Opinion
Spirituality



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The Gospel lesson today seems almost kind of harsh, and kind of puts us off a bit because Jesus seems to make it so clear that some of us could refuse to follow his way and never enter into the fullness of life with him, never become part of that cloud of witnesses. Yet, as we look at the first lesson this morning from the book of the prophet Isaiah, we discover something much more hopeful and something that seems to contradict what Jesus is saying.

Isaiah tells us (this is to the people in exile who have been driven away from their home and have been living in exile for 70 years), "Now I am about to come and gather people of every nation and language. They will come and see my glory for I will set a sign among them." Then Isaiah goes on to name the various peoples and nations who will come: "Even people who have never heard of me or seen my glory; they will proclaim my glory among the nations. They will bring your kindred from all the nations in chariots, in litters, on mules, on camels to my holy mountain in Jerusalem."

He concludes even by saying, "Some of these I will choose to be priests and Levites." In the Jewish religion you had to be born into the tribe of priests or Levites, but here God is saying through Isaiah, "Not only will I draw people from everywhere to come into a fullness of life in the reign of God, but even some of those who have been outsiders their whole life, I will call to be my intimate friends as priests and Levites."

As we try to reflect on these two different images — what Jesus says and what Isaiah says — clearly it's easier to listen to Isaiah. God is going to bring everybody into the fullness of life in God's reign. In fact, if you listen closely to what Jesus says, he never answers the person's question: "How many are going to be saved, how many sent away?" What Jesus does is he kind of turns away from that question and tells us what's important in order to enter into the reign of God. That's the part we really need to pay attention to.

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 25, 2019

Isaiah 66:18-21

Psalm 117:1, 2

Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

Luke 13:22-30

How do we enter into this fullness of life, the reign of God that will bring everyone into a situation of complete life and joy and peace where God's reign will bring fullness of life to every person? How do we enter into that? That's what we need to reflect on. Jesus says it takes the narrow way, come through the narrow gate. In our second lesson today, the author reminds us it takes discipline. We have to listen carefully to Jesus and then follow his way, his way of peace, forgiveness and love, reconciliation.

As we follow his way, we begin to enter into that fullness of his life. In that letter to the Hebrews, last week, the passage included the words were — the author tells us as you're going on this narrow way, "Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus." That's probably the best advice we could ever get. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus; look at what he does; listen to what he says. Keep your eyes fixed on him and you will go through that narrow gate into the fullness of life.

I can suggest just a few ways where if we look at Jesus, listen to what he says, we might have to bring about some change in our life, in our thoughts. There is a passage in Luke's Gospel about a Syrophoenician woman who comes to Jesus. This is an outsider, outside the Chosen people, outside the Promised Land. She comes asking Jesus a favor and he rebukes her. He says, "I was sent only to the people of the tribes of Israel." She's an outsider and Jesus, at first following the Jewish tradition, was going to push her away. But she speaks up and says, "Even the dogs get the scraps from the table." Jesus is humiliated because she points out to him how he is not even willing to treat her as an animal, and here she is a human being. So then Jesus welcomes her, listens to her, and heals her.

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As we watch Jesus and listen to him, perhaps we will have in our hearts more openness to the outsiders who are at our borders, trying to cross our borders because they're fleeing violence. They're being killed in their home countries.

They're starving and we want to build a fence to keep them out. Can't we learn as Jesus did from that Syro-Phoenician woman that everyone is a child of God and we must welcome them. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

I think of also — and there are so many places, but one that has always affected me a lot is toward the end of the Gospel when Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem. There's a blind beggar at the side of the road (you may remember this incident). The beggar is crying out when he hears that Jesus is coming on the road. It's toward the end of this journey to Jerusalem; he's passing through Jericho. The beggar calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The people around him try to quiet him down. He's a poor beggar, probably disheveled and dirty. He's blind; he's helpless. "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" They try to quiet him, but Jesus hears and he calls the man to him. I think what's especially important in this image that we evoke of Jesus is how he treats him with such respect. I think any one of us would say, "Well I know what he wants. He wants to be able to see." Jesus doesn't presume that he knows. He respectfully asks the man, "What do you ask of me?" Bartimaeus (is his name) says, "I want to see." Jesus gives him his sight. Bartimaeus follows the crowd then going on to Jerusalem with Jesus.

Could we not find in this an example of how we have to reach out and treat every person who crosses our path — the poorest, the most disheveled, the outcast — treat every person with dignity, respect, kindness? Yes, keep your eyes on Jesus, act as he did, listen to him, and then you will find yourself coming through that narrow gate, entering into the fullness of life, peace and joy with Jesus. So as we leave today, I hope each one of us makes it our determination that I will keep my eyes fixed on Jesus and follow him.

Editor's note: *This homily was given August 25 at St. Ambrose Church, Grosse Pointe Park, 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.*