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The God of love came for all, no matter the religion

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 12, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

As you probably know, this feast of the Epiphany concludes our celebration of the whole Christmas season. In many parts of the church, this feast is celebrated with even greater joy and celebration than the feast of Christmas itself. It's the culmination of the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, into our world. It is celebrated as the most important feast of the Christmas season. As we listen to the second lesson today, we get a sense of why in the early church, and for many hundreds of years in fact, this feast was so important.
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Paul is writing to the church at Ephesus and he tells them by a revelation, "God gave me knowledge of God's mysterious design as I have explained in a few words. On reading them, you will have some idea of how I understand the mystery of Christ." This mystery was not made known to past generations, but only now. Here it is: Now the non-Jewish people share the inheritance. In Christ Jesus, the non-Jews are incorporated and are to enjoy the promise.

The Epiphany of the Lord
Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalms 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
Matthew 2:1-12
Full text of the readings [1]

Paul says, "This is the good news," and it truly is the good news. The reality that Jesus came not just for the chosen people, but once God entered into human history, it was for all peoples of all nations, of all times, of all religions. Once God has entered into our human family, every part, every person in that human family is blessed by the presence of God in our midst, and is called to cherish that presence, to find out about it and follow the guiding of the One who brings that presence of God into our human family.

There was some foreshadowing of this as we heard in our first lesson today. Isaiah was writing at a particular time in a particular set of circumstances, but when you go back and read what he wrote those hundreds and hundreds of years before Jesus, you discover that God is already beginning to reveal what Paul calls this great mystery, that God came for everyone. "Lift up your eyes round about and see. They are all gathered and come to you, your sons from afar, your daughters tenderly carried. A flood of camels will cover you. Caravans from Midian and Ephah. Those from Sheba will come, bringing with them gold and incense, all singing the praise of God."

Isaiah, writing in a time when the chosen people were in exile and suffering, and everything seemed so hopeless, he sees this renewal, the rebuilding, the exultation of that city of Jerusalem and all nations are coming to it because it is now a light shining forth with God's presence. It is so important for us to get this sense of how the coming of Jesus is not for a few. It's for all. It transforms our human history. It can transform our whole world and the whole human family.

The Gospel lesson reminds us that among the chosen people themselves, this was a mystery that was very difficult for them to accept. That's why Matthew has the story that he has in today's Gospel. The community for whom Matthew wrote the Gospel -- this is about the year 80, so it's almost 50 years after Jesus -- this community was a Jewish community. The other three Gospels were all written for communities where the majority of the people had already become Gentiles, or non-Jews.

Matthew's community was still very much a Jewish community, and they were finding it very difficult to accept the fact of this mystery that Paul calls it, that God came for all, and not just for a few. They were still clinging to the idea that if you wanted to follow Jesus, to be one of His disciples, you had to first become a Jew. If you were a male, you had to be circumcised. For the Jewish people, if you were going to become Christian, you had to continue to fulfill all the rules of the law.

Be a Jew, and only then would you share in the blessings of Jesus. That's why Matthew tells this story about these Magi coming from the East, probably from around the country of Persia, which is now the country of Iran. They were coming from there and they recognized Jesus as the Son of God. They fell down and worshiped him. That's the mystery, that God is now revealed to all the nations, and God has come to transform all of human history, all peoples of all times.

The important lesson that we must draw from all of this, I think, is that we, too, have to look around us and understand that God came for all and that God can work through all people of any religion, even some who have no expressed religious beliefs. This was hard for the people to accept, but at the time of Isaiah, from our first lesson, the One who came to rescue the chosen people, to release them from exile, was an outsider -- Sirus, the king of Persia.

So God is working through other people even then, and God still works through all. This would be so important for us. If we're going to work with Jesus to bring about the fullness of God's reign in our world, we have to reach out and be connected with people of every faith. In our Catholic church, we haven't always been that great about reaching out, even to other Christian denomination, let alone to those who are not Christians.

This feast that we celebrate today and this mystery that Paul calls the really good news reminds us that God acts through all. I've had some extraordinary experiences of this myself. Some time ago, I was visiting in Baghdad in Iraq a few years back, and one evening, I spent the whole evening with a group of young people. Do you know what we were discussing and talking about? How God changes the human family, not through war or violence, but through love.

These were Muslims who understand that we can only change ourselves and our world by loving one another, without limit, without exception. Back in 1976, Pope Paul VI, published for the World Day of Peace that year a statement in which he talked about the horrors of World War II that for him were still a very close, personal memory. When he described what he called an evil of unspeakable magnitude, the dropping of atom bombs, he said, "Who is the model for our time? The poor, weak man, Gandhi."

He was a Hindu, and Paul was saying God is acting through people who aren't Christian, but Hindu. The model for our time is a man who rejects violence, who lives according to the way of love, which is the way of Jesus, of course. Some time ago, I was visiting in France at a meeting during the Vietnam War and there were people from Vietnam who had suffered in jail and had been terribly tortured.

One of them was a young woman who spoke about her experience, and I was very moved by what she said because she spoke with such gentleness and such love, even for her persecutors. I asked her afterward, "How do you come to this point where you can forgive and love those who tortured you?" She said, "From my faith." As we continued to speak, she said, "In fact, if any of us really go to the roots of our faith, we find there's

something we all have in common. God is love, and if we want to bring peace to our world, we must recognize that in one another."

God is love. That's the basis of every genuine religion, all the religions that we know in the world. God is love. So we, as followers of Jesus who know revealed in Jesus and revealed as the God of love must be more committed than ever to following the ways that Jesus has shown us and to reaching out to others of other religious faiths who also understand that God is love.

If we can begin to work together, all the religious groups, and we can do this right within our own community, working with the Muslims in our areas, working with the Jewish people in our metropolitan area, reaching out to Christians of other denominations, working together, reaching down into the depth of our religious faith to that common expression of God, that God is love, we will change our world.

There is a passage in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, that shows us what will happen when all of us hear this word of God and follow it. John the Prophet of Patmos, writes this:

> Then, I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away. I saw the new Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down from God out of heaven, and a loud voice came from the throne.
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> "Here is the dwelling of God among mortals. God will pitch God's tent among them. They will be God's people. God will be God with them. God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the world that was passed away, and the One seated on the throne said, 'See, I make all things new.'"

The Reign of God -- that's the promise if we continue to try to live every day according to what we know: this mystery that God, the God of love, has come into our human family and shows us the way to bring about God's reign, the new heaven and the new earth, the peace and the fullness of life that we all long for.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, 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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