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'Let us follow the light of the Lord'

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 24, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

We begin today, the last and fourth week of the season of Advent, the season in which we look forward to the celebration of the birth of Jesus. As we have been preparing throughout this season, we now want to put special attention on what we are preparing for. The readings if we listen to them carefully tell us about something that is astounding and yet I think that in many ways we have come to take it for granted. In fact, we have let many other things distract us from this message, an astounding message from God that God is coming in to our midst, the eternal God, all powerful, all loving. This God is going to become part of human history. Breaking into our history, becoming part of us.

This week especially our readings are guiding us to put emphasis on this, to think about this most extraordinary, almost unbelievable thing: that God would become one of us. Like us in every way except sin. That is what St. Paul in that first lesson today tells us regarding Jesus who was born in the flesh, a descendent of David, but has been constituted as the Son of God, endowed with power upon rising from the dead through the Holy Spirit.

Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 7:10-14
Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-24
Full text of the readings [1]

What Paul is proclaiming is what he and others at that time the very beginning of our Christian era had come to understand. That Jesus, the one whom they knew as their brother, was like them in every way, this was the Son of God in power. Son of Mary but also Son of God. That is what is emphasized in the gospel especially.

We are used to the events of Christmas as described for us by St. Luke. Out We all remember those scenes of Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph being called to sign up for the census because of Caesar Augustus. Traveling and finding no place to stay and then finding this cave where Jesus is born. Matthew doesn't mention any of that. But Matthew puts emphasis on something that he thinks is more important. Not the details of where, when and how Jesus was born, but who Jesus really is.

Matthew tell us how Joseph is struggling, we may not have a full awareness of the Jewish law, but what was happening was that Mary and Joseph was engaged. For the Jewish people, that was really the beginning of their married life. So if Mary becomes pregnant, obviously, or publicly, at least, she would have been thought to have committed adultery, because she was married. Joseph is totally upset because by law Mary would be stoned to death, if Joseph made a big public thing about it by getting a divorce, which he had a right to. Matthew says that Joseph was pondering all this. Struggling with this. Because, as Matthew says, he was an upright man, he didn't want to discredit Mary. He didn't want her to suffer the consequences of the law. So he was pondering, praying and reflecting, wondering what to do. He hears God saying to him, "Do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife. She has conceived by the Holy Spirit. Not a human source of life, but God. She will bear a son. You shall call him Jesus.

Now at first that might not strike us as too significant. But Jesus, the Hebrew name would be Joshua, he could have been made after the successor of Moses who lead the people into the Promised Land, Joshua. But Matthew points out that this name isn't just given to Jesus because he is being named after a great previous leader of the people. It is because the name means, "God saves."

Jesus, the son of Mary is given this name, but it isn't like Joshua who saved the people from the trials and tribulations of the travels through the dessert. God saves them from their sins. Only God can forgive sins. So Matthew is saying that this Jesus, the one who is to be born, carries the name "God saves" and God is saving not from some human trial or tribulation but saving us from our sins. Only God could do that. So Matthew is telling us that this is God. We are now preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, of God. That should be foremost in our minds, in our awareness, as we come to the feast of Christmas.

Matthew goes on to strengthen us even more because he quotes from that passage from Isaiah, which we heard as our first lesson: "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and he shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us." Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. God with us. If we really listen deeply to these scriptures and make ourselves more keenly aware of what is happening, what we are celebrating, don't you think that perhaps that would change our lives, if we really understood that God is coming into our midst? To save us from our sins, not simply by forgiving them, which God does, but by showing us the way to live in a world where sin will be overcome.

In that passage from Isaiah, Isaiah showed Ahaz the king the way God wants Ahaz to go to avoid going to war. But Ahaz didn't listen. He went to war anyway. He made a pact with the Assyrians and he went to war against those who were attacking him. And it brought devastation, chaos, division and suffering to the people. But in a previous passage, and that is what Isaiah in this passage is alluding to, God showed the people ? and Isaiah wanted Ahaz to be aware of this ? that Zion, the place where God dwells, is going to be the place to which all nations will stream. "For the teaching that comes from Zion and from Jerusalem is the teaching of God. God will rule over the nations and settle disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not raise sword against nation. They will train for war no more."

This is what Isaiah is telling Ahaz. We can find another way. Don't go to war. God will led us into peace, if we follow God's ways. Isaiah says, "O nation of Jacob" ? he could be saying this to us ? "let us follow the light of the lord."

But as we look at the world around us, I don't think we are paying that much attention. Did notice this past week, it wasn't prominent news, but it got some play in the media, how our government is beginning to develop plans, telling us what to do to avert the worst consequences of nuclear bombs. Some of us may remember way back in the '50s and '60s being taught in grade school to duck under the desk we may get bombed with nuclear weapons. Well now the threat is there again, even worse than it was before. And so now we are putting out new plans how to survive, as if that could be even possible, how to survive if we are attacked by nuclear weapons. We are making those kinds of plans, but look at what is happening in our Senate. There is a treaty that would at least begin to make a step in right direction to rid the world of these weapons, but so far we have not yet ratified that treaty. Even if we ratify it, it would be just a tiny, tiny step but at least it would be a step in the right direction. As we try to make ourselves deeply aware of the Jesus coming into the world is the sort of God, son of Mary, but Son of God in power. He shows us the way to rid ourselves of sins, to be forgiven, but then to walk, follow the way of Jesus, which would be a way to lead us into peace.

This week then as we continue our preparations to celebrate Christmas, to remember what happened 2,000 years ago, the coming of God into our midst, Emmanuel, God with us. As we prepare for this, we must also prepare how I will follow Jesus the Son of God more faithfully. How I will be forgiven of my sins, but also follow the way of Jesus into the way of peace in my heart, in our neighborhoods, our homes, our communities and in our world. Emmanuel, God is with us, shows us the way. We must follow.

[This homily was delivered at the Church of the Madonna, Detroit, Mich.]

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