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We must plead for peace, beg for peace

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

It may seem strange that when we begin this season of Advent and we are looking forward to celebrating once more, the coming of Jesus into the world, his birth at Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, that as we look forward to that beautiful feast, we have a gospel lesson that speaks to us about the end of the world, the end of time, the end of the universe as we know it. And yet as we think about it more deeply, it's really not that much of a contradiction because we have the experience, don't we, that so often when something ends, something new begins.

When we pass through one phase of our life, we enter into another that can be better and more blessed than what we've ever experienced, so we're used to going from the end of one thing to the coming of a new thing. That's exactly what the lessons today are intended to teach us -- not to be afraid because we think of the terrible turmoil, chaos and so on that might happen as the world as we know it were to come to an end, but rather to focus on what God is promising.

As we listen to that first lesson today, Jeremiah tells us, "The days are coming when I shall fulfill the gracious promise that I made in favor of Israel and Judah." This is God speaking through the prophet. "I will fulfill Sunday of Advent promise that I made," and here is what the promise means: "In those days and at that time, I will make him who is the shoot of justice sprout from David's line." That is, in other words, a successor of David, a new leader is coming into our world who will surpass anything David ever did as the leader of God's chosen people. This leader will be as the prophet says, "the shoot of justice." He will practice justice in the land. In fact, he will be called "God Our Righteousness."

That is a promise of the new thing that will happen as we leave behind what we have become accustomed to and we wait for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, who is "God Our Righteousness," or our justice. Of course, what this means is that as Jesus said at the very beginning of his public life when he began his first preaching, "The reign of God is at hand. As the former things pass away, the reign of God breaks

Full text of the readings

forth," the reign of God.

The reign of God. That means a time when everything in all of creation, every creature, every one of us lives according to the will of God under that loving will of God. The reign of God means fullness of life for every one of us, for every person of all times, of all places; a fullness of life, a time when justice will be present. No one will be in need. There will be joy and a profound kind of peace. That's what God is promising with the coming of Jesus. "The reign of God is at hand" -- it's right here and now if we're willing to enter into it. This is the new thing that can happen now as we prepare for the coming of Jesus, that we prepare ourselves more fully than ever before to enter into the reign of God, to live according to the values of Jesus.

St. Paul gives us the sense, as does Jesus in the gospel lesson, of what this will mean for us. Paul says, "May God increase more and more, your love for each other," your love for each other -- may God increase that. With the coming of Jesus as we enter into the reign of God, we give up our petty quarrels, our dislikes, our hatreds, our desire for vengeance, all of that, and instead we let God increase within us more and more, our love for each other. But then it goes beyond that: "May God increase within us more and more, our love for all people."

See if we enter into the reign of God, then we will be ready to let go of our hatreds, our desire for revenge, and that means not just within our community, not just with those with whom we associate every day, but for all people. That means we would begin to love more deeply and sincerely, not just those who love us, but as Jesus said, to love our enemies -- love our enemies, those against whom we go to war, the terrorists that have brought such suffering to us at times -- we love them.

It may sound impossible, I suppose, to many of us, and yet with the help of Jesus, who showed us as he died on the cross, was being tortured and executed, that he loved the very ones putting him to death. It's as Paul tells us, "we must love," and that's what will happen if we open our hearts to Jesus. "May God increase more and more, our love for each other and for all people."

Paul goes on to say, "We urge you to live in a way that pleases God; just as you've learned from us, try to do even more. The will of God for you is to become holy." So we must listen carefully to Paul's instructions which he was giving to the people as they expected the return of Jesus imminently.

Then Jesus, in our gospel lesson, urges us two things. He tells us first of all, to "not let your hearts be weighed down." We can do that, can't we? We can let all kinds of distractions and difficulties in our lives weigh us down instead of seeing those as opportunities, to go beyond them, and to enter more deeply into the way of Jesus, which again, is that way of love. Jesus says, "Also watch, be ready, for the time is coming."

As I think about all of this and I know, for myself and I hope for all of us, we each try to find ways in which we will try to grow in our love for one another, but I think even more for all others. That means for people of other religions, right now, especially Muslims. There's that tendency on our part, I think, so often to see a person like the soldier at Fort Hood, because he's a Muslim to think of all Muslims as killers. They're not; they're people who worship God, who love God as we do, but we try to reach out in love to them, or to immigrants in our midst, or to the poor in our midst, of whom there are more and more.

But especially, I think, if we listen deeply to Jesus, we can only be very deeply saddened as we think of what seems to be going to happen on Tuesday when President Obama is going to speak to the nation, and evidently is going to tell us that we're going to not give up war; that we're going to enter more deeply into war in Afghanistan. I think it's especially significant that among all the people whom he consulted, one whom he seems to have ignored is the ambassador in Afghanistan right now, who in 2006 and 2007 was

the military leader of our nation in that country, General Karl Eikenberry.

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Recently he sent two very strong memos to President Obama, urging him not to go more deeply into war. Instead he said, "We need to bring reconstruction money here." He was asking for \$2.3 billion to help rebuild a nation that has been destroyed and tens of thousands of people mutilated because of the mines that we supplied there during the time when the Soviet Union was attacking Afghanistan.

We supplied weapons and mines, and they're still there, and they're destroying people now; and the bombings that have taken place over those years of war and the years since we've been involved. President Obama, if he sends the troops that seem to be coming, the 15,000 to 20,000, it will cost anywhere from \$33 to \$50 billion more a year for killing; \$2.3 billion could bring life and peace.

I don't know exactly how to react to that, except I remember Pope John Paul II in that last year of his life when he went to Spain on one of his international trips. It was about 10 months before he died and he was already feeling very ill; he was weakened a lot. But I remember what a newspaper report said about him when he first spoke to the Spanish people, hundreds of thousands of people, at the beginning of his visit. The reporter said you could see Pope John Paul was experiencing what the reporter called "a palpable sadness."

See, this was just after he had pleaded with the leaders of the United States and the leaders of Iraq not to go to war, but we had gone to war again. So he was filled with sadness and perhaps that will be our reaction if we go more deeply into war this Tuesday. But then Pope John Paul began to cry out, "There must be peace! We need peace in the world! We must pray for peace. Let there be peace." He kept repeating that word "peace, peace for the people of the earth," and the reporter said it was like a mantra. He kept saying, "We need peace. We must work for peace. We must build peace." That's the only way that follows the way of Jesus.

So perhaps we too, as we enter into this Advent season and we look for this new coming of Jesus into our lives and the feast of Christmas, we must plead for peace, beg for peace, work for peace, make peace the constant theme of our lives so that in our individual lives and our relationships with one another, we will always be thinking of ways we can bring peace to ourselves and to each other.

But then beyond that, let's keep on thinking of ways that we can try to influence the decisions of our nation so there will always be ways to bring peace into our world. Perhaps that's the most important thing we could do during this Advent season as we wait for the new coming of Jesus, with the reign of God being proclaimed once more in our midst, that reign of peace and justice and love and joy that we will beg God to help us to be makers of peace.

"Blessed are the peacemakers; they are the sons and daughters of God." That's what we must try to be, especially during this Advent season.

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

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