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Rejecting war, living as the light of Christ

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

It's very appropriate that we are celebrating a baptism today as part of our Liturgy of the Word because in the baptismal ceremony, as you well remember I'm sure, there is the part where the person being baptized is given a candle, lighted, and is exhorted to receive this candle as the light of Christ.

Then a prayer is said that this person being baptized will always live and act as a child of the Light, that is, as someone who follows Jesus who we proclaim as the Light of the World.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Scripture lessons today are very appropriate, even though they were not picked especially for a baptism ceremony. But if we recall the first lesson, Isaiah, proclaiming God's word, speaks about a servant -- someone who is called by God to proclaim the message of God, to be one who is to restore, first of all, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, to bring them to fullness and to peace.

Then, Isaiah says the servant discovers that that's not enough. The servant is to be a light to all the nations, showing all people everywhere, for all time, the ways of God -- be a light for God, showing the ways of God. John 1:29-34

Of course, full text of the readings words of Isaiah and we also put them into context of the life of Jesus, we realize that this one who is to be a light to all the nations is Jesus. He is the one who is able to claim, as he does during his public life: "I am the Light of the Word."

Then as we hear in the Scriptures today, Jesus is that light of the world because as John proclaims in the Gospel, after His baptism, John saw the spirit of God coming upon Jesus.

That spirit of God was the one who sends Jesus forth to proclaim God's message, to bring God's reign of love and peace into our world. John said: "I saw the Spirit as a dove, coming upon Jesus and I knew He's the one who is to be the Light to all the nations."

Then Jesus Himself, later on -- because as John describes Jesus receiving that Holy Spirit later on after His resurrection -- Jesus says to His first disciples: "As God sent Me, I send you. The mission that I have is now yours. You must be the light of the world."

So to make that possible, Jesus breathed on them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. As God sent Me; I send you."

So through our baptism, every one of us receives that Holy Spirit and we are to be the ones who are to be the light to the world. This community of disciples of Jesus gathered here, but the community of the disciples of Jesus, we are to be the light to all the nations -- which would mean, as we prayed in our opening prayer, by being the light to all the nations we could have fulfilled what we ask for, that there would be peace in the world.

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We prayed for the gift of peace, but it isn't hard to see that there is not peace in the world. There is violence, killing, extraordinary evil present in the world and isn't it probably because we do not take seriously our responsibility to be a light to the nations?

We are followers of Jesus, the one who rejects all violence for any reason whatsoever. How many of us would even remember that today, January 16th, is the 20th anniversary of a great tragedy in the world, when we went to war against Iraq, 20 years ago today.

For six weeks -- 42 days and 42 nights -- we bombed Iraq so that we destroyed all of their water purifications systems, their sewage treatment plants, so that they no longer would have clean water. We did that deliberately.

Besides killing thousands of people in those bombings, we destroyed their access to what is necessary for life. We destroyed the whole infrastructure of that country and for 12 1/2 years afterwards, we imposed an embargo that prevented them from ever rebuilding.

Then again, we went to war again in 2003, and we're still at war 20 years later. Where has been the Christian cry denouncing that war? How many of us have cried out against it and demanded that it end?

That isn't the way of Jesus, the Light of the world. He told Peter: "Put away your sword. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." He refused to have violence used, even to protect Him. So He was put to death, executed, and yet He remained the one who forgave. "Father, forgive them."

Jesus never resorted to violence ever. There's nothing clearer in the Scriptures.

And He is the Light of the world. He's the one who shows us the way to peace, but we refuse to hear what He says, to look at His example and to follow it.

Right after that first Persian Gulf War -- that war lasted only 12 weeks and yet did such terrible devastation -- in March of 1991, John Paul II published an encyclical letter called *Centesimus Annus*, a letter that was a recounting of 100 years of Catholic social teaching about justice, about peace and how to

bring justice and peace into our world.

In the document, John Paul says: "I myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf repeated the cry, "Never again war. No, never again war."?"

He was repeating the cry of Pope Paul VI that Paul made at the United Nations in 1965 imploring the nations of the world to reject war.

"Never again war," John Paul says, "I repeated that cry because war destroys the lives of innocent people," and we refuse to even number those innocent people who have been killed through this war in Iraq, and now this war in Afghanistan.

Innocent people in the hundreds of thousands have been killed during these past 20 years by that war, but then, John Paul also says, "It throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing."

Yesterday, I was in Washington for a march against this war -- pleading with the President to end it. Among the people in that march, there was a couple that had come from western Massachusetts and they were joined with a group of people who were carrying a large banner.

The banner proclaimed: "Military families against the war."

This particular couple whom I spoke with told me their story about their son who had been deployed to Iraq, waged war on Iraq and was one of those people that John Paul was talking about when he says, "It throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing."

This young man came back from Iraq as so many of our troops come back, deeply wounded in his psyche. He was a very disturbed young man.

He could not come to peace with what had happened to him and what he had done. It got so bad that the father was telling me that he just couldn't handle what was going on within him.

He sat on his father's lap like a tiny child and he wept, just wept, and said, "Hold me. Hold me," and then the next day, this young man hanged himself, one of the many of our troops that come back damaged in their spirit and their souls, and they commit suicide.

War throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing. You can't learn to kill unless you do something to yourself to dehumanize yourself. That's how you do it, but you're not healed from that easily.

So, we have failed, it seems to me, to be the light of Christ. Each of us must take some responsibility for what has gone on for 20 years now and continues to go on and we must, it seems to me, if we really want to follow Jesus, to be a light to the nations. We must say no to this war and to every war to follow Jesus.

I can't tell you exactly what you must do. I have to keep on thinking about what I must do, but all of us somehow -- if we're going to be the light to the nations that Jesus calls us to be.

"As God sent Me, I send you," Jesus said. "Receive the Holy Spirit so that you can carry on My work." Each of us has to determine how I will more faithfully follow the way of Jesus, to work against violence and war, and to bring peace to our world.

We pray for that peace as we did in our opening prayer this morning, but we must do more than just pray to God for peace. We must enter into the work of Jesus to build peace in our world.

So as we celebrate this sacrament of baptism this morning, and we say to this infant, "Receive the Light of Christ," each of us should remind ourselves that those words were spoken over us and we did receive the Light of Christ.

Now, we're expected to live according to the Light of Christ.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at Holy Rosary Parish in Detroit, Mich.]

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