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Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

There is one point toward the end of the life of Jesus where, in Matthew's gospel, he's described as going up on the hillside, looking over Jerusalem, and he's very sad. He begins to weep, and he says words something like, "If only you had heard and listened, then you would have peace." Jesus was very discouraged.

The reason, I'm sure, was because, as we heard in today's lessons, going back 750 years, almost eight centuries before Jesus had come into the world, the great prophet Amos had gone among the people and had proclaimed to them, "Woe to those people who live overconfident on the hill of Samaria. You lie in beds inlaid with ivory and sprawl on your couches.

"You eat lamb from the flock and veal from cows, fattened in the stall. You strum on your harps and like David, try out new instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and anoint yourselves with the finest oils, but you do not grieve over the wounds of God's people." There were a very few who were very rich, the elite. The majority of the people were in a period of upheaval in their lives. They had been invaded, so they were suffering, in poverty and hunger, yet the rich didn't care.

The other prophets - Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah - time after time, God sent these prophets to proclaim God's word, to call people back, to share what they had. Once, Isaiah proclaimed, "Share your bread with the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless poor. That's how you will please God." But they didn't

listen. Jesus must have been thinking about his own life too.

At the very beginning of his public life, the first time he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, he had called on people to: "Change your lives. The reign of God is at hand," and he quoted those words of Isaiah, "The spirit of God is upon me. He sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, give the blind new sight, set the downtrodden free, proclaim God's year of jubilee, the time of joy, the fullness of God's reign."

Jesus said, "This day it's fulfilled in me, all that Isaiah said." So Jesus is proclaiming the same message, yet at the end of his public life he's so discouraged; people have not listened, things have not changed. The dramatic conversion Jesus was asking of the people had not happened. Now here we are, 20 centuries later. Do you think it's any better, or would Jesus be just as discouraged?

I was looking at a commentary on this scripture passage, and the commentator says this: "I was thinking about today's readings while halfheartedly watching one of the morning TV news shows. There was a segment on the rising number of spas for dogs, where, with congenial companions, they could get a complete makeover - haircut, shampoo, pedicure - topped off by a dose of aroma therapy."

This commentator suggests, "Bring back Amos thundering against the complacent in Zion for their conspicuous consumption and regal living! While pet spas may be a bit humorous, they are but a symptom of the growing and massive disparity of wealth in the United States, the richest country in the world with one of the highest rates of children living in poverty."

Are we like that rich man in the Gospel, that [the poor] can be out there and we're not even aware? In our Congress, they've been trying to pass a bill that would provide minimum health care for poor children in this country. They can't get it passed. Isn't there something wrong about that? Aren't we a lot like the elite, and we don't even know about the poor or care about the poor?

It's even worse if you look at the situation of the globe, where one-fifth of the world's people have 87 percent of the world's wealth, and the bottom fifth of the world's people have 1.7 percent. They're absolutely poor, desperate, dying, in misery, and how much are we aware of it?

Back in 1971, Pope Paul VI asked the bishops of the world, in a special synod relating to justice in the world, to consider this problem, to give direction for our church, so that there wouldn't be this vast gap between a few very rich and the majority of the people of the world very poor. Those bishops asked the hard question: "How is it after 80 years of modern Catholic social teaching, 2,000 years of the gospel of love, that the church has to admit her inability to make more impact on the conscience of the people?"

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They stressed, again and again, that the faithful, particularly the more wealthy and comfortable among them, simply do not see social injustice as sin, so they feel no responsibility for it and no obligation to do anything about it. Sunday observance, the church's rules on sex and marriage tend to enter the Catholic

consciousness profoundly as sin, but to live like Dives with Lazarus at the gate is not even perceived as sinful.

That may seem to you to be a very harsh judgment on our world, yet I ask you to prayerfully look into your own heart and look at the world around us in which we live. How often do we make ourselves conscious of a vast majority of the people on this planet who are desperately poor? How often do we say, "Well, maybe we need to do something about it"? How often do we actually do something about it?

Just yesterday I was reading a report about another situation in our world that's happening right now. Because we are concerned about polluting our planet, overheating the globe and so on, we're trying to develop a new form of fuel for our automobiles - ethanol. Sounds like a good thing, yet do you know what's happening?

Because we are changing, and the vast agricultural corporations are doing this in our country and other parts of the world, they're taking land where corn has been grown for food and now growing that corn for fuel. That means that there will be less food, a large amount less, for the hungriest people in our world. Because less corn is being grown for food, cost goes up. In this report it says there will be tens of millions of people dying of hunger as we continue to change our use of our farm products of corn from food to fuel.

How many people thought about what would happen to the poor if we did this? Would it not be so much more in line with what the prophets say and with what Jesus says, to cut back on our consumption, rather than to simply change our method of fueling our automobiles? The main thing that we need to consider is simply "How aware are we that the decisions we make have an effect, not just on us, but because we live in a tightly globalized world, whatever we do has tremendous effect throughout the globe on people everywhere?"

It seems to me that we have a responsibility. If we listen to the prophets, try to follow the law of God which calls for justice, try to heed the message of Jesus - if we do that, we would begin to first, develop this awareness that there are poor out there in our country and throughout the world and we have to be aware of them, but then even more, be aware that we have to try to work so that the poor are lifted up, so that the downtrodden are set free, so that God's year of favor can happen, where there will be justice and peace for peoples everywhere.

[**Editor's Note:** On Sept. 30, 2007 Bishop Gumbleton preached at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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