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Jesus is an example of how to live in a violent world

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 22, 2011

Today is the beginning of the fourth week that our new missal has been in use, and some of us perhaps are still wondering why these changes were brought about, why we are asked to pray in a way different from what we've been doing for the last 40 years. If we listen carefully to our lessons today, I think we'll get a deeper understanding as to the reasons why we're being asked to make this change. There is always a tension in our relationship with God.

There is the understanding on the part of all of us that God is utterly different from us, what we call transcendent. God goes beyond us. In a certain sense, we cannot come into touch with God. God is totally other. So in our liturgy, we try to emphasize that by using words that aren't our everyday, familiar usage. We haven't done this yet -- but it could be, but I hope not -- that we put our altar back up against the wall and the priest would turn his back to people in order to show the separation between God and all of us because God is transcendent.

There is also our understanding of God as being very close to us, God being within our hearts. We become very familiar to God, and it's difficult to keep a balance between these two things. In fact, you see, that's what's happening in our first lesson today. David has now brought the chosen people to a time of peace. They've been traveling around and the Ark of God, the very sign of God's presence, the very sacred Ark, has been traveling in a tent, going with the people wherever they go.

Fourth Sunday of Advent
2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16
Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38
Full text of the readings.[1]

David says, "I will build God a temple where we can go and worship the God who is apart from us." David is trying to emphasize that transcendence of God, building some huge temple that separates God from our everyday life. Listen to what Nathan tells him. This is God speaking to Nathan: "Go and tell my servant, David, 'This is what God says. Are you able to build a house for Me to live in? I have not dwelt in a house since I brought the Israelites up from Egypt to the present day. As long as I was with you in the desert, did I say anything to the chiefs of Israel whom I commanded to shepherd my people? Did I say, Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'"

Now God says to Nathan, "You will tell my servant, David, this is what God says. I took you from the pasture, from tending the sheep to make you commander of my people, Israel. Now I will make your name great as the name of the great ones on earth. I will provide a place for my people, Israel. I will plant them, that they may live there in peace. They shall no longer be harassed, nor shall wicked people oppress them. From the time when I appointed your judges over my people, Israel, it is only to you that I have given rest. When the time comes for you to be at rest with your people, I will raise up after you the one born of you, and I will make his reign secure.

"He shall build a house for My name and I will firmly establish His kingship forever. I will be a father to Him, and He shall be my son. I will not withdraw my kindness from Him as I did from Saul. Your house, your reign shall last forever before Me, and your throne shall be forever firm." God is telling David that God is going to build the house, and the house will be David's family, the people in whom God will live. That is what God is telling David.

You don't have to build the building. I will be living within you, and that's proclaimed in a very clear and

dramatic way in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, where the prophet says, "The time is coming." It is God who speaks, "When I will forge a new covenant with the people of Israel, it will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. No, this is the covenant I shall make. I will put My law within them, and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be My people.

"They will not have to teach each other, neighbor or brother or sister, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because you will all know Me from the greatest to the least, for I will forgive your wrongdoing, and no longer remember your sin." What Jeremiah is doing is emphasizing what God had said to David, that God is going to live in our hearts. God will make God's house within the family of God's people.

So we are the ones in whom God dwells. God is so close to us always, not a God who is other and apart, but a God who lives within us, who is constantly calling us, teaching us, enlightening us, giving us life, energy and joy, a God who is close to us. How do we balance these two things? It's a danger that we could lose our sense of closeness to God, forget that God is dwelling within each of us and among all of us.

We are God's people. That's made so clear in our Gospel lesson today, isn't it? God sends the angel to Mary and says, "You will bear a son, and that son will be My son, God's son." Now God comes into our human history. God becomes, in a dramatic sense, part of our human family. Jesus becomes our brother. The Son of God is brother to every one of us. How could God be closer to us? The answer, of course, is that God can't be any closer. God lives within us. We are God's people.

When we begin to understand this, it gives us a different sense, I think, of how we are to respond to God. Mary, when the angel was there, she's in awe of that angel because that angel is coming from God and is proclaiming the message. It even disturbs and frightens Mary, but then the angel says, "God is going to become alive within you through the Holy Spirit. You will bring the Son of God into our world as one of us."

As we begin to think about that, it's really amazing that God becomes part of our human family. There is also an extraordinary challenge to this because when Jesus comes into our midst, the Son of God, the one who is all perfect, all powerful, always alive and always present, that God becomes like us in every way except sin. That God shows us not how to become divine, but how to live as a full, human person.

That's what Jesus shows us, how we are to become fully human by following Him. He spends His life teaching us what it means to be truly a child of God. Amazing what God does for us. Mary not only was in awe of God, but then she listened to God's word, and she said to the angel, "Whatever God says, I will do. Be it done unto me according to God's word." That's the challenge to us now, to be able to be that people within whom God lives in a very real way, the people who will listen to God's word and follow it, who will live according to God's ways, not our ways.

That challenge is always present to us, but in this past week, I think we perhaps should remind ourselves that there is one way that God teaches us to live that is perhaps the most challenging of all. We just ended a war this week. It wasn't with great celebration because I don't think most of the people in the United States at this point even celebrate what we have been doing. In fact, what Jesus teaches us, and this is what is so challenging, is the person who follows God fully as Jesus did rejects violence, rejects war and lives according to the way of love.

Way back in 1991, Pope John Paul II deplored that first Persian Gulf War and all that has gone on since because war destroys the lives of innocent people. It throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing and always leaves behind a trail of hatred and resentment to make it all the more difficult to resolve the very problems that promote the war. Here it is, 20 years later, and what John Paul says is totally true.

We've lost thousands. Tens of thousands are badly wounded. Many thousands more are psychologically wounded. But also the Iraqi people: hundreds of thousands killed. Almost 5 million are refugees, homeless

people in that country. The suffering there goes on and on. War doesn't really solve our problems. Jesus came into our midst to show us how to live the way of love, to reject war, violence and hatred, and always to bring peace by responding even to the most hateful violence with love.

That's the challenge. As we rejoice in the fact that Jesus has come among us, is one of us, we must understand that he shows us the way to live in this world where there is so much violence and hatred. We must live the way of love that he shows us. If we do that, then the second message today where Paul writes with great joy to the church of Rome can be our own prayer.

Paul makes this prayer: "Glory be to God. God is able to give us strength according to the good news. Now is revealed the mysterious plan kept hidden for long ages in the past. By the will of the eternal God it is brought to light through the prophetic books and all the nations shall believe the faith proclaimed to them in Jesus. This is what will happen when we follow the way of Jesus." So with Paul, we say, "Glory to God, who alone is wise and good, through Christ Jesus forever. Amen."

[Homily given at Church of the Madonna, Detroit, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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