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The Nativity of the Lord

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

In a few moments when we begin our Eucharistic prayer, I will proclaim the words:

"Yes, God, you are holy. You are kind to us and to all. For this, we thank you. We thank you, above all, for your son Jesus. You sent him into this world because people had turned away from you and no longer loved one another. Jesus opened our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters, and that you are the one God of us all. And Jesus brought us the good news of life to be lived with you forever in heaven, and he showed us the way to that life, the way of love."

This evening I hope that as we hear those words proclaimed, we will listen very carefully and take them in because they really are the message of Christmas. The words understate the situation of the world when we say "people have turned away from you," have turned away from God and no longer love one another.

That hardly states the reality because throughout human history, it's been a history of violence, brutality, hatred, people turning against one another, killing one another. It started with Cain and Abel and all through human history. It's been a history of violence and hatred, a history of turning away from God, not being open to God. Yet, God had in mind to change this, so that's why God sent Jesus, to make a difference in our world.

Certainly at the time of Jesus, when he came into the world, it was a time of violence, as we hear in the

gospel lesson. Mary and Joseph were under the orders of the Roman emperor because the holy land was occupied by the Roman army. It was a time of great brutality and great violence. Mary and Joseph were poor; they had no place to live, they were homeless. In a short time, they were made refugees - they had to leave and go to Egypt. That terrible King Herod did an almost unspeakable brutality, killing all of the children under two years of age in the area of Bethlehem.

Jesus came to change all of that. That's why, in our first lesson tonight, Isaiah would proclaim with such powerful words: "The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light had shown. God has brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing as they rejoice before you, for the yoke that burdened them has been lifted. The pole on their shoulder and the rod of their taskmaster have been smashed."

Even all the gear of war, Isaiah says, "Every boot that trampled in battle, every cloak rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for flames." War will be over. There will be no more violence because Jesus came to open our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters, and that there's one God of us all. Yet here we are, 2,000 years later, and we have to look out at a world that is still marked by terrible violence. We're in the fifth year - have almost finished five years of war once more.

This is coming out of the 20th century, which was the most violent century in all of human history - 127 million people killed in war and the majority of them innocents, non-combatants, children. Recently I had the opportunity to visit some of the people who have suffered the tragic consequences of this war. I was in Jordan and in Syria, where there were over one million people who had to leave everything, sold all they had, became homeless and fled to another country because of war.

Even in the Holy Land, recently I read an article in *America* magazine, which tells us: "Bethlehem is a poster child for division, for hatred. Bethlehem is barricaded behind a 27-foot-high wall, Israel's version of last century's Berlin Wall. According to one Christian in Bethlehem, Michael [Kurawati], 'Bethlehem, Jesus' birthplace, is a prison because we are not allowed outside the wall.' Christian Peacemaker Teams note that Mary and Joseph would not be able to enter Bethlehem today.

"Many Palestinian mothers in labor give birth in cars or fields because they are prevented by the wall and checkpoints from reaching medical care in time. 'They urge us Palestinians to build walls around our nativity scenes to show solidarity with Palestinians in Bethlehem who are suffering from apartheid.'" So we might even ask ourselves: How can we sing of "peace on earth" when we still live in a world that's so marked by war, violence and suffering? What has happened?

I think it's because we haven't really listened to the message of Jesus. It's probably too radical for most of us because Jesus rejected violence, rejected war, rejected any kind of retaliation. It's always been difficult for those who try to follow Jesus to accept the truth of his teachings.

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Remember a couple of Sundays ago in the gospel lesson, John the Baptist sent his messengers to Jesus to

ask him, "Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?"

Some commentators on the scriptures say that John was just trying to reassure his disciples that Jesus was the one, so he wanted them to go and talk to Jesus and be persuaded. But others say, and I think they're probably right, that John himself was beginning to doubt, because John was a prophet, as we heard in the gospels, who proclaimed a very powerful message, who proclaimed a message of austerity, who proclaimed a message of judgment. John said we have to take the ax to the root of the tree and destroy it. And Jesus wasn't doing that.

So John was beginning to wonder, was Jesus really going to change the world? What does Jesus tell John? He says to his disciples, "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind see, the lepers are cleansed, the lame walk, even the dead are raised to life, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." Jesus was trying to tell John: "Look, I am transforming the world," but not through judgment, not through harshness, not through violence, but only through love.

Perhaps you've heard of the film called "The Last Temptation of Christ." There is a scene in that film that brings out this episode from the gospels very powerfully. John the Baptist and Jesus, in this film, are in the hollow of a rock arguing all night about what to do with the world. "The Baptist's face is hard and decisive. From time to time, his arms go up and down as though he were chopping wood. Maybe he is showing Jesus just how to 'lay the ax to the root of the tree of evil.'

"By contrast, the face of Jesus is calm and hesitant. His eyes are full of compassion. He asks John, 'Isn't love enough?' John answers angrily, 'No! The tree is rotten. God called me and gave me the ax, which I placed at the root of the tree. I did my duty, now you do yours. Take the ax and strike!' Jesus sighs, 'If I were fire, I would burn. If I were a woodcutter, I would strike. But I am a heart, and I love.'" That is really the message of tonight. Jesus came into this world to proclaim the message of love.

It's a very radical message that we really need to love one another. Jesus came to open our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters, and God is the one God of us all. Jesus proclaimed the good news of life to be lived with God forever in heaven and he showed us the way to that life, the way of love, and that's the only way that we will change our world, if we follow the way of love.

That means we have to love one another the way Jesus did, without condition, without limit. What's even more difficult - we have to love not only those who love us, but love our enemies, do good to those who hurt us, return good for evil. That's the message of Jesus. It's a radical message. It means we have to give up war, we have to give up violence, we have to give up retaliation. We have to love - transform the world through love.

If we really try to follow this message of Jesus, it begins of course with each of us in our own family setting, in our community, in our town, in our state, in our country, and in all of our relationships going out, love begins within each of us and goes out and it will change the world when enough of us who are followers of Jesus really accept this message. Jesus came not to judge, not to destroy, but to transform through love.

When we hear the proclamation this evening, I hope we will listen deeply and each of us deep in our own hearts, try to respond and say, "I will try to make my life according to the way of Jesus, the way of love."

Then that peace that the angels proclaimed will begin to breath forth. We will experience it within ourselves, but gradually it can spread, and just as the prophet Isaiah, in the time of turmoil and violence in which he lived, would say, "A son is born. Things are changed, peace is coming," we will have confidence that that will happen, and through us, God will make it happen. So we must submit ourselves to the way of Jesus, which is the way of love. This will bring the message of Christmas to its fullness and true peace will happen in our world.

[This homily was delivered at St. Ann Parish, Frankfort, Mich.]

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