

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 6, 2011 at 12:40pm

All races, sexual orientations welcome at Christ's table

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Once more these lessons that we hear as we approach the end of the Christmas season are lessons that bring home to us very powerfully the truth we proclaim in the Eucharistic prayer, the part where we say:

“Yes, God, you are holy, you are kind to us and to all. For this we thank you. We thank you above all for your son, Jesus. You sent him into this world because people had turned away from you and no longer loved one another. Jesus opened our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters, and that you are the one God of us all.”

See: the truth that we are one human family, sons and daughters of the one God who is God of all.

The lessons today help to make that point so powerfully that we must learn and try to embrace it and really welcome everyone into this family of God.

Isaiah 60:1-6

In the first lesson it's the last part of the book of the prophet Isaiah, and it's a passage that's proclaimed by the prophet at a time when the long exile of the chosen people was over and they were welcome to go back to their homeland. But Jerusalem was in ruins and many did not want to go back and were very pessimistic and ready to give up.

Ephesians 3:2-3e, 5-6

But this prophet ~~Matthew had~~ insight into what God was doing, proclaimed those marvelous words we heard in the first lesson:

Full text of the readings

?Arise, shine, for your light has come? -- he?s talking about Jerusalem -- ?the glory of God rises upon you.?

Now he admits: ?Night still covers the earth and gloomy clouds veil the peoples, but now God rises, and over you God?s glory appears.?

And what?s going to happen?

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Nations will come to your light, kings to the brightness of your dawn, so lift up your eyes round about and see, they are all gathered and come to you -- your sons from afar, your daughters tenderly carried. The sight will make your face radiant, your heart throbbing and full. The wealth of the nations will come to you. A flood of camels will cover you, caravans from Midian and Ephah, those from Sheba will come bringing with them gold and incense and singing in praise of God.

It is a vision that goes beyond what anyone else could see practically, but this one person who was so in touch with God knew that God was going to make something happen that seemed to go against all common sense or human wisdom. But he had insight into what God was ultimately going to do: make all the human family one -- repair the evils that had been brought into the world, the separations and the divisions through hatred and sin and violence.

God really wants us to be one, and that message comes through very clearly in that vision that we heard in our first lesson.

But then we also hear very powerfully in the second lesson today the disciple of Paul who wrote to that church of Ephesus.

Listen to what he says: (remember, here is the proclamation: ?This is the good news?) now the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, share the inheritance in Christ Jesus.

The non-Jews are incorporated and are to enjoy the promise. That was a new and difficult message for the early Christian community to hear and to try to accept. By the time that letter was written, the council of Jerusalem had already taken place, and, you may remember, that was the time when the whole church gathered in Jerusalem to deal with a problem that had become very, very difficult.

In fact, when you go back to the account of what happened in the 15th chapter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, you found out how there was trouble in the church.

Paul and Barnabas had fierce arguments with others in Jerusalem who were saying that no one could be a disciple of Jesus -- become a Christian -- unless that person first embraced the whole of the Jewish covenant, the law of circumcision and all the laws of the Torah.

You had to become a Jew and then become a Christian. This caused great disturbance in the church.

Further on in that part of the Acts, Luke writes that the discussions became heated. They really were arguing -- but also it was the whole church gathered -- and they were willing to listen to one another.

So they finally did settle it very peaceably -- and with the conclusion that yes, they would welcome Gentiles into the church to become part of the community of disciples of Jesus without their first becoming Jews.

So that situation was settled, at least in principle, but evidently in the community of Matthew's disciples -- the community for whom the Gospel of Matthew was composed -- there were still many who were having great difficulty with this. And it's understandable if you remember that Matthew's Gospel is the one where when Jesus sends the disciples out to preach the first time he warns them not to go anywhere near Gentiles or Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

That was the warning that Jesus gave his disciples when he sent them out and they thought evidently that that was forever.

In fact, also in that Gospel, Jesus himself -- when you look further on in the Gospel of Matthew in the 15th chapter there's the story that we may remember about the Canaanite woman, an outsider, a non-Jew, came to Jesus pleading for him to cure her daughter.

Jesus at first wouldn't even listen to her. He practically just walked away, but she kept following him and pleading with him.

Then -- you may remember this -- he says to her: "You don't give the food of the children to the dogs." And this woman challenges Jesus and says: "But even the dogs get to eat the crumbs."

She was willing, in a sense, to demean herself in that way to make a point with Jesus.

Jesus was so taken by it that he changed and he said: "Woman, your faith has brought about the healing of your daughter." Her faith: she connected with Jesus and Jesus welcomed her.

So truly there was the beginning of the change even then in the life of Jesus, but that community of disciples had gathered around, the Matthean community, those for whom this Gospel of Matthew was written, evidently still had problems, so that's why we hear the Gospel that we heard today, where outsiders come.

Again, these are people who, in a certain way, would be totally rejected by the faithful Jews because they were ones who studied the stars and followed them, astrologers.

That was forbidden by Jewish law and they were clearly not part of the chosen people. They were outsiders and yet they come and -- contrary to those priests and leaders who advised Herod and who didn't come to Bethlehem to recognize Jesus -- they did, they went. They recognized Jesus and Matthew, in this Gospel, is making the point: Here are outsiders and they recognize Jesus and are welcomed.

So clearly at this point 2,000 years later, we ought to have learned the lesson that everyone is welcome to be within this community of disciples of Jesus.

Some are struggling tremendously, trying to get to know Jesus and to know God in Jesus. Others are falling short in other ways. But regardless, we must try to make our whole community a community which welcomes those that so easily are rejected.

We at this point don't have problems with Gentiles. Most of our church is made up of those who were not

originally Jews and that's because of that council in Jerusalem way back at the beginning.

That isn't our problem, but we still face other ways in which we find it difficult to draw everyone in.

How welcoming is our community to people of different races? There's still, I'm sure, racism present in our church, in our communities. It may not be as blatant as it used to be, but we don't immediately just draw everyone to ourselves and make them welcome.

Or people of different socioeconomic strata? Most of our parish communities are people of all the same class and background. We don't seem to have an ability to really draw everyone together and welcome one another with respect and love.

How well do we welcome women into positions of full equality within the church? We need to make tremendous changes in that regard.

Or people whose marital status is what we might call irregular? They need to be reconciled in some way, but for so long, we have made them feel unwelcome.

Or people of different sexual orientation? They are made to feel unwelcome. It was only very recently that the bishops of the United States could write a pastoral letter in which they say to people of different sexual orientation: "You are our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters. We welcome you." But that hasn't been carried out fully in all of our parish families.

Yet the message that we hear in the lessons today makes it so clear that God sent Jesus to draw together people of every background, every race, every ethnic group, every economic situation, sexual orientation, men, women, we are one.

"Yes, God, you are holy. You are kind to us and to all. For this we thank you. We thank you above all for your son, Jesus. You sent him into this world because people had turned away from you and no longer loved one another. Jesus opened our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters, and that you are the one God of us all."

If we can make that a reality, then like the disciple who wrote the letter to the church at Ephesus, we can proclaim: "This is the good news. Now everyone is welcome at the table of the Lord."

Editor's Note: When this column was first posted, *NCR* incorrectly reported that this homily was given at St. Patrick Church in Ann Arbor, Mich. The homily was actually given at an assisted care facility within the boundaries of St. Patrick Church's geographical area. We apologize for the error.

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