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Hierarchs and lower-archs in the church

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

To listen carefully and deeply to today's scriptures, it's important, I think, to remind ourselves of the context in which these lessons are given to us today. A couple weeks ago, Jesus began this last journey of his life in the gospel we heard a couple Sundays ago, and just before that happened, you may remember, Jesus had challenged the disciples about "Who do you people say I am?" and so on, and finally, Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the son of the Living God!" Jesus said, "You are blessed."

Then, for the first time, Jesus told his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem and there he would be handed over to his enemies, they would torture him, kill him. And Peter (you may remember, again this is important) began to protest and say to Jesus, "No! That's not necessary. You're the Messiah. You're the miracle worker. You have all kinds of power. Why would you give yourself over to torture and death? Why would you give up that power?"

Then Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You're talking according to the ways of the world; not according to God's ways." Then they went on, but now as we find out, Peter and the others really still did not understand and did not accept what Jesus was saying, that you have to give up power and might and wealth and prestige in order to really follow the way of Jesus.

The first lesson today gives us some guidance on how Jesus himself developed this understanding of his role in the world and in his role in trying to transform the world into the reign of God, where there would be peace and justice and love and joy, because in that first lesson, we're told about how the secularized people there in that city of Alexandria, as I explained at the beginning of the reading, took what they called the "just one."

The 'just one' is one who develops relationships and especially a just one in God's sight is one who develops relationships with God. So those who were carrying out that relationship with God through the covenant that they had received and entered into at Sinai were being persecuted by the others and they say, 'Let us set a trap for the righteous, for that righteous one annoys us and opposes our way of life. Let us see the truth of what he says and find out what his end will be. If the righteous one is really a son of God, God will defend him and deliver him from his adversaries. Let us humble and torture him to prove his self-control and test his patience. When we have condemned him to a shameful death, we may test his words.'

Of course, that righteous one is Jesus and he had been reflecting, surely, throughout his life on that passage and so many others where he discovered that God was leading him in a way where you reject power, you let yourself be tortured if necessary, but you don't respond in kind; you respond with love. So that's what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples, that his way was a way of rejecting violence, rejecting hatred, responding to hatred and violence with love and non-violence, even to the point of allowing himself to be nailed on a cross, where he would appear to be totally helpless, but there, as he said, 'I draw all people to myself,' through that love being poured forth.

In that same gospel, Jesus tries to give an image that the disciples might really catch on to. They've had a hard time accepting what he's trying to say. They refused to accept that he's going up to Jerusalem to let himself be handed over to his torturers and be put to death. They want him to use power and might and so on. He takes a child in front of them and he draws that child into their midst; he embraces the child. This isn't because children are cute and lovely and so on. No; what Jesus was showing them in that culture and at that time, a child was a person without any rights, had no power.

This is within the Roman Empire and they simply were not even allowed the possibility of any kind of self-determination, even as they were growing up, so a child is a symbol of someone who is completely without right, without power, and can be used in any way. Jesus said, 'When you receive a child like that into your midst, you're receiving me, because I am one who rejects all power, all violence, all domination. I allow myself to be helpless, but always pouring forth love.' See, helpless in a physical way, helpless in a materialistic way, but in charge in a sense, because of the love that he pours forth that can transform and change everything.

Have we really heard this message of Jesus, and both within the church and the world in which we live, do we try to carry out this message of Jesus? I find it disappointing really, that within our church right now, there seems to be kind of a movement to restore a certain kind of domination and status and power, if you will, to those who are to be the leaders of our communities, ordained ministers.

In recent weeks, Pope Benedict XVI -- every Wednesday he gives a talk to thousands of people in St. Peter's Square every Sunday from his window in the Vatican Palace; he blesses the crowd down in the square and speaks briefly -- in one of those talks recently, because he has made this what he calls the 'Year of Priests,' he told the crowd that Mary, the Blessed Mother, had (and these are his words) 'a special affection for priests as her sons because they are more similar to Jesus.' In other words, the ordained priest, just by being ordained, has a status that puts him apart from, and obviously above, others in the church.

Now that isn't the way of Jesus. At the Last Supper, what did he do? He got down and washed the disciples' feet, but he was celebrating what we think of as the first Eucharist. He wasn't presiding, overseeing; he was acting as a servant. He had given up power; he didn't need power like that, the world's power. And here we are, now they're talking about putting the altar rail back so there's a barrier between the priest and the people, make sure the priest is above and better, holier. Not true!

It's a community of disciples that Jesus calls together, where everyone is equal in freedom and dignity. No one is over others, but we seem to have fallen back into that pattern of wanting to have hierarchs in the church, and then obviously, "lower-archs," if you want to call them that, the people in the pews. Wrong -- that's not the way Jesus intended it. We really have to struggle not to let that happen.

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After the Second Vatican Council, there was a real movement forward to make our church a community of disciples, again everyone equal in freedom and dignity, no one over others. We need to make it become that way again, or even move more fully in that direction, because that's the only way we're going to be a light to the world around us, if we really become a servant church and those leading in the church become servant ministers.

But it isn't only in the church though, that we need to look at how we act, and whether we act according to the way of Jesus. It's in our society, in the world in which we live. As you may know, this past week, I was traveling in Iraq and just got back Friday night. It was an extraordinary experience, but one of the things that I discovered -- and it really is an example of how Jesus says, "The one who is like me is the one who gives up violence and power," and so on -- he might not have the name "Roman Catholic" written across his chest or on a forehead or something.

I discovered this, because, it was last Wednesday or Thursday night. I met with a group of Muslims, an organization that is "Iraqi Nonviolence Group," they call themselves. It's composed by organizations and individuals with different ideological and political backgrounds gathering around the idea of nonviolence as the most effective way to struggle for an independent, democratic, peaceful Iraq. In other words, they're convinced if you want to really bring peace into that country where there is so much conflict and constant danger to people, people living in fear all the time, here's what they say, "We refuse occupation and war as a way to build democracy and establish the rule of law.

"Even when war and occupation is presented as the only option, we refuse it," and that's the message that is coming to us from the Muslims in this part of Iraq. That's the message that should be coming from us, Christians, followers of Jesus. Jesus didn't say the child was necessarily a Roman Catholic, but anyone who rejects power and is helpless and powerless as a child, that's where you find Jesus. We need to look in those places for Jesus today, now, in our world and to our government. We should get to the point where we too reject occupation and war as a way to resolve conflict. That would be the way of Jesus.

And finally, if you want to hear what could happen, listen again to what James tells us today: "Wherever there is jealousy and ambition [and power and might], you will also find discord and all that is evil. "Instead, the wisdom," our first lesson today, "which comes from above is peace-loving. Persons with this wisdom show understanding and listen; they are full of compassion and good works; they are impartial and sincere. They are peacemakers who sow peace reap a harvest of justice." That's what could happen if we really began to follow the way of Jesus.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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