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Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we reflect on these readings from God's word today, it will be very helpful for us, I think, if we do it with the context of the Sacrament of Baptism, which we are celebrating for this baby, Kaelynn Christine, because the readings guide us as to what it means for her to be baptized, and also what our baptism means for each one of us, and that that, of course, is something very important for us to reflect upon regularly: What does it mean to be a baptized follower of Jesus, one of his disciples?

The first thing, it seems to me, that being a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, one called to be part of the family of God through Jesus, is that this gives us an opportunity to know God more deeply. Earlier this week as part of the office of readings, which priests do every day, I was reading from the book of Sirach, which was an assigned reading for that particular day. This is one of the Wisdom books of the Old Testament. It's one of the books written closest to the time of Jesus.

So this is a point in God's revelation to God's people very close to the fullness of revelation that comes to us in Jesus. The writer of this passage proclaims all the beauties of creation. The writer talks about:

"How great is God, who made the world and whose word directs its rapid course. The bright radiance of the stars accounts for the beauty of the sky. What a brilliant ornament they are for the heights of God. At the command of the All Holy, they stand as appointed and never fail to keep watch. Look at the rainbow and praise the one who made it. How magnificent is its splendor."

And then the writer goes on to talk about other parts of creating and finally comes to this:

"Thanks be to God. All turns out well and anything is held together by God's word. We should not give further examples, one last word, God is everything. Where shall we find the strength to glorify God? For God is the mighty one, greater than all God's works. God is awesome and sovereignly great, admirable in God's power. So let your praise exalt God as best you can. God is greater than you could ever express."

So what you are hearing here, how this person is trying to grasp who God is and he sees God as the source of all power, of all creation. Sometime people talk about God as "source," as "power," and that certainly is true. That's, in a way, the best that the people of the Old Testament could come to, but we who are baptized into Jesus, we get further, deeper, more important insights into who God is. Because God is really in Jesus, as John the Baptist tells us: "Yes, I have seen and I've declared that this is the chosen one."

Shortly before in the Gospel of John, we were told how in the beginning was the Word, the Word was god and the Word was with God. But then that Word became flesh, came among us, so in Jesus we see God. We can go far beyond all the beauty of creation, which surely shows the splendor and power of God. We see God in Jesus, so we see God as love. "Greater love than this no one has than to lay down your life for your friends," and that's exactly what Jesus did for us. Today in the Gospel, John tells us: "Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus is the one who shows us how God is compassionate.

I'm sure every one of us has favorite passages in the scriptures, in the gospels, where we think about Jesus. I like to think of the time when, right at the beginning of his public life after he had chosen the first disciples, he went to the home of Simon's mother-in-law and he cured her. Everybody was so happy and grateful. But then the word went out and everyone from the surrounding villages came, bringing those who needed consolation and curing. It's in St. Luke's Gospel.

Luke tells us Jesus spent the whole night caring for people. When I think about that, it makes me realize how compassionate Jesus really is. Of course as God, he could have cured everyone at once, but Jesus wanted to talk to each person. Jesus as God loves every one of us individually, uniquely, so wants to touch each of us. That's the kind of God we have; not a God who's remote and just a creator who is all power, the source of all being.

Yes, God is all of that, but God is also a God who reaches out to look into your eyes, into my eyes, to touch you, to touch me, to be compassionate, filled with love. This is the God that we worship as we know God through Jesus. I could go on and I'm sure you can think of other places where God shows us so dramatically how God is love and loves each of us with that very special love that makes us unique and blessed in a very special way. That's the first think that I think the lessons today tell us about God and the blessing that we receive through baptism.

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The second important point for us as we reflect on the readings today in light of our baptism is to realize that we too have been sent by God. In that first lesson today, the servant of Yahweh talks about how "God has spoken. The God who formed me in the womb to be God's servant, to bring Jacob back to him, to gather Israel to him, He said, 'This is not enough that you be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the remnant of Israel. I will make you the light of the nations, that my saving love will reach to the ends of the earth.'"

That servant pictured by Isaiah is Jesus, who then becomes the light to the nations. But that's the same Jesus who said to his first disciples and says to us: "As the spirit has come upon me, God sent me into the world to be the light of the nations and I send you." Jesus said that to his first disciples and he says that to us, that we are sent to be a light to the nations.

There's a part of the gospel today where I think it indicates to us the very special way in which we are to be a light to all the peoples of the earth. We -- the disciples of Jesus, those who believe in him, who follow him, who have been baptized into his life -- how we are to be the light to all the nations. When John says Jesus is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, I think it's important to note that he says "sin of the world," not sins, which would mean the individual sins of each of us. Of course, God does take away those sins, but here John is talking about something very specific and very special -- the sin of the world.

In John's gospel especially, sin is described as how, in the world, evil seems to be arrayed against Jesus. It's organized evil. It's what Jesus has come to take away. When I think about organized evil, I recall the World Peace Day statement of Pope John Paul II for the year 2002, shortly after our nation had been attacked by people in airplanes that exploded to destroy the World Trade towers. Pope John Paul, in reflecting on that had said, "How are we to transform a world in which the moral order has been shattered, in which the power of evil seems to have the upper hand? How are we to restore that?"

That's the kind of sin that John the Baptist is talking about -- organized evil, violence. It wasn't, of course, just in the World Trade towers attack. You look around the world and you see a world in which there is extreme violence, wars going on in so many different places. We think of modern warfare and we have to be aware of weapons of mass destruction that destroy tens of thousands of people in a matter of seconds. We have to think of a world where rape has become an instrument of war.

Think of a world where hundreds of thousands of children -- children, nine years old, 10 years old -- are forced into being killers in armies. That's the power of evil arrayed against Jesus. That's the kind of thing John meant when he said, "Jesus takes away the sin of the world." How does he do it? This is the really important thing for all of us -- how does Jesus take away the power of evil that can destroy our world?

He doesn't do it by responding to violence with violence, to hate with hate. He does it as was pointed out to us last Sunday, where God's servant, Jesus, is described as one who doesn't call to arms, doesn't call armies to go to war, who becomes a nurturing and loving servant, the one who doesn't break the bruised reed or crush the wavering flame, but nurtures them, loves them -- a poetic way of saying how Jesus responds to every form of violence or evil, through nurturing, through love.

It seems to me that for a long time, we have failed to heed this way of Jesus very well. Even within the Christian community, we so easily turn to violence, to war, to overcome war in violence, instead of trying to understand, reflect on and pray over, the way Jesus overcomes the sin of the world, through the transforming power of love.

I hope that each of us, as we witness this baptism today and see the tiny infant brought into the community of God's people, and is called to be a light to the nations as all of us are, I hope that we will remind ourselves that our baptism is a very important moment in our lives, a moment that we must renew often, regularly, commit ourselves to be a light to the nations, commit ourselves to follow the way of Jesus, commit ourselves to overcome the sin of the world -- the violence, hatred and killing -- through the way of Jesus, the way of love.

When all of us and our whole church really accept this way of Jesus, our world will be transformed, and what we prayed for in our opening prayer, when we asked God, "Show us the way to peace in the world," that will happen. God will show us and if we follow, God will bring peace to our world.

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

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