

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

December 19, 2008 at 8:42am

Third Sunday of Advent

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Editor's Note: If you are looking for Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés' column for December 18, please follow this link: **Blessed Mother: Appears To Us Daily**. Bishop Gumbleton's homily begins below:

As we listened to the first lesson today, that beautiful prophecy from the 61st chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah, and we heard the prophet proclaim, "The spirit of God is upon me because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to bind up broken hearts, to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those languishing in prison, to announce the year of God's favor, the day of vengeance of our God."

When we heard all of that, it might have seemed familiar to us, and it really is because it's used in the gospel of Luke, the very same words by Jesus when he begins his public ministry. He does this by proclaiming the word in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus, as Luke said, was at the synagogue as he usually was on the Sabbath day and that day he was asked to read the scriptures.

Luke says he carefully unrolled the scroll so that he came to the point where he found the passage, and then he read those words that Isaiah proclaims in our first lesson today, "The spirit of God is upon me?" and so on. But when Jesus spoke those words, at the end he sat down, and Luke says, "All eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him."

What was he going to say? I'm sure they were wondering. And he very quietly said, "This day, this scripture passage is fulfilled even as you listen."

Now, when Isaiah spoke those words hundreds of years before Jesus, he was speaking them in a very particular historical context. The chosen people had been in exile for many years, decades. Now they had returned but they found their city Jerusalem destroyed, the temple destroyed, the temple misused and made a place of evil. It would have been like people coming back to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, finding everything in shambles and being totally disheartened, feeling a great loss.

But when that happened to the people, Isaiah proclaimed these words that we heard today -- words of hope, words of comfort, words of reassurance that God really was with them and that God would bring good news to those suffering, to the poor, bind up broken hearts, heal, set the downtrodden free, give the blind new sight and most of all, proclaim God's year of jubilee, a time of renewal, a time of fullness of life for every person, a special time in the Jewish liturgy -- the year of jubilee.

When Jesus spoke those words in the synagogue at Nazareth, he was telling us, "This day, this scripture passage is fulfilled even as you listen," so he was telling us, the community of his disciples, that this is his mission -- to bring good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, give the blind new sight, set the downtrodden free, proclaim God's year of jubilee -- this is his mission. He will change everything, not just rebuild the city and rebuild the temple. Jesus is going to bring the fullness of God's life. For Jesus, that time of jubilee meant a time when every person would have a chance for a full human life, a time when all debts would be forgiven, sins would be forgiven. Everyone would start new and there would be peace and joy.

Now it is 2,000 years later. We still haven't achieved that mission of Jesus, which he gave to us, his disciples, as he left this earth. It was for his community of disciples to carry on that mission, but it hasn't really happened yet, has it? Yet, God's promise is always reliable. We can trust in God's word. So we ask ourselves, "What is it that will make this promise of God come true, be fulfilled? What is it that we need to do in order for that beautiful promise to be accomplished?"

If we turn to our second lesson today, we hear Paul telling the church at Thessalonica, this first community of Christians, one of the first he had evangelized, "Rejoice, pray without ceasing. Give thanks to God at every moment," because Paul is confident that the promise of God will be fulfilled. But he also exhorts them -- this is where our responsibility comes in to play, where Paul tells one of those first communities of disciples: "Do not quench the spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterance. Put everything to the test. Hold fast to what is good."

What Paul is telling those Christians, what he tells us today, if we want this beautiful promise of God to happen, the fullness of life to come, the time when every one of us experiences joy and deep peace, and our world is a world of love and goodness where everyone prospers. If we want that to happen, then we can't quench the spirit; we must let the spirit of Jesus burst forth within us, within our whole community, and we must not despise prophetic utterance. We have to listen to the prophets in our midst today.

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And I think sometimes in our church, we do the very thing Paul says not to do -- we don't listen to the voices that speak to us, responding to the signs of the times right now, the voices that speak to us with God's word, prophetic voices. These voices would call us to change within our church so that we really

would become as John in the gospel lesson says "a witness to the light," that we would be the ones (our community of disciples) witnessing to the light, Jesus, who can change everything.

Let me just give one example. We're here at the Jean Donovan Community Peace Center. This is a place where we're gathered because we are promoting and trying to fulfill a special work, and that is to support the School of the Americas Watch, an organization that is working to close down a school where U.S. military teach military leaders from countries in Central America and Latin America, train them, but actually train them to torture and to kill.

It was graduates of these schools, and this is how School of the Americas Watch was founded, to bring to accountability and justice those who carried out atrocities in El Salvador back in 1989. This was the one event that really began this whole effort to close the school when six Jesuit priests and their two co-workers, two women, were brutally murdered by graduates of this school. During the time of the civil war in El Salvador, tens of thousands of people, including Jean Donovan, after whom this house was made, and three other religious who were working together with her, including Archbishop Oscar Romero, were killed by graduates of this school.

A prophetic voice has risen in our midst, Fr. Roy Bourgeois. And Father Roy has brought together, every year on the anniversary of that terrible atrocity when those Jesuits and their two co-workers were murdered, a few people at the beginning, but now tens of thousands of people come to march, to demonstrate, demanding that this school be closed. It's a part of the overall effort to bring peace into our world by rejecting violence, killing and war.

That's the very thing, of course, that Jesus had promised, that there would be fullness of peace when his message was heard, and now that this prophetic voice is taking us back to that time of Jesus where Jesus taught us to reject violence, to reject killing, to reject war.

We must listen to the prophetic voice. It's one of many voices in our times, from our whole church, calling us to the message of Jesus, calling us to be witnesses to the light of Jesus.

One of the things about prophets, and Paul had told us that you not only have to not despise prophetic utterance, but put everything to the test. How do we know that a prophet is speaking for God, speaking the word of God? One of the criteria offered by scripture commentators is that the prophet will take us back to the beginning, to the ways that Jesus first gathered his disciples and spoke to them and taught them. The prophet takes us back to the beginning, to the time of Jesus and his original, authentic message, and certainly this rejection of violence takes us back to the beginning when Jesus rejected violence for any reason whatsoever.

Now there's a second thing that Father Roy is calling us to, that I think is also a very important part of our message, in order to enliven our church, in order to make us a full community that really can be a witness to the light.

We are aware that our church is lacking in ministers, those who can speak prophetically in our public liturgy, those who can be pastoral leaders in our communities. But they are available and Father Roy has made the plea and a public statement through his action by being present at the ordination of a woman, and has urged our church and proclaimed to our church, "Go back to the beginning?" when house churches -- places like we are assembled here today in a home with a small community gathered -- were led, we learned from the letters of Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, by women.

We must open ourselves to this reality, take us back to the beginning, so that we flourish in the church with new ministers, ministers who can be that prophetic voice as these women were in the beginning.

Those are two ways that Roy's prophetic voice takes us back to the beginning, to the time of Jesus. I hope we can listen to this prophetic voice. Our whole church must listen. And there are many other prophetic voices that we have to listen to, but most of all, each of us has to try to be alert. This is one example, but there are others, and if we as a whole community of disciples of Jesus, a church -- the small community here and other communities throughout our nation, throughout the world -- truly listen to the prophetic voices in our midst, we will return to that time of Jesus when everything seemed possible. This day, this scripture passage is fulfilled even as you listen.

It will be fulfilled for us and of course, the outcome for us and for our world will be what Paul proclaims to that community at Thessalonica: Rejoice, be filled with joy. Give thanks to God.

We will be a people filled with joy, filled with peace, giving thanks to God, and we will be that light, a witness to the light of Jesus that will bring that peace, that joy, into our world so that the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus in that synagogue at Nazareth will happen now in our midst. Our world will be transformed and become as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

Truly this is a message in which we can rejoice always and give thanks to God in every moment.

(Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at Jane Donovan Peace Center, Philadelphia, Pa.)

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