

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 1, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to the scripture lessons this morning, I think it will help us to get the full benefit of what God is speaking to us through God's holy word, if we remember the context within which we are reflecting on these scriptures. We get the context from the first lesson this morning, from the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus said to his disciples, "You are going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, even to the ends of the earth," so it was beginning to happen.

In that first lesson we're told about after the persecution that began in Jerusalem and the first martyr, Stephen, was put to death, the disciples began to disperse and they began to go throughout Judea, into Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth as the centuries rolled along. So as we listen to this word of God, it's coming to us in fulfillment of that promise of Jesus, "You will be my witnesses."

Now this word of God has extended to the ends of the earth and we are the ones who hear it and must respond to it. So it's within that context of being the witnesses who now, 2,000 years later, are hearing God's word, just like those first disciples that had gone out into Samaria and spread the word. So what is God speaking to us?

First of all, if we listen carefully to the gospel, God is speaking to us in Jesus, and as I mentioned before, these are words that Jesus spoke to his first disciples at the Last Supper. It was a moment when they were very troubled. In fact, we began this conversation as our gospel lesson last Sunday, when Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be troubled. Trust in me and trust in God." They were troubled because he was about to leave them.

He wanted to reassure them, and he reassures us by telling us, "In God's house there are many rooms. Otherwise I would not have told you that I go to prepare a place for you, but after I have gone and prepared a place for you, I shall come again and take you with me." Jesus was comforting those first disciples and those words can comfort us too.

I'm sure probably many of us have been at a funeral Mass where we've heard those words proclaimed, and how comforting they are: "I am going away to prepare a place for you." Jesus is telling each one of us this morning, 'Yes, I've gone away but I am preparing a place for you and one time I will come, and then you will be with me and I will be with you forever.'

In today's passage, again Jesus is trying to offer comfort to his disciples, and he tells them, "Even after I go, before I come to take you to be with me, I will send another paraclete, another helper, another guide, another counselor, someone who lives on within you and carries on my work, brings to you the word of God, gives to you strength and courage."

Jesus promises us that we'll never be alone. He's going to send the spirit, the paraclete. Then what is the greatest blessing of our baptism, which happened to us because of the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus reminds us, on that day, the day when we are baptized, "You will know that I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you." So we have that great blessing -- Jesus being within our very spirit, Jesus being one with us. We, living with the risen life of Jesus, which is forever.

That's a message of great joy that we receive. As St. Peter, in our second lesson today, points out to those first disciples, these words of Peter this morning are words that he spoke at a baptism, so he was encouraging people who were receiving this spirit of Jesus, having the life of Jesus break forth within them, telling them, "Yes, you may suffer, but do not be afraid, do not fear, because you will be blessed by the Lord Jesus in your heart."

Then Peter encourages these first disciples, and again encourages us, "Always be ready to offer an account for your hope, but give it simply and with respect." Peter is reminding us that because we have this blessing of God living within us, we, joined with God through Jesus, have great reason for hope. And our world is a world that needs hope because so many terrible things are happening all the time.

We live in a world of such terrible violence and sometimes we wonder if we're ever going to survive it all. Even in our personal lives, things happen that are very difficult for us to bear -- suffering, illness at times -- but we have that hope because Jesus lives within us. Peter says share that -- that's part of your responsibility as a disciple of Jesus. Be able to speak forth what is the cause for your hope so that others too may have hope and hope will spread throughout our world.

Finally today, as we listen to these lessons, thinking of ourselves as the ones to whom this word of God has come now after 2,000 years, we perhaps listen especially to the first lesson. That lesson might be a little bit puzzling because we hear about how Philip has baptized a number of people in Samaria, and now two of the apostles come from Jerusalem. They've only been baptized, Luke and the Acts tells us, in the Lord Jesus.

So now these disciples lay hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit. That's puzzling because when we're baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we are alive immediately with the Holy Spirit, so why do the disciples from Jerusalem, the apostles, come? When you look further into the Acts of the Apostles, in the 10th chapter, you find that St. Luke tells us something happens very differently.

Peter goes to the house of Cornelius because the Holy Spirit has already come down upon Cornelius and the members of his household, and then Peter baptizes them. The point is that Luke, in writing the Acts of the Apostles, isn't so concerned about the exact timing of what happens in what sequence. It's really all at once -- when you're baptized and receive the holy spirit -- but Luke tells these two different ways of the coming of the Holy Spirit because he's trying to emphasize something special in each account.

In the 10th chapter, he's showing us that God isn't confined by our rituals. The Spirit came on the house of Cornelius before they were baptized. God acts where God wills to act, and God's love is poured forth onto the world to anyone who is open to it. But in today's lesson, what Luke is emphasizing is that when you are made part of the disciples of Jesus, when you are baptized, you become part of a much larger community.

Baptism isn't just for me to save my soul, baptism is to draw me into a community of disciples that is bonded together throughout the whole world. The sign of that bond is the college of apostles or the college of bishops. That's why Peter and John come to Samaria, to show those people that they're linked in a universal church that spreads everywhere, an apostolic church that's built on the first disciples of Jesus.

That's why Pope Benedict came to us a couple of weeks ago, to remind us, and he did this so well, he's a symbol in our midst, that we're not just the church in the United States, we're part of a worldwide community, people bonded together with us throughout the whole world. In a very gentle way, Pope Benedict reminded us, that means we have to look out for our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

He spoke about immigrants in our midst. "Welcome them," he said, "as your brothers and sisters," because that's what they are. Some of us might not like to hear that in our country, but they are our brothers and sisters in Jesus and in the human family. This morning, because I have been invited to speak with you, and Fr. Jim assured me it would be all right to speak about a personal concern of mine, and that is some of the work that I'm associated with in Haiti.

I think it's very appropriate that while we live here, were part of a worldwide church; we're connected with Haiti. If you've followed the paper recently, you're probably aware that some terrible things are happening in our world. Hunger is becoming a huge problem, and it's especially true in Haiti. "Haiti's hunger, that burn in the belly that so many here feel, has become fiercer than ever in recent days as global food prices spiral out of reach, spiking as much as 45 percent since the end of 2006, and turning Haitian staples like beans, corn and rice, into closely guarded resources."

Here's what happens: Here's a man in Port-au-Prince named Saint Louis Meriska. "His children ate two spoonfuls of rice apiece as their only meal recently, and then went without any food the following day. His eyes downcast, his own stomach empty, the unemployed father said forlornly, 'They look at me and say, 'Papa, I'm hungry,' and I have to look away. It's humiliating and it makes you angry.' "

There's another part of that same article that goes on to say: "In Haiti, where three-quarters of the population earns less than \$2 a day and one in five children is chronically malnourished, the one business booming amid all the gloom is the selling of cookies made of mud[, oil and sugar,] typically consumed only by the most destitute." Can you imagine having to give your children a cookie made of mud? Yes, there's some oil added to it and a little bit of butter, but basically it's mud.

One of the persons giving such cookies to his children says, "It makes your stomach quiet down." So then at the end of the article, "Most of the poorest of the poor suffer silently, too weak for activism or too busy raising the next generation of hungry. In the sprawling slum of Haiti's Cité Soleil, [a young mother], 29, offered one of her five offspring to a stranger. 'Take one,' she said, cradling a listless baby and motioning toward four rail-thin toddlers, none of whom had eaten that day. 'You pick. Just feed them.' "

It is impossible even to exaggerate the suffering of people that are so poor that a mother would say, "Take one of my children. All I ask is that you feed that child." So this morning as we hear this word of God and are reminded that through our baptism, we are joined into a whole community of disciples of Jesus throughout the world, we have to make ourselves aware that it's part of our responsibility as baptized disciples of Jesus to

connect with our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

I'm asking you this morning to be especially mindful of Haiti. The Catholic Worker House of Grace here in Philadelphia is helping to build a clinic in Haiti that will provide some health care for people, that will make it possible for those children in Haiti to be vaccinated, to make it possible that people might live a little bit longer than the current lifespan of 49 or 50 years, in the poorest country in our hemisphere.

We not only are trying to provide through the clinic, minimal health care, but also it's in a parish in Port-au-Prince where there's a food program that feeds almost 800 to 900 children every day, one meal; trying to do something to stave off the worst consequences of the poverty of Haiti.

As we listen to God's word today, I hope we will realize that we who are the ones that are now the witnesses of Jesus at the farthest ends of the earth, as he promised his gospel would go, that we will, as Jesus told us in the gospel, be comforted by the fact that he is still among us, he lives within us, we are in him and he is in us, that we will rejoice in the fact that he has gone to prepare a place for each of us, and that he will come to take us with him.

Also, I hope we will remember that we must reach out to our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world and today I ask you especially to be mindful of the people of Haiti, and in whatever way possible, that you might support our efforts in that country to provide some minimal health care and to stave off the worst consequences of hunger.

This is the way that we truly live out the blessing that we have received through our baptism, the blessing that has made us the witnesses of Jesus now in our world, the blessing that makes us part of the community of disciples of Jesus that will carry on the work of Jesus to bring the love and the goodness of God to every part of our world. I pray that each of us will commit ourselves to that work.

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