Spirituality



by Thomas Gumbleton

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The most important thing from today's Scriptures, I think, is the command of God given to Peter, James and John, but also to all of us: listen to Jesus; listen to him. But before we pursue that much further, I think it's very important to speak briefly at least about our first lesson because that lesson could be very troubling and has been actually. It's interpreted in a variety of ways. All of us want to ask the question: how could God command Abraham, to whom he had promised that his children and all the people that followed him, would become an enormous race of God's people, how could God ask Abraham to sacrifice the only son, Isaac, the one who would make it possible for God's promise to be fulfilled?

### Second Sunday of Lent

Feb. 25, 2018

Genesis 22:1-2, 9A, 10-13, 15-18

Psalms 116

Romans 8:31B-34

Mark 9:2-10

One of the things that Scripture scholars tell us this lesson teaches us is about Abraham's total trust in God. God had said, "I will make you the beginning of generations upon generations following after you." Abraham had left everything because God had called him. He had left his family, his world — everything, and God had promised, though, that there would be generations. Now God has asked him to sacrifice his son.

So there is obviously a lesson there about Abraham's total trust in God, even though he could not understand how could it be fulfilled, God's promise, if he sacrificed Isaac, his only son. And of course, we want to try to have that kind of trust in God too. But no matter what kind of complications arise in our lives, we will trust God, that God's love is always going to be with us and bring us through whatever we're asked to accept as suffering or tragedy in our lives — whatever it would be, we would trust in God.

But there's also another explanation. This part of Genesis actually was written hundreds of years after Abraham and Sarah had already died and it was a time when the chosen people were living among others who did practice human sacrifice. It really was an abomination in the sight of God, and prophets preached against it. So this, Scripture scholars suggest, is God's way of teaching the chosen people that they must not fall into the practices of those living around them, among whom they live, that they must abhor this terrible crime of human sacrifice. So it's a lesson to the chosen people.

But I think it's the Gospel that we especially want to listen to today. You may not have noticed, but at the beginning of the Gospel, Mark says, "Six days later." What had happened just before that Mark points out it's six days later? Well, if you look back in the Gospel (although it's not recorded in Mark, it's in Matthew's Gospel, but it's still the same event and the same six days), and Matthew had just recorded six days before, Peter had made that extraordinary declaration of faith when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?"

They began to say Moses, or Elijah, or one of the prophets come back. Do you remember Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"? Peter makes a declaration of faith that is profound and extraordinary. Jesus is almost overwhelmed and says, "Blessed are you Simon, son of John because flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but only God." Somehow God had revealed to Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Jesus congratulates Peter and says, "Now I call you, not Simon (as he had been called before), but Petrus (Peter, rock), and on this rock I will build my church." It was an extraordinary moment for Peter. But then what happens right after? They're going along their way, still on their way to Jerusalem, and the mood of Jesus changes. He says to the disciples, "The Son of man is going up to Jerusalem and there (he's talking about himself), I will be handed over to my enemies, tortured, put to death (the horrible ignominious death of the cross), then three days later rise again."

At that point, Peter who had been just praised by Jesus now says, "Oh no! That can't happen!" You can understand Peter saying, "Look at the crowds following you. You can help us overthrow the Roman authorities. We can have a revolution and everyone would follow you." Peter has a whole different idea from what Jesus is trying to show them, that you don't overcome evil through power and violence. He's going to go to Jerusalem.

So Jesus gets angry with Peter: "Get behind me, you Satan." That happens and six days later, this extraordinary event happens where Peter, James and John have an experience of a transformed Jesus, some kind of a mystical experience where they know Jesus more clearly as to who he really is. They hear God's voice: "This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him." They're overwhelmed. Peter in his enthusiasm says, "Let's build tents and stay here." Why would you want to leave that extraordinary experience? But a cloud comes and then suddenly, it's only Jesus and they're back to their everyday life again.

But the lesson is so clear: God says, "This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him." Listen to him; get to know him; understand who he really is and what he teaches, not just by word, but by example: how he did give himself over to death and would not allow anybody to use violence to prevent it from happening. At that moment in the garden, you remember, Peter raises his sword and Jesus says, "Put it away." He's not going to be defended by violence.

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Jesus is teaching us in the ultimate way about love. You don't just love those who love you; you love your enemies. You do good to those who hurt you. You return

good for evil. These are the things we are to listen to. A Scripture scholar John McKenzie, in a book called *The New Testament Without Allusion,* writes about Jesus and says, "If Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus." John McKenzie goes on to say, "Jesus taught us how to die, not how to kill. You die even loving your enemy, forgiving the one putting you to death."

That's the example of Jesus, profound, and almost in a sense, extreme. You never return violence for violence, hatred for hatred. Are we going to listen to Jesus? We live in a time when there's violence all around us. In our own country, we're doing violence in other parts of the world. We're at war. We're helping through our weapons to destroy a country, Syria. We're suffering losses ourselves in Afghanistan. We're doing violence, violence in our streets, violence in our schools that we're so aware of. How are we going to respond — with more guns? Not if we listen to Jesus. "This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him."

[Homily given Feb. 25, 2018, 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.]