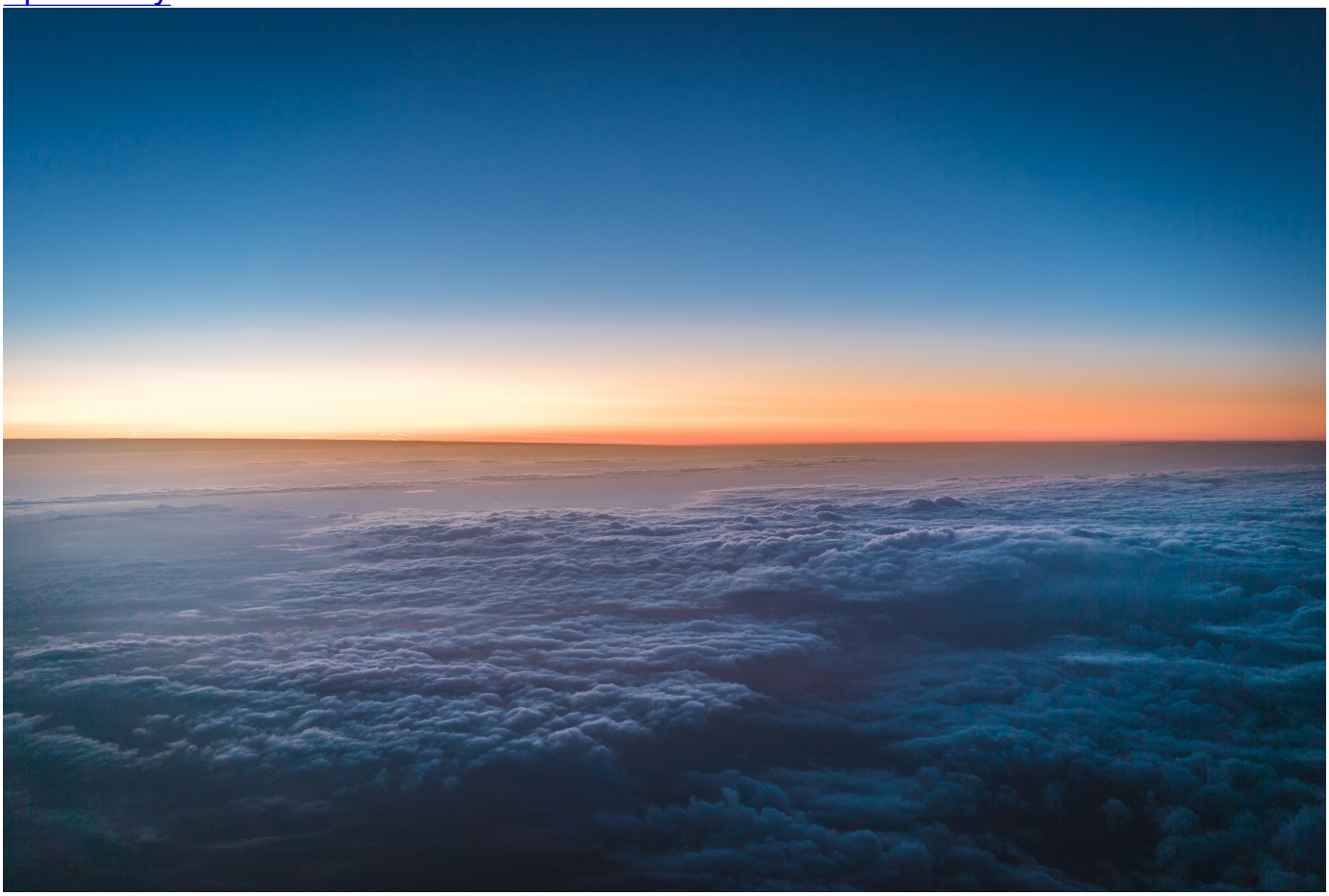
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Jorg Angeli)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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March 22, 2018

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We call the Gospel the "good news" and surely it is good news for all of us, and has been throughout our lives. But surely, this first lesson today could also be called "good news," preached long before Jesus — hundreds of years before Jesus, the good news of God's love. As I mentioned in introducing this reading, Jeremiah had been preaching to the chosen people for 50 years and most of the time had been rebuked, pushed away, mocked, and even put in prison.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 18, 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 51

Hebrews 5:7-9

John 12:20-33

But this point at the very end of his life, he tells them what surely is good news: "The time is coming," it is God who speaks, "When I will forge a new covenant with the people. … It will not be like the one of old when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. … No, this is the covenant I will make with my people: I will put my law within them, write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. … They will all know me from the greatest to the lowest. I will forgive their wrongdoing and no longer remember their sin."

God's love being poured forth in what God calls "a new covenant," a new relationship between God and the Chosen people. Notice how it's the initiative of God. It's God's love reaching out to make this new covenant, not a covenant with commandments written on stone, but a covenant where God speaks deeply within the heart of each person. Everyone has the ability to enter into this new covenant with God. As we know from the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is the source of the new covenant.

In that letter the writer describes Jesus as the high priest who offers this new covenant of God through the shedding of his blood. We say that every time we celebrate the Eucharist when we hold the cup up at the altar: "This is the cup of the

new covenant, the covenant of my blood, the covenant of the new and everlasting salvation." How does Jesus bring about this new covenant? Through the shedding of his blood. The author tells us, "Through suffering, Jesus learned what obedience was and once made perfect, he became the source of God's eternal salvation for those who obey him, who obey Jesus."

You may remember that three Sundays ago, on the second Sunday of Lent, we heard the Gospel of the transfiguration of Jesus. When Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transfigured and they fell on the ground in adoration, God raised them up and said, "This is my beloved Son, my chosen one. Listen to him." That's what the author of this letter to the Hebrews tells us Jesus did — he obeyed. The word "obey" means to listen deeply. Jesus obeyed, and when we obey the word of Jesus, listen deeply and follow it, then we begin to enter into this new covenant of God's love.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus actually begins to offer his life for us and begins to establish that new covenant. I think many of us probably have heard this gospel used at some point in a funeral sermon because it does give comfort. When you think about someone who has died, you think it's like the grain of seed falling into the ground. It dies; it has to die, or it remains all by itself; it becomes useless. But if it dies, it breaks forth into new life, abundant life, everlasting life. The seed of God's Word is like that.

I think sometimes when we hear Jesus offer that parable, we think he's just doing that for us so that we could take comfort at the time of death. But we should listen carefully. In this Gospel, Jesus is experiencing this sense of fear of death. He doesn't want to die. He's fully human like every one of us. He's not sure about what's happening after death. He's human. He doesn't have any divine insight in his human mind or heart. He's fully human. So Jesus knows his end is coming. The anger and the hate against him have built up to the point where he knows he will be taken and put to death. He pronounces this parable so that he can go forward with confidence in God, and he does. Jesus reminds us that we too then have to listen to him.

That's where the letter to the Hebrews becomes very important: "The one who is given over to death had learned through suffering what obedience was, and made perfect, he became the source of everlasting life for those who obey him." In this liturgy we are being asked once more to listen to Jesus, to obey him, listen to him, follow him because as he declares in the gospel, "I, when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself." Jesus doesn't conquer the world through power and force and

coercion, but only through love. "When I am lifted up, pouring forth my life, my love for all people, I will draw all to myself."

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So we begin the last two weeks of Lent prepared to try to repeat what I presume we told ourselves on that second Sunday of Lent: I will try to listen more deeply to Jesus, to follow him more clearly, more faithfully. Don't we need that in our society, in our country, in our communities? We live in a world of such violence. Jesus rejected that kind of violence and somehow we can't seem to do the same. In a short time our country will be entering into what will be maybe the most important conversations with a foreign power in our history when the president meets with the president of North Korea and tries to negotiate a treaty of peace.

We've been threatening them with fire and fury like the world has never seen. But now perhaps there's a chance to follow the way of Jesus, to reach out in a spirit of reconciliation and try to build peace through understanding, through forgiveness, through love. It's an extraordinary important moment for us. If we as a people, and then through our leaders, somehow listen to Jesus and follow his way, "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people through love. When I am lifted up, forgiving those putting me to death." It seems almost impossible, but if we can't make it happen, the consequences are almost beyond our capacity to imagine.

If we ever use those weapons that we threaten, if this effort of reconciliation breaks down, we have no real way of knowing what the outcome might be. It could be devastating for our planet, for every person on this earth.

This is a time when each of us in our own heart, in our everyday relationships, but also as citizens of this country must pray that we can have that spirit of Jesus, listen deeply to him, obey him, follow him, and God's saving love can embrace our planet, our world — all of us. I hope we hear deeply and listen deeply and pray with great fervor that we as individuals, as a people learn to follow the way of Jesus. Forgiveness, peace, and love — these are of Christ. We must embrace them.

[Homily given March 18, 2018, at Franciscan Spiritual Center, Aston, Pennsylvania. 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.]