

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 1, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

Editor's Note: Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at Ss. Peter & Paul Church in Detroit, Michigan at the celebration of the 160th anniversary of the parish. It is a Jesuit parish in downtown Detroit.

First of all, I express profound thanks to Fr. [Carl] Bonk [S.J.] and to all of you, who are the community of this parish at Ss. Peter & Paul, for the opportunity to be the main celebrant today on this very important occasion when you celebrate and remember 160 years of the presence of this parish community here in the city of Detroit. It truly is a privilege to be among you and to experience your faith and your joy as this celebration takes place.

I hope that, as we listen carefully to the scriptures today, all of us will have an even deeper understanding of how important it is that this community has been here for these 160 years, and that it will continue to be here for many, many decades to come.

What we must do as we try to listen to the scriptures is to understand better, I think, what it means to be a parish community, and what it means for each of us to be a member of that community ? the responsibilities that we have, the privileges and the joys that we receive.

Of course, over the 160 years that this parish has been here, it obviously has undergone many, many changes ? changes in its sociological makeup, changes in the ministries that it has performed over these years. But there's always been one constant. This parish and every parish in the world is basically a community of disciples of Jesus Christ.

The recent Vatican council has helped us to understand better what that means to be a community of disciples of Jesus. It's a community where everyone is equal in freedom and dignity, where everyone shares in the same ministry, proclaimed so marvelously by that council in the first sentence of the document ?On the Church in the Modern World ? the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people everywhere, especially the poor and the oppressed. These are the joys, the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the church, of the community of disciples of Jesus.

It's especially hopeful to celebrate this on this feast day of Ss. Peter & Paul. They, of course, were among the very first members of that first community of disciples of Jesus, whose history is recorded so well in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. From them and from the scriptures today, we can get a deeper understanding of ?What is my responsibility?? Each of us will say that as a disciple of Jesus.

First of all, it seems to me that a disciple of Jesus accepts what is truly the most important part of our calling: to get to know Jesus.

This is what happened to Peter and to Paul. Peter, over a number of years, by being part of that small group of disciples that moved around the holy land with Jesus, came to know him. He saw him laugh, he saw him cry, he saw him get angry, he saw him be tired, he knew Jesus as a fellow human being, but then as we hear in today's gospel, through that special gift of God to Peter, he was the first who could say to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

So Peter knew Jesus deeply as a human friend and he cherished that friendship and he nurtured it, but he also knew Jesus as the son of God.

The same thing is true of Paul, isn't it? Paul had a different way of learning about Jesus. For him, it happened in a flash. You remember the story, I'm sure, where he was on his way to Damascus, a city in Syria, where he was going to go to arrest Christians - those who were, as Paul understood it at that moment, being destructive toward God's chosen people. Paul was going to arrest them, put them in prison, even have some of them executed, but on his way he was thrown to the ground in a flash of light. He heard Jesus speaking, "Paul, Paul, why are you persecuting me?"

Paul suddenly realized that in those followers of Jesus whom he was going to arrest, he was actually arresting Jesus.

Paul came to know Jesus first of all, in other people, in those in whom Jesus lived. But then, as Paul tells us in his letter to the church at Galatia, he went away and spent 14 years in the Arabian desert before he went back up to Jerusalem as he, in prayer, discovered who Jesus is.

So that is how Peter and Paul first became disciples. They committed themselves to know Jesus, and that's what you and I must do. We won't have that same revelation, obviously, that Paul had, and we don't have the opportunity to be with Jesus in his physical presence, but we can listen to the words of Jesus as they're proclaimed to us every week, as we take the time in our own private moments to read the gospels, listen to Jesus, watch Jesus, see how he acts, come to know Jesus deeply. That's a privilege and it's also our responsibility as a disciple of Jesus, to know him so that we call him friend, brother, one of us, like us in every way except sin.

As we come to know Jesus more and more - more intimately, more deeply - we become truly his disciples. But I guess we must also realize that this will require changes for us. If you're going to really be a disciple of Jesus, even if you've been a Catholic all your life, even now certainly there are ways that you and I must change to be disciples of Jesus.

Look at Peter again. He had to change dramatically.

Right after the passage that we heard today, Jesus and the disciples go on and begin a journey to Jerusalem. Jesus begins by telling them, "Look, I am going up to Jerusalem and there I will be arrested, then I'll be tortured and then I'll be executed, put to death on a cross." Well, that was too much for Peter. He had the idea Jesus was going to be a new David, a powerful earthly king with an army that would drive out the occupying forces at Rome.

Peter had a whole different understanding of what Jesus' ministry was. He never thought about how he would transform the world, not through power or armies or wealth, but through forgiveness and love.

So when Jesus announced what was to happen, Peter said, "No, no! It doesn't have to be that way." He thought that because Jesus had such a huge following, it would be so easy for him to take a worldly way. Do you know what Jesus did? Matthew tells us. He said to Peter, "Get behind me, you Satan! You're thinking in human terms,

not in God's ways.?

Peter had to begin to change, really think differently, a whole new set of values, and it was hard.

We find out that even on that last night of the life of Jesus, Holy Thursday, when he was in the garden and was being arrested, Peter still had not changed, because he's the one that is described in the gospel as taking out his sword, trying to defend Jesus with violence, and Jesus said, "No, put it away. Whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword."

Jesus rejected violence.

He would not allow himself to be defended with violence. He would not use violence himself. If we take Jesus seriously, probably for most of us, it will mean dramatic change, even as it did for Peter. He had to change his thinking, and he did because he even went to death himself, was crucified, but forgiving and loving those who did it. Paul too, had to change. He was one who was very strong in his commitment to destroy this new religion. He was a zealot, really, and God, through the presence of Jesus in his life, turned him around. The one who was known among the first communities as the persecutor of the Christians became the great preacher, apostle of the Gentiles, reaching out and beginning to spread the gospel message of Jesus into the whole world.

So Peter and Paul changed, and you and I, if we really want to be disciples of Jesus, must begin to change so that we have the same attitude, the same mind and heart. As Paul put it in writing to the church at Philippi, "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus," then he goes on to say, "Who, though he was god, did not think his divinity something to be clung to, but emptied himself and gave himself over to death, even the terrible death of the cross."

We have to get that mind, that heart, the attitude, the values, of Jesus. The scriptures today remind us too, that this will cost us something.

In that first lesson, Peter was in jail, and that was the second time he was in jail. Why? Because, as he told the judges when he was on trial the first time, "I must obey God rather than any human law. God's law is first." He paid the price for saying that and for doing that and ultimately he paid the final price - he was executed. Paul too, paid the price. As we heard in the second lesson today, Paul could say at the end of his life, "My life is being poured out like a libation." He was talking about the sacrifices where an animal would be slaughtered and the blood would be poured out over the altar to consecrate the people. Paul's whole life was poured out as a living sacrifice, a libation for others. Paul ultimately paid the final price too, as he was beheaded for being a disciple of Jesus and living according to the way of Jesus.

Down through the centuries, over the past 160 years in this parish, people have tried to be disciples of Jesus and we can look to them as our models, as those who show us the way.

Today we look at Peter and Paul but I also suggest that, in this time in which we live, a time when violence seems to be more present in our world than any time in history - wars and the destructive violence of war exceeds anything that's ever been known - even in our own country, the everyday violence, tens of thousands of people each year killed with handguns.

It's a time in the history of the world where violence seems to overwhelm us. As John Paul II put it in one of his Peace Day statements, it's a time when "violence seems to have the upper hand," seems to be overwhelming the world in which we live.

This past October, Pope Benedict held up for us a model from our current, modern age. He beatified a peasant from a tiny village in Austria, St. Radegund. That peasant was Franz Jagerstatter, a husband and a father of three

children, who was a very faithful disciple of Jesus, and in the face of great opposition, refused to serve in Hitler's armies, so on Aug. 9, 1942, he was beheaded as a traitor. From jail in Berlin, he had written to his wife and his mother:

"It was not possible for me to spare you the pain that you must now suffer on my account. How hard it must have been for our dear Savior, when through his sufferings and death he had to prepare such a great sorrow for his mother ? and they bore all of this out of love. I thank our dear Jesus too that I am privileged to suffer, even die for him."

Then another time in prison he wrote:

"I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth, even if it costs me my life, for you will not find it written in any of the commandments of God or of the church, that anyone is obliged under pain of sin to take an oath, committing him to obey whatever might be commanded by a secular ruler," so he stood up against the civil authorities. Finally, "which Catholic, which disciple of Jesus, would dare to declare this war, undertaken in many countries, continuing to be carried out to be a just and holy war? Who can manage to be a soldier of Christ and at the same time, a soldier of his nation?"

We, who live in a nation where war has become a constant for almost 15 years, must begin to ask, if there isn't a different direction we must go if we are to be disciples of Jesus. Peter and Paul in the past, Franz Jagerstatter from very recently, show us that the way of Jesus is a different way.

We allow ourselves to be challenged today to try to truly become what every parish is supposed to be, a community of disciples of Jesus who know him, who understand his ways, and who follow him.

As it did for Peter and Paul, it will require changes in our thinking, in our attitudes, in our actions, and it may cost us something, but as we try to commit ourselves to follow the way of Jesus, we can perhaps listen once more to the words of Paul and pray that we can be like him: "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. So now there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness with which Jesus will fill me on that day, and not only me, but all those who have longed for his glorious coming."

And that would be all of us, if we can be faithful disciples of Jesus.

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