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Prophets and 'the fascinating power love'

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

If you remember last Sunday's gospel, especially at the end of it, today's gospel is rather jarring. Last Sunday we heard about a Jesus who was very gentle. Who took a little child as a symbol of all of those who are vulnerable and suffers or are oppressed in our world and made that child, as Jesus embraced the child, the very presence of Jesus. He said I live in every one of these who are most vulnerable. If you welcome them, you welcome me. But today in the gospel we find a very harsh Jesus.

Of course as we try to follow Jesus, we have to try to know the whole Jesus, all that he is and all that he teaches and try to take it in and try to let it influence our lives. For us to really hear the lessons today, I think we have to go back to the larger context in which this passage is proclaimed. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He started that journey at a very precise point in his life, right after Peter had declared "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Then Jesus had said, "yes." He acknowledged that he was indeed the son of the living God, but then he proclaimed, now I am going up to Jerusalem where I will be handed over to my enemies to be tortured and executed, but then on the third day I will rise. He then invited all his disciples, if you want to be my disciple, follow me on this journey.

That is what we are doing now. We are with those disciples, following Jesus on this journey.

Peter had rejected the message. He had said, "No you don't have to be handed over to torturers and put to death." But Jesus then called Peter a Satan. Get behind me. You're thinking according to human ways, not God's ways.

So Jesus is trying to instruct us on how to follow God's ways. And this a very important point in the instruction, because as we take the Gospel lesson and put it together with the first lesson of today, we hear

Jesus urging us as Moses did, "Would that all of God's people were prophets, and that God would send God's spirit upon each of them." You see, that is what Jesus is saying in the Gospel lesson. John says, there is someone out there acting in your name. We should stop that person. Jesus says, No, No. Everyone should be a prophet. Everyone should be filled with the spirit, proclaiming my message, the message that leads to the reign of God. Everyone.

That is certainly true of every one of us in this church.

I have a feeling that most of us would not claim to be prophets. Would not even think of ourselves as being called to be prophets.

A prophet, of course, is someone who proclaims God's message. By the way they live most of all. By following all the teachings of Jesus, but also by what we say and by the way we act. But we are called to be prophets. In fact, everyone in this church has already been anointed to be a prophet. At your baptism, this was your prayer:

"God, the father of our lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin and given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit and welcomed you into God's holy people. God now anoints you as priest, prophet and king so that you may live always as a disciple of Jesus."

You see, you were anointed as a prophet. As a priest, too. As we gather together, we offer the Eucharist. As a king. Someone who shares leadership and who exercises authority. But also as a prophet. One who speaks, proclaims the message of Jesus Christ. We have to ask ourselves: Are we fulfilling our prophetic role in our society and our work.

You know, we have a church -- because it is proclaiming the message of Jesus -- that is prophetic in many ways. Obviously, one of those ways is how our church consistently proclaims the value of human life, especially in its most vulnerable form: human life before birth. No one in this country can doubt that the Catholic church has proclaimed that prophetic message and probably everyone of us shares in making that proclamation. But there are other parts of the prophetic message of Jesus that our church has been proclaiming and perhaps we have not in our own lives proclaimed with enough determination and strength.

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I think of the health care debate that is going on in our country right now. Are you aware that health care has been declared in very important teachings of our church -- Pope John XXIII's encyclical "Peace on Earth" -- in there it says that health care is a basic human right, inalienable. Everyone, everyone has the right to the health care that is needed.

If we were prophetic at proclaiming that message, I think the debate would have been quite different from what it has been. We would have been struggling, not to stop any further health care, but to find a way that we could share health care with every person in this country. It would give a different tone to our debate, I think, if we were prophetic that way.

There are so many other ways we could be prophetic.

Think of all the violence that goes on in our world. John Paul II especially was very powerful in his proclamation about war and then about the alternative of active love and nonviolence. Back in 1991, John

Paul said, "I myself on the occasion of the recent, tragic war in the Persian Gulf, repeated the [admonition] 'Never again war, no never again war.' " You can't have war in this modern era. That has been a constant teaching in our church, because as John Paul said, it destroys innocent life. It throws into upheaval the lives of those in the conflict. It always leaves behind a trail of hatred and resentment that makes it all the more difficult to solve the burning problems that provoked the war.

Instead John Paul, so many times but especially when he was speaking to young people on his trips throughout the world. The last one when he went to Spain is a very good example. When he spoke to young people on that occasion, hundreds of thousands, he pleaded with them: Give up violence. Give up violence. Respond to violence always with the fascinating power love. Never respond to violence with violence, with hatred to hatred. Always respond with the fascinating power of love. Be artisans of peace, John Paul urged them, by giving up violence.

That's part of the prophetic message of Jesus, of course. The prophetic message of our church. Have we absorbed that message? Do we proclaim it? Try to live it?

"Would that everyone were a prophet." That is what Moses pleaded, but Jesus also makes it his own message. Would that every one of us was a prophet.

Those harsh words of Jesus today -- they seem so harsh, but they are very important -- remind us that it is going to require some radical changes in our lives if we are really going to live out the message of Jesus. Radical, decisive changes but if we do, if we make those changes, we will become the prophetic church that God has called us to be and each one of us a prophetic witness proclaiming the way of Jesus and the way to live it.

That is the one way that we will bring peace and fullness of life, that we will make the reign of God break forth and really happen. Pray today that we will continue to listen deeply to this word of God.

And as we celebrate our Eucharist as the priestly people of God, pray that we might also each of us become a prophet and that our church will continue to be a truly prophetic church proclaiming with authenticity and integrity the message of Jesus Christ.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at Our Lady of the Assumption, Atlanta, Ga. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to [NCRonline.org](http://www.ncronline.org). **Sign up here** to receive an e-mail alert when the latest homily is posted. Send this homily **to a friend**.]

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