NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 14, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

It's my conviction that most of us who hear these lessons today, especially the first lesson, can find a lot of comfort in them. I think there are a couple of reasons for this, one of which is very obvious, and the other we have to search a little bit more deeply to discover what God is really saying to us today.

The first reason why these lessons seem so comforting, I think we find in the gospel, how quick Jesus is to reach out to help. As soon as Peter cries in fear and in need, Jesus is right there, disappointed perhaps because Peter has suddenly lacked confidence in him, but nevertheless, he's there to give Peter the help he needs. The first lesson we also find comforting because it reminds us that when we are searching for God, or perhaps when we feel somewhat abandoned by God, if we go apart, we will discover God.

The experience of Elijah is so powerful because it shows us that we don't find God in great acts of power, acts of intimidation, in ways that would frighten us. Elijah, in his search for God, first experiences this terrible windstorm that must have seemed overwhelming and totally frightening. "A wild wind which rent the mountains and broke the rocks into pieces" is how it's described, but "Yahweh was not in the wind."

After the storm, there's an earthquake and how frightening and yet powerful an earthquake is, but God's not in the earthquake. After that, a terrible fire, which seemed to destroy everything with its power, but "God was not in the fire." Then finally there's the murmur of a gentle breeze. When Elijah perceived that breeze, he covered his face with his cloak, went out and stood at the entrance of the cave, because it was in that quiet breeze, that whispering breeze, that he heard God's voice once more. He knew he was in the presence of God.

We, too, if we take the time to go apart to listen deeply, there will be that whispering breeze. We're confident of it. We've experienced it. In that very deep quiet, God's spirit speaks to our spirit in the depth of our heart.

This, of course, as I say, is something that we cherish and if we haven't experienced it, we can have confidence that if we make that choice - go apart, be quiet -- we will, we can discover God speaking deeply in our hearts.

In this, there is a second lesson, and this we could easily miss. We discover first of all, in that first lesson from the book of Kings, the experience of Elijah. Immediately after Elijah experiences God speaking to him and he's aware of God's presence, he heard God saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Remember, Elijah had just traveled a long, long distance and God had assisted him. If you go back before that experience of Elijah discovering God in the quiet breeze, you find out that on the journey Elijah had fled

because he was in danger of his life, and God had been leading him. We read before this experience that Elijah was discouraged. "He laid down, went to sleep under a broom tree; then an angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.' Elijah looked and saw at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and went back to sleep. But the angel of Yahweh came a second time to him saying, 'Get up and eat, for the journey is too long for you.' He got up and ate and drank, and on the strength of that food, he traveled for 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, to the mount of God."

God was guiding him, bringing him, to this very place. But then afterwards God says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and Yahweh says to him, "Take the road back through the desert and go to Damascus, for you must anoint Hazael as king of Syria. You shall also anoint Jehu, grandson of Nimshi, as king over Israel."

So God is telling Elijah, "You've come all this way. I've led you, I've brought you here, but now suddenly I'm telling you, you've gone the wrong way. You have to go back," and it's maybe 300 or 400 miles that he has to travel. God has led him, he's been faithful, he's followed, but now God says suddenly, a different way.

That's a hard lesson, but an important lesson for us. It's a lesson that is repeated, I think, or it's very similar in what Paul writes to the church at Rome today, our second lesson. Paul is beginning a whole new section in his letter to the Romans, and he's beginning to reflect on the situation of his people, the people he loves. He's a Jew. He's cherished the Law, the covenant, the sacrifice, the temple-everything. Bbut God has taken him, even though he'd been faithful through all of that, and now suddenly God says, "Here's a different way. Follow Jesus." Paul is enlightened by that. He makes this dramatic change in his life.

But now Paul is struggling. "What about my people?" Paul says, "I have great sadness and constant anguish for the Jews. I would even desire that I myself suffer the curse of being cut off from Jesus instead of my brothers and sisters, my own people, my kin."

Then he describes the Israelites, whom God adopted, and on them rests God's glory. Theirs are the covenant, the Law, the worship, the promises of God. They are descendants of the patriarchs. From their race, Jesus was born. Now, Jesus and God are calling them to let go of the covenant, the Law, the worship, the promises of God as they understood them. Now follow Jesus.

Paul struggles with this as we'll hear in the next few Sundays, through this ninth chapter of Romans. What is happening is that his beloved people don't all take up the challenge and Paul comes to the end of this passage and is faced with a mystery: How does this happen? Why does it happen? But the point that's so important is that God can lead us a certain way and then suddenly God takes us a different way.

Doesn't that happen sometimes in our lives?

We try to be faithful to God. We try to go where God has been leading us. In my own life, and I always hesitate to be personal like this, but it seems so clear to me. For 20-some years I was pastor at St. Leo Parish. I'm sure it was true and is true, I felt that God had led me there, God wanted me to do that, but then suddenly not by my choosing, but by decree from Rome, I was told I must leave there.

Of course I felt and still feel it was very unjust, yet somehow in this action that is unjust and on one level wrong, still for another reason that I am slowly discovering, God has said, "Let that go. Go in a different direction." So that is what I'm doing now. Even though it's hard to make that reversal and go a different direction, if you've been listening to God and trying to discover God speaking to you and you go that other direction, you find God is with you and you will be at peace in it.

That's been my experience and I'm sure could be the experience of any of us when suddenly we're unemployed - a new direction -or suddenly there's a devastating illness that has come to us. God is leading us in a new direction. There can be any number of things that suddenly, God is saying, "Leave, go back, turn around; go another way."

I think this is the situation with people in our church over the last couple of decades. In fact, just the other day a very good friend who had been a priest, his wife died. He had left and married. She had been a religious, a nun, and they made this sudden reversal in their lives. They had been following a certain way, but I think we can see how God said, "No, now reverse. Go a different way."

The reason I can be sure that it was God leading them is that their lives, as married people, became a real sacrament, a true visible image of God's love. Their love for one another and the sacrament of marriage was a witness to all of the love of God present in our world. So they had been going a certain direction -- suddenly, a new direction -- and I think that's been true of many people in the church in the last couple of decades.

Another way that this is true, I think, is another situation that has developed in the church, and that's the sex scandal. Many people, and I include myself among them, see a deep problem in the church and why that scandal has happened and why we find it so hard to get past it. There are structures in the church that need to be changed. Many people have come to that awareness.

The structures that allow authority or power within the church to be totally centralized so that the Pope is not really accountable, bishops are not accountable, so when they act in a wrong way, there's no way to bring them to account, those kinds of structures have to be changed. We can't have a church where all power, authority and decision making is centralized with one person and then a few gathered around that person. It happens in Rome; it happens in each diocese.

That has to change, and if that were changed, then I think we could get to some of the root problems that cause this scandal within the church which continues and will not end, I think, until we make a reversal. Yes, it's been hundreds of years that church structures have been built up. God has led us in this way, but now God is speaking to us and saying, "A different way."

It doesn't mean the past was wrong; it simply means that at this point, God is asking us to turn around, go a different way.

This, of course, is confirmed most of all in today's gospel, where Peter is going a certain direction, he's confident in faith and he walks toward Jesus. In this instance, it's not very long, just a short time, but Jesus is asking him to focus totally on him.

Peter begins to look around, begins to be aware of his surroundings-where he has been, what is happening-and suddenly he begins to sink, to go down under the water. So he cries out, "Lord, save me!" and Jesus does. That means, I think, for us as we reflect on these scriptures that the important focus for us always: Keep our eyes on Jesus, and Jesus will lead us, guide us. It will be his quiet voice speaking in the depths of our heart, sometimes telling us to reverse where we've been going and go in a new direction.

If we keep our eyes focused on Jesus and really listen deeply, whatever we hear from Jesus is where God is leading us. When we have the courage and the confidence to keep that focus on Jesus and to go wherever Jesus leads us, we will find that peace, the quiet that Jesus brings.

As he gets into the boat with Peter, the storm stops. Everything is quiet and peaceful. What a blessing that will be in our lives, when we keep our focus on Jesus and go wherever Jesus leads us. We will find peace, tranquility, and we will be following God's way and bringing about results that God wants and chooses.

We pray today that our focus will be on Jesus and we will go wherever Jesus leads us.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at Holy Trinity Parish in Detroit.]

Source URL (retrieved on *02/21/2017 - 17:20*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/nineteenth-sunday-ordinary-time-1