Spirituality



An advent wreath is seen in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Dec. 7. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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In our second lesson today, St. Paul urges us to rejoice, to be full of joy. The reason he was exhorting them in this way was because he was urging them to have a deeper awareness that the Lord is nigh; Jesus is near. This is what we've been celebrating throughout Advent: the coming of Jesus into our midst through commemoration of his birth over 2,000 years ago, through reaching out to Jesus as he lives in others, and finding Jesus, especially in the poor and those with suffering and pain of various kinds, and also to find Jesus in the quiet of our own heart.

Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11

Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Full text of the readings

At the same time I feel a sense of sadness, even though I, like you of course, are confident that Jesus is coming to us in all of these ways. This is what the Feast of Christmas is about. But this past week I read an article about research being done on the celebration of Christmas in our country. I think all of us have realized over a period of time that our celebration of Christmas gets further and further from the religious aspects of this holiday, as we call it, but feast day also in the church.

The results of this scientific study show us that while a vast majority of Americans still celebrate Christmas, most find the religious elements of the holiday are emphasized less than in the past. Here's what is hard to accept — few of them care about that change. More than a majority of people in our country don't consider Christmas from its religious aspects. It's a holiday; it's a time to celebrate; it's a time to give gifts. It's a commercialization of something that for a long time, for hundreds of years, was a sacred feast. We've been losing that.

It's not just that we lose the sense of the sacredness of Christmas, but it's also the consequences of why Jesus came. We're losing that also. If that first lesson today sounded familiar to you from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, the beginning of Chapter 61, it is very familiar because it's also the passage that Jesus chose (as recorded in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel) when he began his public life.

He was preaching to the people in the synagogue in Nazareth at the very beginning. "When they handed him the scroll of the Scriptures to read, he unrolled it carefully," Luke says, "To the place where he found this passage of Isaiah." He read it: "The Spirit of God is upon me. God sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to heal the brokenhearted, and to proclaim God's year of favor (the Jubilee year when everyone would enjoy the fullness of blessings that God has given to the world for all)."

Luke said he proclaimed those words. Then he said, "This day, this Scripture passage is fulfilled as you listen." He was telling us good news. The Spirit of God is going to change everything through Jesus. He will reach out to the poor, give the blind new sight, heal the brokenhearted, and so on. That's a promise of Jesus. That's what could really happen in our world if we made this feast day what it is meant to be — a celebration of the coming of the Son of God into our human family, into our human history, to change that history so that it becomes a time gradually where our world is the place where everyone has a full human life, where God really does proclaim good news to the poor.

But look what's happened in this past week. We passed a tax bill that gives benefits to the rich that won't expire, far lesser benefits to the middle class and the lower classes economically. But those expire in eight years. Then they'll begin to say there's going to be a deficit. We have to cut those entitlement programs that help the poor. Is that good news for the poor? Of course not. It's devastating and it will be.

I think this happens because we truly have lost or are losing (it gets more and more every year) where people see Christmas not as the celebration of a profound event in our history when God became one of us to help us change our world. So we have that happening. Instead of God bringing good news to the poor, it's bad news. Also this week, once more we have our secretary of state, in some sense, trying to reach out to dialogue with the North Koreans who are beginning to develop nuclear

weapons that can strike our country.

Of course they have not signed a non-proliferation treaty, so we have no right to tell them what they can or cannot do. We signed a non-proliferation treaty and yet we still are enhancing our nuclear capability to the tune of a trillion dollars over the next 10 years, and yet we threaten North Korea. Then Secretary of State [Rex] Tillerson tries to say, "Are we're going to dialogue?" President [Donald] Trump says, "No. You'll see fury and fire like you've never seen before."

I find it very difficult that people don't really remember the devastation that took place during World War II — the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There were years where we were very alert to that and to the danger of nuclear weapons. Now the threat is there but no one seems to pay attention. I find that so discouraging. Some years back there were many efforts to curtail the development of nuclear weapons by all the nations.

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Now the intensity of that effort is gone, so the world becomes a more and more dangerous place. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, comes into our midst and we reject his word, his message that we must love one another as he loved us. In this final week of Advent, I hope and pray that I, and that all of us, can commit ourselves to make the celebration of Christmas what it really should be: a feast day, a celebration of a sacred event, the most sacred event in all of human history — the coming of God to be part of our human family, to show us the way to fullness of life and peace and joy, and to commit ourselves to that.

But then, not just from now until Christmas, but on into the new year to take up the message of Jesus, to make it our message that the Spirit of God is upon me to proclaim good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to give the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free and proclaim God's year of favor (fullness of life for everyone), and to begin to work with greater determination to make that change in our human history happen. We must bring back the full religious meaning of Christmas. This week I hope all of us make a special effort to think about what it really means, and then commit ourselves to listen to Jesus, to follow him, and to make his way our way so that we bring peace and fullness of life to everyone.

[Homily given Dec. 17 at St. Philomena, Detroit, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]