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'Follow me now,' don't put it off

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Jesus challenged [the disciples]: "Now that you recognize me as the Christ, the Son of the living God, I invite you, take up my cross and follow me." That was the challenge given to all of us, to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and then to follow him. Then last Sunday, the Gospel reminded us of how following Jesus requires dramatic changes in our lives. "The Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head. The birds of the air have their nests and foxes have the hole where they live, but the Son of Man has nothing. If you follow me, you give up your security and wealth." We choose to have what we need, but not excess.

Jesus explained that there's an urgency, "Follow me now," don't put it off. He also explained to his disciples: "Anyone who puts their hand to the plow and then turns away is not worthy of the reign of God, so anyone who wants to be steady in ordinary times must be a disciple of Jesus. If we have accepted that call then, to follow Jesus, today Jesus invites us to carry out his very mission, his mission to proclaim the good news that the reign of God is at hand."

What this means for me became very clear when I, some years ago, became aware of the writings of one of the Jesuit priests in El Salvador who was murdered on November 16, 1989, Father Ignacio Ellacuria, Director of Catholic University in San Salvador. He was one who really was trying to proclaim the reign of God and to make it happen. He was challenged and he and his brother Jesuits who taught that the poor had to be the cherished ones in God's kingdom and that all of us had a responsibility to raise up the poor. He and the others were accused of being too violent, too destructive, too utopian.

In response to that charge against them, Father Ellacuria wrote: "We are not violent and we are not destructive. Perhaps you can say we are utopian, we are idealists, maybe even naïve, because we are a people of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, a good news that calls us to proclaim the reign of God and to transform our world into as close an image of that reign of God as possible." That's the mission of

Jesus. I don't think I've ever read anywhere where it describes more clearly our mission -- proclaim the good news, the gospel message that the reign of God is at hand, and then to work to transform our world into as close an image of that reign of God as possible.

If we listen carefully again to our first lesson today, we are able to understand what this reign of God means, what it will mean to transform our world into one as close to the reign of God as possible.

Rejoice for Jerusalem, be glad for her, be glad with her, rejoice with her, all you who were in grief over her. But this is what God says, I will send her peace overflowing like the river, and the nations' wealth rushing like a torrent towards her, and as a son is comforted by his mother, so I, God, will comfort you, and at the sight of this, your heart will rejoice.

Those words remind us of what we proclaim in the Eucharistic prayer. One day, Jesus will come again and then in his kingdom, there will be no more suffering, no more tears, no more sadness. Fullness of peace and joy and love, fullness of life for every person -- that's the reign of God. So Jesus gives us the mission today, if we have chosen to follow him, deny our very selves, take up our cross and follow him, if we have chosen to do that and we're ready to leave everything and we're ready not to turn back but to be steadfast and consistent in following him, then we commit ourselves to work with Jesus to proclaim this good news and to make the reign of God happen.

Of course, that will require changes in the world in which we live, changes that we must help to bring about. I don't think any of us will probably ever be challenged as dramatically as some of those like Father Ellacuria, who was trying to bring about dramatic change in the unjust system that existed in that country of El Salvador through what he called 'the structures of violence, the structures of injustice,' or like a religious sister I read about recently in Maryknoll Magazine, Sister Dorothy Stang, working in Brazil in the Amazon region.

The writer says, 'Like Jesus, she did not turn away. Threatened many times, she said, 'It is not my safety but that of the people that matters.' She was murdered for her outspoken defense of poor peasant-farm families who had moved into the rainforest region in a government-sponsored resettlement plan. Besides forming each settlement into small, Christian communities that prayed and studied the Bible together, Dorothy established agricultural and rainforest preservation projects. Her initiatives outrange the big landowners, who wanted the forest for logging and the land for cattle grazing.

'The day she was killed, she told a friend, 'I can't talk long because there are people outside my door asking me to go down the road with them to show support for several poor families who had their crops and houses burned down by hired hoodlums.' Armed with her Bible and government documents granting peasants' right to the land, she accompanied the people to the settlement near the rural town of Anapu and there, with the Bible in her hand, she read to those who were threatening her: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Then one of the two thugs fired six shots into her at close range. At 73, she became a martyr.'

As I say, not many of us will be challenged to work for the transformation of our world in quite so dramatic a way, and yet there are ways in which every one of us, every one of us can work to bring about justice, to make peace happen. Today we celebrate our country's birthday, a country where we proclaim that we want liberty and justice for all, and that's the very same mission Jesus gives to us as his followers. I hope that all of us can commit ourselves to that mission with the same determination of St. Paul, who, in that letter to the Galatians says, 'For me, I do not wish to take pride in anything except the cross of Jesus Christ. Through him, the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. Let no one trouble me any longer for my part; I bear on my body the marks of Jesus, so the grace of Jesus our Lord is with me.'

That will be true of us too, if we commit ourselves as Paul did, as the 72 disciples in today's gospel did, as people like Dorothy Stang did, as people like Ignacio Ellacuria did. If we commit ourselves to carry out

this mission of Jesus, proclaim the good news, a good news that calls us to transform the world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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