

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 13, 2007 at 12:49pm

Second Sunday of Advent

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

It is certainly not difficult to understand the point of today's Gospel reading. It's a passage that calls us to begin to change our lives, to begin to undergo radical conversion, so it's a very appropriate passage for us to reflect upon as we celebrate today, the sacrament of reconciliation, where we try to look deeply into our hearts to discover the ways in which we fail to live up to God's call to be disciples of Jesus and to repent of our failures and seek God's forgiveness.

When we listen to John's proclamation, one of the first things that he reminds those Sadducees and Pharisees of is, "You must be sincere." There must be authenticity in what you do, when he suggests, "Don't just say, 'Abraham is our father, we're part of the chosen people, we're OK.'" No; John is saying look deeper. He was accusing them in a sense—well, not just in a sense, but really. They're hypocrites! They fulfill all the forms of religion but their hearts are not really close to God.

It's not good enough just to undergo certain ritual forms and formalities, saying prayers out of routine. We have to make sure we're looking deeply into our hearts and ready to change our hearts. Reflecting on this, I found it helpful to turn to Luke's proclamation of the same incident in the life of John the Baptist because Luke gets even more specific.

People asked him, "What are we to do? How are we supposed to change our lives?" Luke suggests, "Well, if you have two coats, give one to the person who has none. If you have food, do the same," in other words, begin to reach out. Share what you have. Don't hold it to yourself. We live in a society where

individualism is very highly cherished. "What's mine is mine, I worked for it" - maybe that's not what Jesus looks for.

Even tax collectors came to John: "What are we supposed to do?" John said, "Collect no more than your fixed rate." In other words, don't cheat, don't exploit, be honest. Even soldiers came: "What about us? What are we to do?" Here, perhaps, is the most radical challenge: "Don't take anything by force or threaten people." It's almost like, as a soldier, "turn your whole life around." Soldiers do take things by force. It's what they're trained to do. John is saying no, that's not right; when you follow Jesus, you must change.

There are various ways in which each of us has to begin to look into our hearts and discover where it is that I fall short of what Jesus asks of all of his disciples.

If we turn to the first lesson today, there's also a challenge to us, not just to look at ourselves as individuals. I think we're all very used to that - our personal sins, our individual sins. We examine our conscience: "Did I lie? Did I cheat? Was I dishonest in any way? Did I get angry? Did I lash out at someone or use bad language?" All of those things we think of as personal sins.

But Isaiah says it's more than that. When he talks about the spirit of God coming upon this new leader that's going to come forth, he says that leader will act with justice. He will lead his whole society to act with justice, judge for the poor, reach out with righteousness, decide for the meek. In other words, have what we've come to call in modern times, a preferential option for the poor, trying to make sure that the goods of our world are distributed with justice so everyone has a chance for full human life.

Also, this leader will not depend upon weapons. Justice will be the girdle of his waist, truth the girdle of his loins, rather than trying to be aggressive and reaching out and taking more than you have a right to. So perhaps, even though we're not used to it, as we look into our hearts today, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions about what we, as a society, [have done], or we, as a community here, or we as a nation.

Just this morning I was reading in the paper about a terrible situation in the northern part of Iraq near Kirkuk. The article says, "Even by the skewed standards of a country where millions are homeless now or in exile, the squalor of the Kirkuk soccer stadium is a startling sight. On the outskirts of a city adjoining some of Iraq's most lucrative oil reserves, a rivulet of urine flows past the entrance to the barren playing field.

"There are no spectators, only 2,200 Kurdish squatters who have converted the dugouts, stands and parking lot into a refugee city of cinder-block hovels covered in Kurdish political graffiti. What rankles the stadium's impoverished Kurds most is that while they remain in a foul-smelling limbo, on the other side of town some of the Arabs who were forcibly moved there by Saddam Hussein still live in comfortable suburbs, a legacy of the dictator's notorious 1980s campaign with United States support to depopulate Kurdish areas and 'Arabize' that part of Iraq."

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Do we at times need to look into our hearts to discover that maybe we were not concerned enough, we did not make an effort enough to know what our nation was about, why we did what we did, why we continue to do what we're doing. Sometimes we can let the important decisions that our nation takes be as though we have nothing to do with them, and yet we do.

So when we look into our hearts to discover how we may have failed, perhaps we have to especially look at how we as a society have not lived up to what Jesus asks of us, regarding sharing the wealth that we have, trying to change from policies of war to policies of non-violence and love as Jesus did. The results if we do that could be extraordinary.

Here's how Isaiah puts it when the time of total peace could happen: "The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will rest beside the kid, the calf and the lion cub will feed together, and a little child will lead them. Befriending each other, the cow and the bear will see their young ones lie down together. Like cattle, the lion will eat hay. By the cobra's den the infant will play. The child will even put his hand into the viper's lair. No one will harm or destroy over my holy mountain, where as water fills the sea, the earth will be filled with the knowledge and the goodness of God."

Isaiah is describing the time of total harmony in our world and our universe, a time of peace, and it all could happen if we began to faithfully follow the way of Jesus.

I'll offer one other suggestion as we prepare to receive this sacrament. John seemed very harsh, and he even said at the end of the passage from Matthew that, "When Jesus comes, he'll have his winnowing fan in his hand and he'll do the threshing and throw the chaff into the everlasting fires," and so on. But in fact, the way of Jesus was different.

John was a very, almost harsh sort of prophet, demanding that people change, and Jesus used a different way. Remember how Peter had sinned so grievously during the night of Jesus' suffering when he was being put on trial, scourged, crowned with thorns and so on? Peter was asked, "Aren't you one of them?" He got very angry and said, "I don't even know the man!"

He rejected Jesus, denied Jesus, betrayed Jesus. The friendship that had been built up-he simply threw it away. Just a short time later, when Jesus is being taken from one part of the praetorium to another part during his trial, Jesus looks across an open space and sees Peter and he doesn't look upon him with anger or with a threat to punish; he looks upon him with love. Peter went away, the gospel tells us, and wept bitterly.

He was totally changed because Jesus simply reached out to him with the fullness of love. That's what can happen to us during this sacrament. If we open ourselves to the goodness, the love, the beauty of Jesus, Jesus will look upon us with love. If we absorb that love of Jesus, we will be transformed, and then we

will be able, much more faithfully, to follow his way and perhaps to really help to bring about that time of peace, justice and joy for all the peoples of the earth.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at Homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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