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Follow Jesus' way in suffering and death by rejecting violence

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

With our solemn procession, carrying our palm branches, we have begun the most important, most sacred, most holy week of our church year, and we have listened to the full account of the sufferings and death of Jesus. During this week, we are invited now to enter into the experiences of Jesus, to hear more deeply perhaps than ever before the words of Jesus, because this is the week when we can once more undergo the profound transformation that God calls us to as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Obviously, we cannot take the time this morning to reflect on the account we heard in the Gospel of the sufferings and death of Jesus in a full way, but as we begin our reflection on the Scriptures this morning, our first lesson gives us some instruction on how to go about this week, what's important for us. We're invited by the Prophet Isaiah to be reminded that God has given us a disciple's tongue so that we know how to reply to the weary. God provides me with speech, but here's the really important part of our guidance that we try to enter into this week.

Each morning, God wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple. A disciple is someone who is a learner, who is trying to understand, trying to grow in understanding, and Isaiah tells us that we do that by listening, listening deeply to the words of Jesus, but also listening to what Jesus is telling us through his actions. God has opened my ear. God comes to my help. So this week, God will be with us as we try to hear what Jesus says, try to listen to what his action speaks to us. Our second lesson today reminds us what is to happen, what can happen to us during this week.

Paul, in writing to those Christians at Philippi, was concerned about their failure to be faithful, true

Palms Sunday for
the Passion of the Lord

Mark 11:1-10

Isaiah 50:4-7

Psalms 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24

Philippians 2:6-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

Full text of the readings

followers of Jesus. So he says to them, "If our life in Jesus means anything to you, if love can persuade us or the Spirit that we have in common, then we must be united in our convictions and united in our love with a common purpose and a common mind." The goal we have for this week is to have that common purpose and common mind, which Paul makes more explicit than when he says, "In your minds, you must have the same attitude as Jesus. You must begin to think as Jesus, to have the attitude, the mind, the heart of Jesus."

What was that? Although he was God, he did not think his divinity something to be clung to, but emptied himself to become human, fully human, to experience all that we experience, to suffer as we suffer, to be abused as we sometimes are abused, to be treated with contempt and hatred, but in the midst of all that, to have this mind, which was in Christ Jesus, who gave himself over to become fully human. He gave himself over to suffering, even the deep, profound suffering of the cross, to have this mind in you, which was in Christ Jesus as he underwent what we heard in today's Gospel.

If we begin to listen, to try to have the mind, the heart, the attitude of Jesus, we will undergo what is truly the most profound part of our conversion to being disciples of Jesus that is given to us. That is, to follow Jesus through the way of suffering and death, the way of hatred and evil, but not ever responding in the same way. There is a Scripture scholar, John McKenzie, who proclaimed once in one of his books that if Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus.

If Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever -- we just don't know Jesus Christ if we can't say that. John McKenzie goes on to say, "Jesus taught us how to die, not how to kill. How did he die? He died loving, forgiving those putting him to death." Jesus shows us the new way to transform our world, not by returning violence for violence or hatred for hatred, but returning love for hatred, gentleness and nonviolence for violence. It's the most radical, profound way that Jesus teaches us, and the most difficult way for us to follow him.

We want to say, "No, that's not possible," but Jesus shows us it is possible. Even in today's Gospel, or the Gospel that we heard before our procession with the palms, we begin to get an understanding of how Jesus rejects violence and how this week, he is calling us to have this mind, this heart, the attitude, because as we heard in the Gospel that was proclaimed before our procession, Jesus accepted the call of the people to enter into Jerusalem as a king. They were thinking of a warrior king like David or a great leader of the past.

They wanted Jesus to be a king who would lead an army, who would overthrow the Romans, who would bring freedom and liberty to the people, to restore their kingdom, a kingdom of this world. So what did Jesus do in the action today? He sends his disciples to get a donkey. He will not ride into Jerusalem on a war horse. He will not lead an army, and as we hear in John's Gospel, we're reminded that this is in fact something that had been spoken about by the Prophet Zachariah, hundreds of years before.

Jesus was inactive, but Zachariah had said in chapter nine of the Book of Zachariah, "Rejoice, heart and soul, daughter of Zion. Shout with gladness, daughter of Jerusalem. See now, your king comes to you. He is victorious. He is triumphant, but humble, riding on a donkey, a beast of burden." Because of this, Zachariah says, "He will banish chariots from Ephraim, war horses from Jerusalem. The bow of war will be banished and He will proclaim peace for the nations. His empire of peace shall stretch from sea to sea, from the rivers to the ends of the earth."

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Now it's up to us to listen to that action of Jesus, and to try to understand that he is rejecting war, violence and hatred, and calling upon us to follow him, to be like him, to have this mind, this attitude, this heart of Jesus. If we as the disciples of Jesus will spend this time listening, reflecting, praying with Jesus during this week, perhaps we will be changed, transformed so that we can be the disciples of Jesus who gather together with him and follow him as he pours forth his love on our world from the symbol of hatred and evil, the cross. "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself through love." This is what we must try to do as we are converted to the way of Jesus: Draw all people to ourselves only according to his way of love.

[Homily given at Holy Trinity Church, Des Moines, Iowa. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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