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The very image of God

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I presume if we were to choose lessons for the celebration of a peace Mass kind of Eucharist that we are celebrating this afternoon, we probably would not choose the ones we have just listened to. They're not quite the sort of thing we want to think about and pray about when we want to celebrate the gift of peace that Jesus has brought us. Yet if we listen deeply as we can to this word of God today, I think we can find a message that is very important and will guide us on the way to genuinely be the peacemakers we know we're called to be.

Probably most of us remember just a few years ago at the turn of the millennium, all the excitement, I guess you could call it, throughout the world, or the distress even that many people felt, because so many thought this was it, the end times are here, history will be over; the world will disappear in a cataclysm, fire, storm, earthquake, whatever. Now, well, we got through that period obviously, and the world did not end. We all are aware of that.

But perhaps you've been hearing more recently about 2012. This is the next time we're told the world will end, according to the History Channel, which has given a number of programs to this issue, a movie that is just coming out on Sunday the Ordinary Weekend, entitled "2012." Even this morning on the radio I heard that NASA is preparing some special arrangements to avoid any cataclysm when 2012 comes. Evidently, it's a part of Mayan history or tradition that the world will end at that year.

Obviously, as Jesus says, no one knows, and we don't know, so we need to try to listen carefully to the kind of lessons that have been given to us today, especially the first lesson and the gospel. These are a special kind of scriptural literature that goes by the name of "apocalyptic literature." Two books in the Bible are of this type, the book of Revelation, also called the book of the Apocalypse, and the book of Daniel. But the passage we heard from Daniel today, for example, was not a prediction about the end of the world. It wasn't any kind of prediction at all.

Full text of the readings

What Daniel was doing was trying to give courage and calmness to the people. They were in the midst of a terrible tyranny, oppression. People were being murdered. Wars, chaos, social disruption was everywhere, but Daniel assures them that God is still present, God's angel will be with them and God will bring them out of this chaotic, terrible suffering period to a new time of peace and joy. So that kind of literature is always written, proclaimed, when there is distress in the world, when there are wars, chaos, suffering, oppression and injustice.

Mark's gospel was being written in the early 70s and that was a time too, when the Roman army had invaded the Holy Land, had destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed the temple. The people were being dispersed everywhere so it was a time of terrible suffering. So Mark gathers together words that will encourage the people. Jesus is in their midst. They really do not have to be concerned because ultimately, Jesus will bring about a resolution of those sufferings that will bring deeper peace to the people.

So again, this apocalyptic kind of message is not a message about the end times at all; it's a message that is proclaimed in a time of suffering, a time of oppression, war, and it's a kind of message that we need to hear today because we live in a world where there is extreme suffering for many people, mostly because of the wars that are going on in so many parts of the world. We have to have confidence in the message that Jesus, the Son of Man, is still in our midst and is guiding us, leading us.

Perhaps the most important thing to hear from today's reading is the very end of that passage from the letter to the Hebrews, where the writer tells us: "Where there is forgiveness, there is no longer offering for sin." The suffering and death of Jesus, what we call his sacrifice, was not a payment for our sins. We're not redeemed in that sense, bought back, because Jesus was cruelly crushed on the cross, that God demanded this -- that is not the message at all. The message of Jesus through his giving of himself on the cross was a message of healing, of love.

See, Jesus, in response to hatred, to violence, poured forth his whole being in love, in forgiveness, in rejection of violence, rejection of hatred, returning good for evil, love for hate. That's what Jesus did. That is what we make present every time we celebrate a Eucharist, is that pouring forth of love that can change the world, transform our world into the reign of God. Nothing else will do it; only that kind of unconditional, unlimited love, even for enemies. That's what Jesus is teaching us, and that's what the letter to the Hebrews is expressing, that where there is forgiveness ?. Jesus obviously wanted a community of disciples to come after him that would be a reconciling, forgiving community.

We all remember, I'm sure, very quickly, what happened Easter Sunday night, when Jesus came into the upper room where the disciples were hiding and he greeted them, the first words he offered to them were "Peace be with you." He came to bring them peace through his life and death and resurrection, but then he challenged them to forgive: "The sins you forgive, they are forgiven. The sins that you hold back, they're held back," If you don't reach out in forgiveness, it's not there.

So Jesus was asking his community of disciples to become a reconciling, forgiving community, to go out into the world to spread this message. Clearly we have not heard it yet, or at least have not acted upon it in the way that God wants us to.

This may seem like kind of a minor criticism within our church, but I think what I'm going to share here has great meaning if we think about it.

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A few weeks ago, there was a comment in *America* magazine about the way we celebrate our liturgy. It wasn't a condemnation or anything; it just pointed out the fact that very often when people come together around an altar to a table of the Lord to celebrate the Eucharist, they stay apart from one another. The comment was that doesn't seem right in a community of disciples of Jesus. Well, a week or two later, there was a letter writer who responded to that comment and says, "Avoiding the noise and chattiness that inevitably accompany the sign of peace is a good reason for us to remain separate from one another."

The letter writer says, "At the very moment when all minds and hearts should be one in adoration of Christ, we are called on to slip on a social mask and smile warmly at the people in one's vicinity, while the mystery of our faith, Christ's sacrificial presence on the altar, is deluded into the sorry mess of a spiritual group hug."

You see, he's missed the whole point because yes, Jesus becomes present on the altar under the form of bread and wine to renew and to make present once more, his life, suffering, death and resurrection, but isn't it also true that Jesus lives in every one of us?

I think sometimes it's a lot easier to believe that Jesus is present in the bread and wine than to believe that Jesus is present in you or me or the person next to us, isn't it? It doesn't take much, but it doesn't cost any effort really, to say, "Yes, I believe Jesus is present," but to look at your brother or sister here in this church or in your neighborhood or anywhere and say, "Yes, this is the very image of God in this person," and to love that person and refuse to do anything to hurt that person, that's the challenge.

You know, we probably find it very difficult to deal with the whole incident of what happened at Fort Hood and Major Hasan, who is being charged with those 13 murders. I'm sure we'll never figure it all out. No one will -- probably even he doesn't totally understand all of his motivations and so on. But one of the things he said, and I would certainly believe he's sincere in this, he could not bring himself to go into a war where he would kill his Muslim brothers and sisters. That's, I think, something commendable, but it's far short of what Jesus asks us to do, and what Jesus wants all of the people in our world to do, not just love our fellow Christians. If we did that, what a marvelous thing it would be.

We would end a lot of wars if we weren't fighting other Christians, but it shouldn't be Muslims refusing to kill Muslims or Hindus refusing to kill Hindus; Jesus wants all of us to say no to war, no to killing. We must love everyone, really make our community a place where forgiveness is always present -- forgiveness, reconciliation, love. That is what we must do, and only when all of us are willing to truly see God present in every other person, no matter what race or ethnicity or religious background, every person is made in the image of God. We must see every person that way and treat every person as we would treat God present to us in Jesus.

At the end of the first lesson today, in that passage from Daniel, we read "Those who acquired knowledge will shine like the brilliance of the firmament. Those who taught people to be just will shine like the stars for all eternity." In a commentary I read about that passage, the scripture scholar said, "Cosmologists," those who study the cosmos, "tell us that our bodies are literally stardust made flesh." I'd never heard this before.

"Our bodies are made of particles that were present in the primeval fireball at the beginning of the universe. Daniel's image of righteous people becoming stars is, in a sense, inviting us to be true to what we actually are, made of stardust. His words give hope that those who endure tribulation not only tend the divine light within, but also radiate goodness to others, increasing the brilliance of the divine radiance,

which endures forever."

When each of us becomes the star that we are and we radiate the brilliance of God's light, goodness and love, our world will be transformed and the peace that we yearn for and that we want to make happen will break forth in our midst.

[This homily was delivered at Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish, Arlington, Va.]

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