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Two extraordinary witnesses, real disciples of Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure we remember last Sunday's gospel because it was so dramatic, where Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" and they were fumbling around trying to come up with an answer. They said, well, one of the prophets, maybe Jeremiah, Elijah. Then Peter steps up and says, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." Jesus was very excited about that, that Peter recognized who he was, but then at the end of the gospel, Jesus says something quite strange for the disciples -- and for all of us -- because he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Why would Jesus tell them, "Don't tell anybody?" Now they've discovered through Peter's faith who he is, and he says don't tell anybody. As we listen to today's gospel, we understand why Jesus did not want them to tell who he really is, the Christ, the son of the living God, because they weren't ready yet. They weren't ready to really follow him. We discover that today when Peter, the very one who had said, "You are the Christ, the Anointed, the son of the Living God," and when Jesus says he is going up to Jerusalem to be handed over to his enemies to be tortured and executed, Peter says, "No, no?"

Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

Romans 12:1-2

Matthew 16:21-27

Full text of the readings

Peter is totally misunderstanding who Jesus is, and the other disciples did too. Perhaps we still don't really understand what Jesus is asking of us: "If you want to be my disciple, deny your very self, take up your cross and follow me." When we hear about denying ourselves, doing mortification, I think very often we think of giving up something like we used to do for Lent, giving up candy or whatever -- some kind of self-denial -- but Jesus is asking for something much deeper. He's asking that we change our whole life, our whole way of thinking. He said to Peter, "You're not thinking God's way; you're thinking according to human way."

Peter was thinking of a Messiah who would be like a warrior king, like David, and he felt, well, Jesus, all these followers, he could overthrow the Roman occupiers. He could bring liberty, freedom, to the chosen people, by bringing about a violent revolution, and Jesus says, "No, that's not the way. If you really want to follow me, then you have to do what I do, live as I live." That means rejecting power, rejecting the use of force. That means loving even your enemies, doing good to those who hurt you, returning good for evil. It means reaching out to the poor, the oppressed; drawing in the stranger, the immigrant, welcoming them into our midst. All of this is what Jesus taught, this is his way, this is God's way of thinking, and it's not a human way of thinking.

So we really have to ask ourselves, Have we made that commitment to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, to live according to his way? If we think about this in a very honest way, I think we must find a lot of things very troubling in what's going on in the world around us, and what we've participated in, in some ways. After all, we've been at war now for over ten years -- in fact, two wars -- and we have military occupation in other countries. We seem only to know how to go to violence to try to resolve our problems. Is that the way of Jesus? Not if we listen to what Jesus says: Do good to those who hurt you, return good for evil, love your enemy.

There have been a couple of people that I think are extraordinary witnesses in our modern time of being real disciples of Jesus. One is a priest who lived during the time of World War II, Maximilian Kolbe. You may remember, he's been made a saint now by Pope John Paul a few years ago. He had resisted the Nazi ideology; spoken out against it like a prophet, like Jeremiah; denounced it and was put in a death camp, Auschwitz.

While he was there, some prisoner escaped, so those in charge of the camp said ten others must die for the one who escaped. They took ten prisoners and put them in a separate cell, cut off from everybody else, to starve to death, to slowly die of thirst and starvation. Their suffering went on for a number of days and most of them had died. There were three left -- one of them was Father Kolbe -- and they injected them with poison so they died and their bodies were cremated at Auschwitz. They just became ashes. Now Maximilian Kolbe is declared a saint. He was willing to be a prophet, to follow the way of Jesus, and he loved his enemies, even those who put him to death.

Or I think of Oscar Romero, more recent, archbishop in El Salvador, threatened many times by death. At the end of his life, or two weeks before he was shot to death, a reporter asked him, "Why don't you leave the country? They're going to kill you," and of course Oscar Romero was committed to his people, who were being killed every day. He said, "Of course, I've been threatened with death many times, but I don't believe in death without resurrection, so even if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people."

So he had deep faith and was willing to follow Jesus completely. But then he also added, "As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine mandate," and he really could have said, "As a disciple of Jesus, I am obliged by divine mandate, to give my life for those I love, that is, for those who may be going to kill me." He offered his life that moment, out of love for his enemies. He said, "In fact, if they do kill me, you may tell them, even now I bless and forgive those who do it."

These are examples of people who have taken the message of Jesus to heart, who really understand that Jesus meant it when he said, "Love your enemies." He meant it when he said, "Put down the sword, don't use violence." He meant it when he said, "Reach out to the poor and the suffering, draw them in." It's a hard challenge, and we may find it very difficult even to hear the word that Jesus is saying to us today, but then perhaps we have to listen carefully to St. Paul again, "I beg you, dearly beloved, by the mercy of God, to give yourselves as a living and holy sacrifice, pleasing to God. Don't let yourselves be shaped by the world where you live, but rather be transformed through the renewal of your mind, a deep revolution, a new understanding, be transformed. You must discern the will of God. Discern what is good, what pleases God, what is perfect."

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So as we try to hear the challenge of Jesus today, "If you want to be my disciple, take up your cross and follow me," we must pray as St. Paul urges us, to let God transform our mind, our heart, to let us to begin to think, not in a human way, but in God's way. Follow Jesus wherever he leads us.

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

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