

Being those who do the will of God

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 29, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

As we begin our reflection on the sacred Scriptures today, it seems very clear first of all that these lessons are lessons about conversion, about changing the direction of our lives in some minor ways, perhaps, but as always with Jesus, it means radical conversion -- a profound change.

In the first lesson, we discover Ezekiel preaching to the people at a time when they were in exile. And among the chosen people in the Jewish tradition at the time, they had a sense of what we might call corporate sin.

The whole people Sunday being punished because of the sins of the leaders, basically. That's why some of the people were saying, "If it's not fair, God, you're not fair." In fact, God says to them, "Am I not fair?"

God goes on to point out, through the words of Ezekiel, that if a person sins the person is responsible for that sin, and if that person turns away from the sin, God accepts the person and forgives the sin. The person is not held accountable any longer. The person is free of sin.

On the other hand, if the person is good and turns to sin, that person is going to be damaged -- injured -- by his or her own sin. Sin brings hurtfulness into our lives. It makes us less of the human person that God wants us to be, and that's always a loss in our lives.

[Full text of the readings](#) [1]

Again, the possibility of forgiveness is always present if we turn back to God. That's the main thing that we learn about conversion in this first lesson. It's personal for me. If I turn away from God, if I turn towards evil, if I let evil come into my life with the way that I act, that will diminish me and hurt me ultimately.

If I turn from evil and do good, I become the loving person God has created me to be. Healing is always possible. Now, in the Gospel lesson, it becomes even more dramatic in a way and it's important, in fact, that we be aware of the first part of today's Gospel, which is not assigned for this Sunday.

The Sunday reading that is assigned simply starts at the parable of the two sons, but we really don't understand that unless we remind ourselves now what went just before. Jesus had come into Jerusalem, and this was right after he had knocked over the tables in the Temple.

Then he was going around teaching on the Temple grounds, and a lay person like Jesus really wasn't supposed to be doing it, especially that turning over of the tables and driving the money changers out.

That's why the Pharisees, Scribes and chief priests come to him and say, "By what authority are you doing this?" They want to know, "Who told you that you have the authority to throw out these money changers, in a sense, almost taking over the Temple area and making it your own?"

So Jesus challenges them with the fact that John the Baptist had come, had preached powerfully and many people were following him.

Jesus asked them that question about John the Baptist: "I will ask you a question, only one. If you give me an answer, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. The question is this: was John's baptism a work of God or was it merely something human?"

Now, as we remember the Gospel, they were trapped. If we say it was God's work, then He's going to say, "Why didn't you follow him? Why didn't you listen to him?"

If we say it wasn't God's work, that it was something merely human, then we have to be worried about the people. They followed John in great numbers, and if we put John down, we're in trouble. So they take the easy way out, the very cowardly way out: "We don't know whether it was from God or not from God."

Then that's when Jesus says, "Here's a story about two sons." Jesus is trying to push them to be decisive about John, but now ultimately about Him. Is He from God or not?

Jesus won't accept just words for an answer. You may remember previously in this Gospel of Matthew, we had a Sunday where Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord,' will enter into the Reign of God, but the one who does the will of the Father, the one who changes and follows the will of God."

In this case, it was proclaimed by Jesus, exemplified by Jesus, and lived by Jesus. So the question is put to us just as it was put to the two sons. Which one really did the father's will? The one that said yes but then did not go, or the one who said no but then did go, changed and was converted?

Of course, we know the answer: the one who changed, who converted, who went, even though at first he had said no. That son is the one who did the will of the father. Again, it's not enough to say, Lord, and then think you'll enter the Reign of God. No, you have to do the will of God.

This Gospel lesson was surely a challenge to those chief priests, the teachers of the law, the Jewish authorities that Matthew talked about, but it's a challenge to us right now. We, too, have this challenge put before us. The way of Jesus, will we follow it? We could say, "Oh, yes, I will," and maybe even do some superficial things to pretend we're doing it, but we're not.

Even if we were slow to respond and maybe failed to respond at first, but now we say, "Yes, I am going to follow the way of Jesus. I do want to be converted and changed" -- not just say, "Lord, Lord," but really try to do the will of God as Jesus makes it clear what the will of God is.

Now comes the real challenge for today. We turn to our lesson from St. Paul, the letter that he wrote to the Church at Philippi. This is a letter that Paul wrote to a community of disciples that he had brought together and whom he really loved. There was a really loving relationship between Paul and the community at Philippi.

At this point, Paul is in prison when he's writing this, so it's kind of a poignant thing, and they know it. Paul pleads with them. "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus."

He is saying, "Change your way of thinking. Have the mind, the attitude, the way of Jesus," and now he spells it out in a radical, profound way.

"Though He was God, He did not think His divinity was something to be clung to, but emptied Himself to become human, fully human, even becoming a slave and giving himself over to death -- the ignominious death of the cross to be executed in agony and shame as a criminal, mocked and spit upon, held in contempt.

That was Jesus. He emptied Himself and became human, one like us in every way except sin. He gave himself over to death, the total weakness that we face because we don't really control our life. Jesus gave himself over

to that vulnerability and then a terrible kind of death. He identified with the poorest, with the lowest, the rejected, the most reviled of people and he did that his whole life.

I'm sure you will remember how Jesus was accused actually of being a glutton because He ate meals with people often. He made public that the tax collectors and prostitutes were His friends.

Jesus made what we now call a preferential option for the poor. As we reflect on this passage, it's important to really put it in its right context. As we hear that passage, Jesus, although He was God, did not think His divinity something to be clung to automatically.

We know the beginning of the Gospel of John. We used to read it at every Mass as our so-called last Gospel, and we read it on Christmas Day every year. It's that Gospel where John talks about the pre-existing Word of God who becomes flesh, becomes human, enters into human history, the Word of God pre-existing, Jesus and then coming into history.

That Gospel wasn't written until in the 90's at the earliest, after the year 100. It wasn't part of the Christian documents when Paul wrote to the Church at Philippi.

Paul wasn't automatically, and in fact not at all, thinking in terms that we do. Paul was thinking of Jesus as one who had equality with God as a human being, but it says in the first part of the Book of Genesis that we're created in the image and likeness of God.

Everyone is, and Jesus is one who has that image and likeness of God in its fullness. That's what we are all striving to do, but we are all fully human and yet fully in the image of God.

Yet, that's what He didn't cling to, to put Himself above everybody else. Instead, He emptied himself. He made what we call today the preferential option for the poor. He became one with the most rejected, despised people, the tax collectors.

They really were rejected and despised. They were known as public sinners, but He would associate with them, drawing them towards God by loving them, opening to them the path to conversion. He did this with prostitutes, women who had been forced into selling themselves, and Jesus again would reach out to them. They were the ones that He went to and made part of His circle.

Now think about what is being asked of us. It is a radical conversion for us to begin to think if we're really going to follow Jesus, we have to make a preferential option for the poor, reach out to those who are rejected, to the ever larger number of people who are poor in our country, financially poor right now, out of work, or the people we call illegal, people who have been forced to leave their countries because they can't survive.

They can't take care of their families and their children so they come here. We want to push them away. Those are the ones that Jesus made His friends.

It's hard, isn't it? We don't want to, or at least it seems like many in our country don't want to hear this message of Jesus. We're more like the one son who says, "Oh, yes. I'll follow your way," but then we don't really do it. Today's the day when perhaps we look at ourselves and understand we haven't been following the way of Jesus, and we say, "Yes, we will go out into that field. We will work."

We will make the change in our lives so that we can be more like Jesus, have this mind, this attitude, this heart of Jesus. Though He was the full image of God in His humanness, He emptied Himself and became like us in order to change us, in order to help us to become like Him.

That's the conversion that's presented to us today, and that's the conversion that we must really undergo. We don't want to be those who say, "Lord, Lord," and think that will get us into God's Reign. No, we have to be those who do the will of God. The possibility is offered to us today.

As we celebrate this Eucharist today, we must pray deeply and enter into it, for Jesus is in fact renewing on the altar His life, death and resurrection. We must enter into this and pray that God will give us the courage, the strength, the goodness to become like Jesus, have His mind, His heart, His attitude and be like Him in every way we possibly can.

That's the conversion that we're being asked to consider today.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Hubert Parish in Roscommon, Mich.]

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