Spirituality



Women take part in the Palm Sunday procession March 25 in Panchimalco, El Salvador. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Cabezas)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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March 29, 2018

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It's a very long Gospel, but the message is so important that we really must spend a few minutes trying to listen deeply to the message that Jesus proclaims today. In our first lesson from the book of the prophet Isaiah, the prophet describes a servant who, as a disciple, listens deeply to God's word and is changed by it. That's what we have to try to do today, and especially throughout this week, Holy Week, the most sacred week of the whole year.

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

March 25, 2018

Mark 11:1-10

Isaiah 50:4-10

Psalm 22

Philippians 2:6-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

The lesson that we hear today is especially timely for us. When we were blessing the palms, the Scripture lesson that was part of that blessing referred to a passage in the book of the prophet Zachariah. That passage was referenced because the Gospel writer wanted us to see that what Zachariah had spoken about hundreds of years before now becomes a reality in Jesus. The prophet said, "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion; shout for joy, for your king is coming, just and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey."

Whoever heard of a king, especially in those days, riding on a donkey? The king would have been riding on a warhorse ready to take on his enemies and kill them. But Zachariah goes on to say, "No more chariots in Ephraim, no more horses in Jerusalem, for this king will do away with them." Chariots for war, warhorses — they're gone. "The warrior's bow shall be broken when God dictates peace to the nations through the coming of Jesus."

Of course what the prophet is trying to get us to understand is that Jesus did not come into Jerusalem then, or at any time in his life or in his preaching did he uphold the idea that he was a warrior king, that he was going to overthrow the Roman Empire for the Jewish people. He came humble, riding on a donkey, rejecting violence, rejecting war, rejecting hatred, and teaching something so extraordinary we can hardly believe it — don't just love those who love you; love your enemies. Do good to those who hurt you. Return good for evil.

It's an overturning of everything, and it should affect us very deeply in our own lives. We too have to overcome the tendency to violence, to hatred, to killing, to war. We live in a time when this message of Jesus becomes, it seems, more important every day. The violence in our country seems almost uncontrollable, overwhelming. The threat of war and the kind of war that our president talks about, "a war with fire and fury that the world has never seen," that threat becomes more real.

But there are two things today that I hope we might remember as we look back on what the prophet Zachariah said and what Jesus said and does during this time of his suffering and death. One thing is a hopeful thing about our young people. Probably you're aware, across our country today tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of young people are marching. They're asking for common sense: Do away with the weapons that are killing us in our schools. Can't we do that? That's what they're asking; it seems so sensible. Assault weapons sold to people recklessly and used to kill our children — it happens again and again and again.

Finally, the young people themselves are pleading with us: Do something. Change the laws. Make it impossible for this kind of killing to happen time after time after time. That's a sign of hope, but we have to go deeper. We really have to try to be converted to the way of Jesus, each one of us. Deep in our hearts we have to undergo a change so that we give up any kind of commitment to violence or killing or war.

Today is a very special day because 38 years ago today on March 24th, 1980, Archbishop Óscar Romero was shot to death standing at an altar like this, ready to offer the bread and the wine, and a man opens a door in the back, takes aim with his rifle, and fires and kills the archbishop, an archbishop who had been pleading for his people — the poor and the suffering, and trying to bring about a change of justice in that tiny country of El Salvador. He was shot to death.

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But two weeks before that happened, he had been interviewed by a reporter calling over the phone from Mexico. The reporter asked him about these threats against his life which were coming frequently. The archbishop said, "Of course, I have been threatened by death many times, but I don't believe in death without resurrection. Even if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people." It's so true; his spirit is alive in El Salvador.

It's being awakened within our whole church because Pope Francis has beatified him and is now going to canonize him a saint. He's becoming alive among the people. In that interview, he went on to say as a shepherd, a bishop leader in the church, "As a shepherd, I am obliged to give my life for those I love, that is for those who may be going to kill me." Give my life for those I love, and the first ones he thinks of are his murderers. He forgives them. He says at the end of the interview, "If in fact they kill me, you may tell them that I bless and pray for those who do it. I forgive them."

There is an example of one who has listened deeply to Jesus and has followed his way. Soon we will venerate him as a saint, but what's even more important is that we need to take his example and the examples of so many faithful followers of Jesus who reject violence and follow that example, which ultimately is the example of Jesus who showed us how to die, not how to kill, die even forgiving those killing you. That is the way of Jesus — enemy love. That's the only thing ultimately that's going to bring peace into our country and into our world. We who say we listen to Jesus and follow him must follow his way of his active love; love even our enemies. That will bring us peace and only that.

[Homily given at the St. Clare of Montefalco Parish, Detroit, Michigan, March 24, 2018. 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.]