

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

February 11, 2008 at 8:42am

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Last Sunday, we remember, Jesus proclaimed good news: "The reign of God is at hand." The reign of God is at hand. How often do we think about that, what that means? The reign of God, a time when all injustices would be eliminated. Everyone will have a full chance for a human life. Resources of the whole earth would be made available to every person on the earth, instead of a few having so much and so many having so little.

The reign of God, a time of justice, and then from that would flow a time of peace, where swords would be turned into plowshares and war would be no more. What a marvelous thing to think about, how God would bring into fullness the reign of God throughout the whole of our world. Could it ever happen? Well, of course, but we also have to remember what Jesus said last week in our gospel lesson: "Change your lives," live in a different way, live according to the values of the reign of God, and then the reign of God will happen.

Today we have the opportunity to listen deeply to God's word once more and to discover, what are those values that we must begin to integrate into our lives, that each of us must try to live by in order to faithfully follow Jesus and his way. Today we hear the beginning of that famous discourse of Jesus, proclaimed on that hillside in Galilee 2,000 years ago, what we call the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with those beautiful beatitudes that Jesus proclaimed. These are the value system of our world.

We just heard them proclaimed, as Jesus proclaimed them, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek, the gentle. Blessed are those who mourn and grieve. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice's sake. Blessed are those with integrity of heart and spirit. Blessed are the peace makers. Blessed

are those who are persecuted.? Yes, these are the ways that we become blessed. These are the values that God proclaims through Jesus today, to us. ?Change your lives,? live according to those values.

If we look at the world in which we live, it becomes very obvious very quickly that we're not living according to those values. A few have so much; so many have so little. We live in a world where there's a terrible imbalance between those who have access to and make use of the resources of our planet and the vast majority who do not. This past week, maybe you noticed in the daily paper, a story about Haiti, the poorest country in our hemisphere. Do you know what children in Haiti eat?

They eat cookies made of dirt ? cookies made of dirt. People make them, sell them for five cents on the streets, five cents for a cookie made of dirt. Is it any wonder, where we have a world like that, that five million children die every year from hunger or hunger-related causes. Certainly we do not have a just situation. Many of us, of course, live with far more than we have a right to. We have to begin to reach out to the poor, make justice happen. But that will only happen when we ourselves begin to live according to the value system of Jesus, that first beatitude: ?Blessed are those who are poor in spirit.?

By these, we mean the ones Zephaniah talked about in the first lesson, the humble of the land, those who know that they depend upon God, who find their security in God. So many of us reach out for more and more of this world's goods because what do you hear on the television, on the radio, in newspapers, in the ads? ?Get more, get rich, that will give you security.? No. that's not it. God is saying through Jesus, ?Blessed are the poor,? those who depend upon God, who have what they need but make sure that what they don't need is given over to those who are so desperately poor.

That's how justice could happen in our world -- when we really begin to live according to the beatitude, ?Blessed are the poor,? when we do not accumulate way beyond our need in order to have a false sense of security in those material goods. That's the basic problem, we are not poor in spirit, so we need to change. Change your lives.

Another situation that I think about in the world, and it's probably in the United States -- these are issues that you will hear in the different debates that are going on among our political candidates -- is immigration. Very, very few of our candidates speak in a very merciful way, ?Blessed are the merciful,? or who really mourn with those who mourn. Do you ever ask yourself why people try to come to this country?

Do you think people deliberately and cheerfully leave their families behind and come to live in a situation of fear all the time, that they're going to be deported again? No; they leave because they're desperate. They're trying to save their families. Do we ever look into the reasons why there is this flow of people from the south to the north, from Mexico, from Central America, into our country? Part of it is because through the systems we've set up, the poor in those countries are becoming poorer to the point of desperation, where they feel they must leave.

Or I also think of the people I visited in Jordan and Syria, the refugees from Iraq, where there's all that violence and suffering because of the destruction of that whole society that continues to go on. These people are finding it very difficult to be allowed into the United States. Citizens of Iraq may have been willing to help our military as translators, drivers and so on. Now they had to flee the country and they can't get in here.

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Obviously if we had that spirit of Jesus for those who were mourning, "Blessed are those who mourn," not just for our own sorrows and difficulties, but who mourn because of the sufferings of people like those desperate immigrants. "Blessed are the merciful" -- we would reach out in mercy. We wouldn't be calculating only the problems that these immigrants would bring into our society, as though we couldn't resolve those problems; we could. We're a nation of immigrants, we've done it before. We welcome people. Well, if we're going to change our lives, we need to change again in this regard.

Perhaps the most important of all the values that we need to change would be to become peace makers, "Blessed are the peace makers. They shall be called the sons and daughters of God." You'll be living within the realm of God as God's sons and daughters, if you really become desperate to make peace happen. Again, this isn't what you're hearing in the society in which we live. Our political candidates with varying degrees of insistence are saying, "We have to protect our borders, we have get security for ourselves and make our nation secure so we can block ourselves off from the rest of the world, and live in peace," but there isn't peace outside our borders.

All we can do, at least according to what is being told to us by our leaders is, spend more and more for military weapons. We've already spent over \$500 billion on such weapons and we're not secure, we're not bringing peace into the world. Jesus had a way of making peace happen. It's through what John Paul called the fascinating power of love. Jesus rejected violence, rejected war, and yet we cling to war as somehow being an answer to our needs for security, for peace. War, violence killing -- it just can't make it happen and will not bring the reign of God.

I wonder how much we stop to think how we have been affected by all the attitudes in the world around us, instead of going deeply into the gospel of Jesus and listening deeply to his words and letting those words transform us. This would be one of the most important areas that Jesus, who rejected violence for any reason whatsoever, who was executed, but who died loving those putting him to death, would preach in this Sermon on the Mount that begins in our gospel today.

He would preach: "Don't just love those who love you; love your enemy. Do good to the one who would hurt you." Reach out, speak to them, understand them, negotiate with them. Those are values you're not hearing, and we have to ask ourselves how much are we affected by the values of Jesus, what we hear in the gospel, how much we are giving in and just following, heedlessly, the values that we hear in the society, the culture in which we live. "Blessed are the peace makers" -- this is one of the most important of the values of Jesus that we need to try to nurture within ourselves so that we could bring an end to war and bring peace.

It's challenging, isn't it, when you really try to listen to what Jesus says, to the values he proclaims. The reign of God is at hand, it's ready to break forth, but you and I must change our lives, begin to make radical, deep changes in our value system, in our way of living, so that we live out the values of the gospel that we hear today. This is a very marvelous time to hear this gospel and to be challenged to change our lives because on Wednesday this week, we begin the season of Lent, Ash Wednesday. Of course, Lent is the time where every year, we try to enter into the life of Jesus more deeply, let his values change us.

We are willing to go even through death with Jesus, suffering in death as we enter into Holy Week and Good Friday. but then we come through that to the resurrection, where Jesus is raised from the dead. "Death," according to Paul then, "is no more," once we've gone through this radical conversion. During the season of Lent, six weeks we will have that opportunity and perhaps if we deepen our immersion into the way of Jesus during this season of Lent, try to let his attitude, his values, his teachings, penetrate deeply into our hearts and change our way of living.

Then when we celebrate Easter, we will have a beginning of the breaking forth more completely of the reign of God. Starting in our own lives as we arise with Jesus, having gone through suffering and death with him, the reign of God will be more present within our hearts, and then we can continue to reach out into the world and share with Jesus in bringing about God's reign, that time of justice, peace, love, joy and fullness of life that we all long for. Change your lives, the reign of God is at hand.

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