

First Sunday of Lent

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 5, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

I think we will understand and learn best from the gospel today if we start our reflection with the first reading and reflect on the covenant that God renews after that flood. Covenant is a word that is very important in the Catholic-Christian tradition. It wasn't a word that was important in other ancient religions. A covenant means an agreement. It means something that happens between two people -- or it can be a large scale too -- as a covenant of marriage when two people promise to each other they constant faithful love.

The covenant we hear about in today's first lesson is not the first covenant that God made with human people, with the human race. That happened at creation, because all of creation was loved into being by God. Love. A relationship established immediately between all of creation, the universe, the world in which we live and every one of us. God loved us into being and made a commitment to us and we respond. So there is this basic covenant that is contained within in creation itself.

In today's lesson, we hear about how people had failed to live up to their part of the covenant. Violence. Starting at the very beginning with the slaying of Able by his brother Cain. Violence going on in creation. The abuse of creation. Sin rampant. But then after the flood, Noah and his family are saved. God enters into a new covenant, a new relationship, whereby God says that all of creation will never be destroyed by God again and God asks the people to response.

Today's Readings
Genesis 9:8-15
Psalm 25:4-5, 6, 7, 8-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Matt 12:1-15

Later on in the Book of Genesis, we know the covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah. God says to them, "You will be the beginning of a whole new people, my chosen people. You be faithful to me, I will be your God and you will be my people."

Then comes the covenant at Mount Sinai, the great covenant with Moses, during the time when the chosen people were coming out of Egypt, out of slavery, headed toward the Promised Land. At one point on their journey, Moses prays on Mount Sinai and God gives to Moses the commandments, the law. But all the commandments are summed up with that one great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your soul and love your neighbor as yourself." That is what God asks of the people. God promises to be their God. They will be God's people based on that covenant of love of God and neighbor.

The Gospel then is really the beginning of a new covenant. At this time it is a special, unique covenant whereby Jesus becomes the one who is the sign of that covenant and in whom the covenant is made. At the time of the baptism of Jesus, as we heard in the gospel, Jesus experiences in his own spirit God speaking. God saying you are my son, you are my truly beloved. In you I am well pleased. God was conferring on Jesus special love but asking of Jesus to carry out a special role.

And as we hear it in the gospel, Jesus immediately -- the words are striking -- Mark says the spirit drove Jesus into the desert. Drove him into the desert, because Jesus had to pray, reflect, come to understand deeply what God was asking of him as he became the seal of a new covenant for all of the universe, all of the world, all of the people.

Jesus began his time in the desert praying. And this is what we try to do during this season of Lent. We kind of take on the role of Jesus, being in a desert place, a quiet place where we can enter into quiet prayer and reflection. Jesus was reflecting on those words that he heard, what God was asking of him. Now for us, we hear the words, "You are my son my chosen one in whom I am well pleased," and that is probably the end of it. But of Jesus, he knew those were words that had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah speaking for God. "Here is my servant, my chosen one in whom I am well pleased. I put my spirit upon him. He will bring true justice to the nations." He will be the one who reforms, reshapes the whole world, all of the nations.

But how does he do it? This is what Jesus had to reflect on: "He does not shout nor raise his voice. He does not cry out in the streets calling people to arms. The broken reed he will not crush. Nor will he snuff out the light of the wavering wick." Yet he will bring true justice.

Now what happens in the desert to Jesus? It isn't in today's gospel, but we know it well from Matthew's Gospel. During that time of 40 days and 40 nights of prayer and quiet, Jesus was being tempted. He knew that God gave him this call, bring true justice to the nations, or as Mark puts it in the beginning of the Gospel, the reign of God is ready to break forth. The reign of God is here now, if you follow God's ways.

You see, following God means true justice for the nations. Everyone would have a full human life. There would be peace; there would be joy in the lives of all. No more grief. No more suffering, no more pain. Fullness of life.

How do you make that happen? That's what the temptations were about. It was a constant struggle in the life of Jesus. He was fully human like us in every way, so it wasn't something that was automatic. Even after the temptations were over, it says in the Gospel of Luke, "the devil left him for a time." It was a constant temptation.

Remember the temptations? The first one: These stones change them into bread? Jesus would have these miraculous power, that Jesus would have all that he wanted. Turn stones into bread. Have all the riches of the world. That would be the way to bring about the reign of God? No. "It is not by bread alone that people live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." That is what Jesus tells the devil after the devil tries to tempt him into using wealth to bring about the reign of God.

The second temptation: Go to the pinnacle of the temple and throw yourself down. Become a wonder worker. Make everyone in the world aware of you. Have prestige. Fame. These are things that we so easily go after. But Jesus says no.

Then the third, the most important. The devil says I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth. You will have the power of all nations. The greatest empire ever thought of. I will give you all of that. Power, so that you can dominate, so you can make things happen as you want." And Jesus says, "Be gone Satan. Get out of here. You shall love the lord you God alone." Satan had said, "If you adore me that is what I will give you." Jesus rejected that.

But what does he understand? He is to bring true justice to the nations according to the way he understood the prophet Isaiah speaking. Not by calling to arms, don't cry aloud in the street, you are not going to bring true justice through war, through violence, through force. No. But rather through love. By being nurturing, life giving. You don't quench the wavering flame or crush the bruised reed. You draw it into life. Then you can

bring true justice to the nations.

That is what God was presenting to Jesus in the desert. Jesus entered into a special covenant with God. He became God's chosen one, the one who would bring true justice to the nations. The one who would show us how to make reign of God happen. The one who would invite us to enter into that reign of God by living according to the ways that he understood and that he lived out in his life.

That is the covenant that Jesus enters into and invites us to be a part of. That is what we try to do during this season of Lent. To try to understand what Jesus was called to and commit ourselves to follow him.

There are many ways in which, if we start to make it practical what am I to do, how am I to act. Obviously we are going to try to act with greater love and tenderness toward one another. Bringing joy into people's life through nurturing through love. But we also have to act as a community. If all of us who are followers of Jesus started to really live according to the values of Jesus, how different our world would be. How different our nation would be and public policies that we would follow. Not by forcing them on everyone, but by coming together in a consensus and developing public policies that we choose to follow that would reflect the way of Jesus.

I think right now there is great hope for us. This morning I was reading in the paper about how our government, our leaders are saying that we will try to take leadership among the nations of the world to bring about protection of the earth, to prevent the change of climate that is even more quickly destroying our planet. We will take a lead among nations, which we haven't done, refusing to sign the past accord that nations agreed to at Kyoto some years ago. Now we are going to take the lead to save the earth, which is the second covenant that God entered into with Noah. To save the earth and never let it be destroyed. If we support our leadership, this can happen.

But there is another way, and it may be even more challenging and many of us perhaps find it quite difficult. This past week President Obama published his budget projection for the next 10 years. Now that is not something that we might not think of as a religious document. All those numbers get very confusing after a while. But the thrust of this budget, as we read about it, is to try to bring about some redistribution of wealth so that everyone on this planet, everyone in our nation, will have a chance at full human life. Now when he does that, what do you hear? Socialism! He is going to make us a socialist nation. Well, that's not really a bad word, if it means redistributing wealth. It's not a bad word.

Among the very first Christians, do you remember the Acts of the Apostles, no one lacked anything because they shared what they had. That's how they lived. They shared with one another. It wasn't "I keep everything for myself. I earned it. I worked for it. It's all mine." That wasn't their attitude at all because that wasn't the attitude of Jesus. That would be hard for some of us, but it has been a constant teaching within the church, the community of the disciples of Jesus, from the very beginning.

Recently, Pope Paul VI reiterated all of this when he wrote a document that says God intended the earth and it contains for the use of every human being and people. God made the world for all, for everybody. All other rights, including those of property and free commerce, are to be subordinated to this principle.

Now did Pope Paul VI pull that out of the air? That God made the world for all and not just a few and that all other rights have to be subordinated to that principle, even the right of what I own, my private property, has to be subordinated to that principle? No. He goes back to the scriptures. On the Sermon on the Mount, God through Jesus teaches us that we do not own everything for ourselves, we do not place our trust in material goods. We trust in God.

Or in the letter of St. John: Someone who has the riches of this world, sees a brother or sister in need and closes

their heart to that person, how does the love of god abide in them? It doesn't, of course. We have to have that spirit of willingly sharing.

Or the early teachings of the church, this goes back to the third century. It is well known how strong were the words used by the early teachers. St. Ambrose: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person; you are handing over what belongs to that poor person." What a different way of looking upon our material wealth. If we have more than what we need, it belongs to the poor. That is what Pope Paul says: "Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditioned right. No one is justified in keeping for their exclusive use what they do not need when others lack necessities."

So we have leadership now in our country who are saying let's share more completely, give everyone the opportunity to have full human life. Again that may be hard for us, but I think it really is the constant teaching of the community of the disciples of Jesus from the very beginning, from Jesus himself and down through all these centuries. We haven't always lived up to it. But if we take seriously what we hear in today's scriptures about covenant and especially about this covenant that Jesus enters into and calls us to be a part of, then we will follow his teachings.

Jesus was especially concerned not to let the covenant that he entered into with God be something that would not be lost. So the night before he died, he gathered with his disciples -- this is in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians -- and Jesus has supper with them. Paul writes, "This is the tradition of the Lord that I received and I in turn have handed on to you. At this supper, the Lord Jesus on the night he was delivered up, took bread after giving thanks, broke it, saying "This is my body which is broken for you." In the same manner, he took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this in memory of me." ?

Every time we come to this table to celebrate the Eucharist, we share in the body and blood of Jesus. We should be recommitting ourselves to this new covenant in his blood. So we have a very extraordinary program for Lent, trying to make this new covenant with Jesus our covenant. Each of us following Jesus faithfully.

Then the reign of God will break forth in my life and your life and gradually the reign of God will happen in our country and throughout the world. The way of Jesus, this new covenant can make God's reign come forth in its fullness as each of us lives out this covenant.

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