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God will rebuild

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 21, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

Probably our first inclination as we hear today's gospel is to think of it in terms of a wedding and a joyful occasion, and how it certainly must have been a great blessing for that couple to have Jesus present at their wedding, and that's one of the reasons, I'm sure, why many people choose this particular episode from the gospel for their weddings -- a way of having Jesus show his blessing upon what they're doing.

Also we might think of this incident in terms of Jesus himself, and something which we probably don't do often enough, and that is to realize how human Jesus was. He could have a good time, he went to parties like this, he enjoyed himself, he laughed with the people, he enjoyed the company of a happy group of people like this. And that's an important thing for us also, to come to know Jesus as one like us in every way.

But the most important thing about this gospel is what we hear at the very end, when John says, "This miraculous sign was the first and Jesus performed it at Cana in Galilee. In this way he let his glory be seen and his disciples believed in him." This reminds us that, in John's gospel especially, but the other gospels also, we are not given historical accounts of the life of Jesus. The gospels aren't biographies of Jesus, but they're a way of trying to teach us who Jesus is.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 96:1-2, 2-3, 7-8, 9-10
1 Corinthians 12:4-11
John 2:1-11
Full text of the readings [1]

At the very end of John's gospel, where in that gospel he has described seven of these signs (John's gospel is different from the other gospels in that regard -- his is built around seven signs), John says, "And yet there were many other signs that Jesus gave in the presence of his disciples but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God. Believe and you will have life through his name."

So with this incident in the second chapter of John's gospel, it's the first time John through a sign is showing us who Jesus really is. You see, during their life, the disciples were only very slowly coming to know Jesus as more than another human being like themselves. But gradually as they saw these signs one after the other, they came to know Jesus, not just as the son of Mary, but the son of God. Of course, that revelation was confirmed and strengthened and became their public witness after the resurrection when they experienced Jesus alive among themselves again. So the most important thing for us to take from this gospel lesson today is a recollection and a reminder to ourselves that when we develop our relationship with Jesus, we develop a relationship that's on a human level as a friend, but also a friend who is the son of God.

It takes faith for us to do this and it means we have to have a deeper insight, see beyond the externals. In the incident of the wedding, there's a couple of other things that show us God's presence. The water jars were jars that were used for ceremonial cleansings -- the Jewish traditions included many ritual washings and cleansings before meals or at various times before any religious service and so on. When the water in those jars was changed to wine, many commentators suggest that it's the way that through Jesus, the plain water of Judaism becomes the rich wine of the presence of Jesus transforming religious practice from something that is based mostly on human rituals and so on, into a practice that puts Jesus, son of God, right at the heart of our worship.

If we turn to the first lesson today, we discover also how God is represented as one being wedded to his people:

"As a young man marries a young woman, so will you Builder [God] marry you. As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will your God rejoice in you." But what is especially extraordinary about these words of the prophet Isaiah is that he was proclaiming these words about the city of Jerusalem and the chosen people at a time when they had been crushed. Jerusalem was rubble, totally destroyed, and yet Isaiah, with that inner vision of faith, could see beyond the externals. So that's why he could say, "You will be called by a new name. You will be a crown of glory in the hand of God. No longer will you be named Forsaken. No longer will your land be called abandoned, but you will be called My Delight, and your land Espoused," married. Isaiah could see beyond the circumstances of the people at the time, where they had been crushed almost 90 years before by the Babylonian invasion and they had been carried off in exile, the temple destroyed, the city totally ruined, left rubble only.

As we reflect on seeing inner truth and having a deeper insight into things that are going on in our lives and in our world, because that's what we must do if we listen deeply to these lessons today, I think we can find something quite extraordinary where people in circumstances that must be very much like those of the people of Jerusalem in the time of Isaiah, and I'm thinking, of course, as we all are, of the people of Haiti. You've seen the pictures. Port au Prince is rubble, almost everything destroyed. Three million people without food, without water, no place to live -- their homes are gone, they're in the streets. Now it's been four or five days; you don't live very long without water. You might last three or four weeks even without food. So more and more of them are dying now.

Yet here is an account of what was happening on that first night, Tuesday night. "For most of the past 20 hours, I've been hiking the earthquake-rubbled streets of Port au Prince. Tuesday night, when we had less idea of the scope of the devastation, there was singing all over town: songs with lyrics like 'O [God], keep me close to you,' and [people singing] 'Forgive me, Jesus.'" Then at certain points, "Preachers stood atop boxes and gave impromptu sermons, reassuring their listeners in the total darkness: 'It seems like [God] is hiding, but [God is] here. [God is] always here.' "

As you know, I've been to Haiti quite a number of times myself and I know the people of Haiti quite well, and they are people of faith. I can easily imagine and almost hear them singing -- because I've heard them sing so many times, but even in the midst of all that turmoil and suffering, confidence in God, knowing God is here even in the midst of the worst that has happened to us.

So for me, this terrible event is also a sign of how people of faith can see beyond the immediate, can see deeper reality, can experience God and see God even in the worst of things, confident that as Isaiah says to the chosen people 500 years before Christ, "God is going to rebuild, God will be with you, will restore you. No longer will you be called Desolate and Destroyed, but you will be called Espoused," the very spouse of God; God loves you that much. So among other things, it seems to me we must pray for the people of Haiti that they can sustain that faith, and that they can see beyond the immediate, devastating suffering and experience God present even now in their midst to give them the strength and the courage to keep on going until some kind of peace can be established in that city, in that country.

The second lesson today makes me realize that there is also a task for us besides praying for the people of Haiti. As St. Paul reminded that church at Corinth, he reminds us this morning. We're a community of disciples of Jesus just as they were, so there are many, many gifts among us, different gifts, or as we learned at confirmation, the gifts of the Holy Spirit -- wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, love and fear of the Lord -- but also these gifts that Paul writes about that are distributed among the whole community, gifts of prophecy, gifts of administration, gifts of tongues, a gift of service, again, the gift of wisdom, the gift of teaching. All of these different gifts are distributed here among us, and it's important that we rejoice in those gifts, but then use them.

There are obvious ways that use these gifts. First of all, the gift of service -- every one of us in some way, not

directly -- perhaps because we can't go there and be active in bringing medical care, bringing water, bringing food, that sort of thing, but we can help by giving to those who do that, by praying for those who are doing that hard work right now in Haiti. But also I think of the gift of knowledge, the gift of understanding, this is important. You may have heard, as I did, a person saying, "Well, this is God's punishment on Haiti because they made a pact with the Devil." That is so absurd and so evil. That's so totally far from the truth. If we really had an understanding of -- because people do ask and I think with justification -- "Why is Haiti and has been for such a long time, the poorest country in this hemisphere? What's the matter with them? Why is there no infrastructure so that this destruction could be dealt with more quickly?"

But the reason, and it's one that many of us maybe don't like to hear about, is that Haiti has been a country that from its very beginning, has been (I think no better word really than this), abused, mistreated in cruel, harsh ways. Most of us probably don't know anything of the history of Haiti and this is where we have some responsibility to know about our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, and Haiti is very close to our country; we should know something about it. Well, in 1804, Haiti had a revolution, as we did in 1776, only 20-some years before. It was a revolution of black slaves against France, which at that point was ruled by Napoleon with one of the strongest armies in the world, and it was a crushing, dominating, oppressive, colonial structure that France had put into Haiti.

When these black slaves rose up and declared their freedom, established their own nation, just as we have done, no other country in the world, including ourselves, the United States, would recognize the sovereignty of Haiti. From the very beginning, France began to retaliate. They imposed harsh reparations upon Haiti. They had to pay. They said, "You stole our property," and by that they meant the people. Slaves were property. "You stole our property. You have to pay it back," and under the threat of reinvading, which they could have done, they forced Haiti to begin to pay reparations, and that went on for over 100 years, where Haiti kept paying out of its meager resources, reparations to France.

We continued to support it. We did not recognize Haiti as a nation until after 1865 and of course, that was after the Civil War because we were under threat, or at least many people felt maybe there would be a slave rebellion in our country, so we refused to give any support to Haiti. Down through the years, you may not know this, but in 1915, we invaded Haiti. We occupied Haiti until 1934, a cruel, harsh occupation, military. Then not too long after that, a dictatorial regime was put in. You heard of Papa Doc and Baby Doc. That went on for 20, 30, 40 years with support of the U.S. So the people of Haiti have been oppressed, pushed down, crushed, treated with great malice and yet through all of this, they have somehow survived and they are people who are filled with love. They have a resilience, they'll come back from this in a way that will be incredible, I think.

But it is our responsibility to use the gifts that we have, and among them would be knowledge and understanding, right judgment and then the courage to do something and the willingness, the generosity to do something. Maybe most of all what we need to remind ourselves of is after Paul lists all of those gifts in that 12th chapter of this letter to the Corinthians, at the end he says, "But set your hearts on the most precious gift and I will show you a better way," and then we go into the 13th chapter, one that we're very familiar with. "If I could speak all the human and angelic tongues but had no love, I would only be sounding brass or a clanging cymbal." Then he goes on to describe what love is. Love is patient, kind, without envy, not boastful, not arrogant. It is not ill-mannered nor does it seek its own interest. Love overcomes anger and forgets offenses, does not delight in wrong but rejoices in truth. Love excuses everything, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love will never end."

That's the greatest of all the gifts that the spirit gives to us, so we must nurture that gift of love within our hearts and now, let it be expansive and let our love go out especially to the people of Haiti, trying to understand better their circumstances and doing everything we can to bring about a healing for the people of Haiti, a rebuilding of the city of Port au Prince and that nation, and most of all, work to give them a chance to become the strong and

marvelous nation they could be if they were not oppressed by ourselves and other nations in the world. We must reach out with that kind of love that as Paul says, is the most precious of all the gifts the spirit gives us.

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

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