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Sharing peace, being the light of Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Now, as we listen to this Gospel lesson, I think it becomes very clear to all of us that there is more going on here in this incident and the interaction between Jesus and the blind man, and the blind man and the Pharisees, and then Jesus and the blind man.

There is more going on than simply a physical healing of physical blindness. There is also a spiritual blindness present in those who refuse to see.

Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. That's a very logical conclusion of the man born blind, and yet, the Pharisees, the religious leaders, would not see it. They would not see it, not so much that they could not see it, but they would not see it. They were willfully blind, refusing any healing.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a

Jesus says in fact, "I came into the world to carry out a judgment. Those who do not see shall see. Those who see shall become blind."

Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6

Jesus stands in judgment simply by who he is and by what he does. People can choose whether to be judged by Jesus as those that are willing to be healed, to begin to see, and those who refuse. What happens in this incident really reminds us of what was proclaimed in the first lesson today, where Samuel is told by God to go and anoint a new king.

Full text of the readings

Samuel, when he goes to Jesse -- the one who's son has been chosen to be king by God -- Samuel uses ordinary human site and insight, and thinks immediately because he is thinking in human terms that Eliam, the older -- the one who Samuel saw as very robust and strong, someone who in appearance would

seem to make a marvelous king. But God says to Samuel, "Do not judge by his looks or his stature, for I have rejected him."

God does not judge as humans judge. Humans see with the eyes. God sees the heart. So there is a different kind of sight that we need, a sight that God can give to us, heal whatever blindness there is within us that keeps us from seeing as God sees and judging as God judges.

It wasn't only in the time of Jesus when he performed this miracle that Jesus stands in judgment. That happened when he was here living among us but Jesus continues to stand in judgment to be the one against whose teachings we must all stand in judgment. Jesus continues to be in the world to carry out a judgment.

That happens over and over in history and it is happening even today. This past week, I read a review of a new book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian who was one of the relatively few Christians in Nazi Germany who resisted Hitler and his ideology.

Bonhoeffer's fierce rejection of everything that Hitler stood for was deeply rooted in his faith as a Christian. Now this is in the early 1930s, and he saw that the plan to purge the German church of all Semitic elements was an outrage against Scripture.

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He was writing about the so-called Jewish question as early as 1933, when Hitler first came into power, and his rejection of what the righteous church, Hitler's church, taught about the Jews was total and unwavering. He recognized right away that National Socialism, and its call for what Hitler said was harmonization between the church and state, was a lie.

What the term really referred to was not harmony, but really Nazification -- a form of both idolatry and blasphemy. But the church went along with Hitler's plans.

Bonhoeffer saw that very clearly and in 1933 he began even then to be a resister. But there was a blindness in the official church, the Christian church for the most part in Germany, the Catholic Church in Germany. In fact, in 1933 the Pope's representative, the papal nuncio, entered into a concordat with Hitler -- a treaty.

This meant that the Vatican, the papal state, was one of the first states to recognize the legitimacy of Hitler's rule. And throughout the whole period of Nazism until 1945, there was hardly any leaders in the German Catholic Church who stood up to Hitler -- who urged people, the Catholic Christians, to see the lies of Nazism, to see the evil of the extermination of the Jews, the attempt to eliminate all Semitic elements from Nazi Germany.

Very few stood up and said no. Bonhoeffer did and eventually, a few months before the end of the war in 1945, he was executed for his stand.

He was one who saw, who was not blind. And leaders in the church were those who thought they saw, but in fact were blind like the Pharisees in the Gospel. A tragic failure, but it continues to happen in a variety of ways.

One of the ways in which it seems to me we have somewhat the same kind of situation where there are those, not necessarily leaders in the church, but those who are healed of any blindness, who have a clarity

of vision and sees as God sees, judges as God judges.

In this instance, I'm thinking of something that is happening right now. Also during this past week, I was called to be a witness at a hearing to announce the sentencing of five people who had, in a symbolic way, tried to turn weapons into plowshares. They went on a Trident submarine base, and tried to dismantle a nuclear weapon. Of course, it was symbolic. They were not able to do any damage to the weapon, but they were trying to give witness, to speak out, to say, "These weapons are wrong."

(For *NCR's* coverage of the plowshares groups' sentencing, see **Plowshares activists given 15 month prison terms**)

In 1965, the Vatican Council did say weapons of mass destruction -- weapons that are used for counter-city or counter-population warfare -- are to be condemned unequivocally. They are evil and must never be used, and yet, we've never had that kind of teaching clearly, forcefully in our church here in the United States.

So we were the first to use such weapons of counter-city warfare, weapons of mass destruction, and have continued over all these years since World War II to develop, deploy and keep nuclear weapons of mass destruction even on hair trigger alert, ready and committed in fact by our public policy to use them when we think we must.

When we think it's in our interest to do so, we will use those weapons and anyone in the military chain of command who would object to that is forced out. That happened very recently. A young man was asked to sign a declaration that when he was given the command to use a nuclear weapon, he would push the button and he couldn't do it, so he was forced out.

These people who went on that Trident base were trying to open our eyes -- open the eyes of our church leaders, open the eyes of the Christian Church in this country, the Catholic Church, so that we would see that what we are committed to do is an act that is to be unequivocally condemned.

So what happened in the Gospel continues to happen. Somebody who is blind but is open to listening to Jesus, to following Jesus, truly to worshipping Jesus as he does in this incident, someone like that learns to see but most of us continue to be blind.

Isn't it really a case where we choose to be blind? We don't want to take the time to discover what our national policy is, what kind of weapons we have, how we are using them, how we intend to use them and are committed to use them?

Jesus, I think, is standing in judgment: "I came into the world to carry out a judgment. Those who do not see shall see. Those who think they see shall become blind."

Now in our second lesson today, St. Paul, in writing to the Christians, put an emphasis. He declares to them, and it is a declaration we must hear right now:

"You were once in darkness, but now you are the light of the Lord. Live as children of the Light."

We have been baptized into Jesus who is the Light of the World and so we are called to be that light, to live as children of the Light.

Perhaps if we take someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer seriously -- look into his life and how he came to see so clearly -- or if we listen to those five who went to jail this past week for standing up against nuclear

weapons, perhaps if we listen to them, try to see as they see, we really will be children of the Light, and the Light of Jesus will begin to shine on our world, and make it a world where the peace of Jesus can be one that we all share.

And that becomes the peace that covers our world, everyone living not in darkness, but in light -- the Light of Jesus.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Leo Church in Detroit, Mich.]

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