Helping 'the most vulnerable people in our society'

by Thomas Gumbleton

In our first lesson today, the prophet Isaiah was proclaiming really great news to people who had been suffering for seven decades. They had been defeated in war and their city had been destroyed, the temple put into ruins, and they had been driven out. But now Isaiah wants them to realize God is going to change all of that. If you think about it, how would you describe something as glorious, as marvelous as being returned from an exile in a time of suffering and deprivation?

It would be something like right now -- those people from Syria that are being driven out by the violence and struggle that's going on -- revolution, religious conflict. If they were suddenly to hear, "It's all over! We're coming back!" how would you describe their joy? Isaiah, in the first lesson today, gives an idea of how he thinks this extraordinary accomplishment would be felt by the people of Israel. "Wilderness and the arid land rejoice; the desert itself be glad and blossom; see everything come to life covered with flowers it sings and shouts with joy."

And then Isaiah says, "Say to those who are afraid, those who are feeling weak and drained; do not fear any longer!" And it's marvelous that he says, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the deaf ears unsealed. Then will the lame leap as a hart; the tongues of those who are mute will sing and shout. There will be a highway, which will be called The Way of Holiness." Finally, "For the ransom of Yahweh will return with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will come to Zion singing gladness and joy marching with them."

If only that could be true for all of those refugees and migrants from around the world right now; I'm sure many of us have seen the pictures of those two little children -- five and three years old that were drowned trying to escape in a rubber raft hitting a rough sea, capsizing, their bodies washed up on the shore. If you
turn to the gospel lesson, you discover Mark is speaking about Jesus. He's clearly implying that the God who made that happen for the chosen people so many hundreds of years ago is right in our midst, right now -- Jesus.

There are two places in the scriptures where the word that Mark uses to describe the deaf, mute person -- two places -- one in the book of Isaiah that we just heard and here in the Gospel of Mark. It's a rare word and surely Mark chose that word to make us think of what can happen because of Jesus. It's marvelous and great, overwhelming, bringing joy. It's what happened to those people centuries and centuries ago. Jesus could bring about the same kind of return from exile and suffering and death and killing that God brought about for the chosen people in the time of Isaiah.

Mark describes in this incident a Jesus who has the very power of God. But also, I hope we notice that this is a Jesus, too, who's very gentle, very respectful. You might understand that this deaf and mute person would have been poor and probably homeless, rejected by people. Jesus shows respect for him, takes him apart and gently, carefully gives him his hearing and his speech, makes him whole again -- one of the marvelous things that Isaiah said would happen when the reign of God breaks forth and God brings his people back.

That could happen now if all of us accept it -- the truth that Jesus is in our midst. Where is Jesus? He lives in the heart and soul of each one of us. He came to make the reign of God happen. His very first preaching was, "The reign of God is at hand." He wants us to realize that all those marvelous things that God did for the chosen people, that Jesus did for the people of his time -- those things can happen and will happen when every one of us who is a follower of Jesus accepts our responsibility and begins to act according to the way of Jesus.

St. James puts it very practically. Last Sunday he said, "Be doers of the word, not hearers only." Isn't it true sometimes that we hear this message, we listen to it, but then we don't do anything? James would say, "You have to be a doer of the word of Jesus." If the reign of God is going to come its fullness, if people are going to be returned from exile, if their lives are going to be made whole again, if we're going to overcome violence and evil and war, it will be because we begin to act on the word of Jesus, not just listen to it.

Again, James makes it very practical, "In the sight of God, holy and blameless religion lies in helping the orphans and the widows -- the most vulnerable people in our society." He goes on today to say how we have to especially be careful not to discriminate and reach out to those who are like us, that we feel comfortable with, but to reach out to the others that are different from us. It's true, very often, that we do as James says, we kind of go with those who we feel comfortable with. The poor, the vulnerable, the homeless, those in exile in various places of the world, the refugees and immigrants -- we don't really reach out and draw them in.

That's true of us as individuals and true right now of the nations in the world. It's changing, thank God, this week. Germany and Austria -- yes, they've opened their borders. Hungary has let the people go through their country to try to come to where they can find the help and the good life that they're seeking, giving a way through the violence of the killing. In our own country, we hear people still talking about putting up walls, putting up fences, blocking people.

That's not hearing and doing the words of Jesus. I hope as we listen to our scriptures today that, first of
all, we really will carry with us that image of Jesus taking that man apart -- the man who was rejected and suffering so much, gently talking to him, touching him, healing him and begin in our own lives to try to reach out with the same kind of gentleness and love to anyone in need.

But even more, I hope, we will realize that what God brought about for the chosen people hundreds and hundreds of years ago, what Jesus promises when he says, "The reign of God is at hand," people will realize that that reign of God where everyone will experience the fullness of life and joy and enjoy the blessings of the earth that God made for all, that that reign of God could happen only when each one of us finds the way to hear God's word, to follow that word, to follow Jesus and live according to the values that he is showing to us.

If we leave here determined to be doers of the word and not hearers only, things will begin to change in our neighborhood this week and in our country and even throughout the world.

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

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