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The way of Jesus: rejecting power, wealth, violence and war

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Perhaps most of us are not aware of it, but when we're reminded, I'm sure many of us will remember this date 50 years ago, 1962, Oct. 28. It was the end of 13 days of crisis where people in this country were terrified, and all over the world people were dismayed and upset because of what we have come to call the Cuban Missile Crisis. I'm sure some of you remember those 13 days. The Soviet Union had put missiles in Cuba, 90 miles from our border, and they were missiles that had nuclear warheads. And we had discovered them and demanded they be removed, but instead, the Soviet government set forth some battleships with more warheads. It was a direct threat against us, and President [John F.] Kennedy established a blockade in the Pacific Ocean and indicated if the ships crossed that latitudinal line, we would go to war. Of course, it would be a nuclear war.

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara later on said, and he put his fingers this close together, "We were that close to an all-out nuclear war." It almost happened. I think we should listen to the scriptures in light of that event. As I mentioned regarding the first lesson today (and I think it's quite dramatic in a sense), Jeremiah had been preaching for 50 years to the chosen people not to prepare militarily, not to prepare for war. "God will bring you to fullness of peace and life without war," Jeremiah 17:9. The people at that time refused to listen. So they went to war; the temple was destroyed; most of the people were carried off into exile that lasted 70 years. Psalm 137:1-6 - a long, long time of suffering because they refused to listen to the prophet speaking for God. Mark 10:46-52

Today's Gospel gives us a dramatic example of someone who was willing to follow the way of Jesus. This man, Bartimaeus -- blind, a beggar, homeless, poor -- when he hears that Jesus is passing by, he cries out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" He's looking for healing. But as the incident unfolds, it

becomes clear that this physical healing, being able to see with his eyes, is only a symbol of what was really happening. He was recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, son of the Living God, like Peter had done some weeks before on the journey where Jesus had asked, "Who do people say I am?" and so on. Do you remember that? Peter said, "You are the Christ, son of the Living God." It was then for the first time that Jesus made the prediction about himself: "We're going up to Jerusalem. There, the Son of Man will be handed over to his enemies. He'll be tortured, humiliated and executed. Then on the third day, he'll rise again."

Peter and the other disciples couldn't really hear what Jesus said. In fact, at that time, you may remember Peter says, "No." He rebukes Jesus. You could almost hear Peter saying, "Look, you've got these crowds of people following you. We don't need to have you go and be executed, be tortured, handed over to your enemies. No -- we can form a strong army. You could be the Messiah like David, a great warrior king, and restore Israel to all of its earthly glory." That's what Peter is looking for, and remember what Jesus said? "Get behind me, you Satan, because you are not listening to God's ways. You're following human thinking, human ways."

Peter and the other disciples just could not accept what Jesus was saying, that he had to accept suffering rather than ever inflict suffering. He had to accept being killed rather than kill. He had to, and wanted to, accept his role as giving his life out of love and loving even those who were putting him to death, showing us the way to enter into the reign of God. This is the way of Jesus -- rejecting power, wealth, violence and war, and transforming our world through the power of love, and only that; the disciples couldn't hear that.

Remember two Sundays ago, the young man came running up to Jesus -- he was so enthusiastic. "What must I do to be saved?" Jesus said, "Keep the commandments." The young man said, "I've done that. I'm doing that." Jesus said, "OK. If you really want to follow me, go sell everything you have, give it to the poor; then take up your cross and follow me." Well, the young man went away sad. He couldn't hear Jesus, he couldn't accept what Jesus was saying. He wanted to depend on his wealth. That's what Jesus said to the disciples, who were amazed, because they couldn't believe Jesus would ever suggest that, give up everything. Jesus said, "It's harder for a rich person to enter the reign of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle," an absurdity. Jesus said that's how absurd it is to depend on wealth to save you, to guarantee security; it won't do it -- only deep faith in God.

Last Sunday, James and John, you might remember, come up to Jesus and say to him, "When you come into your kingdom, let us be one on your right side and one on your left side, the two top places in your kingdom." When they had come up to him, Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?" That's what they asked for. Jesus said, "That can't happen. If you want to be my disciple, again, take up your cross, follow me." The other disciples, when they heard about it, were angry, and they came to Jesus, complaining. He got all the disciples together and said, "Among the pagans, those who don't trust God, don't believe in God, those who are in positions of power lord it over the others. Among you it can't be that way. The one who leads must be the servant, even the slave of all." So Jesus rejects worldly power, rejects wealth, rejects armies, rejects violence, and says there's one way to enter into the reign of God. It's the way of love.

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This is where Bartimaeus is such a great example to us. His healing was not simply physical healing. He had the eyes of faith. He recognized Jesus and was willing to listen to Jesus and to follow Jesus. He throws off his cloak, probably his only worldly possession. He's ready to be poor and just depend on God,

depend on Jesus, follow Jesus, trust in God's goodness and God's love. Jesus is now on the final part of his journey to Jerusalem, where it's going to happen, where he's going to be handed over to his enemies.

Mark tells us Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way. The other disciples were unwilling, and in fact you remember, they all run away when it happens, except for John. But all the rest of them run away; they don't want to follow Jesus. Bartimaeus is the example of a true disciple, the example for each one of us. We probably need healing also, that we can see with the eyes of faith, see that Jesus is the son of God, son of Mary also, one like us in every way except sin, but he shows us the way to enter into the reign of God.

Again, Jeremiah says it so beautifully what that reign of God will be like if we follow the way of Jesus. "God who scattered Israel now gathers them together. God guards them as a shepherd guards his flock. Shouting for joy they will ascend Zion. They will come streaming to God's blessings -- the grain, the new wine, the oil, the young of the flocks and birds. They will be like a well-watered garden. No more will they be afflicted. I will turn their mourning into gladness. Instead of sorrow, I will give them comfort and joy. All of them, the lame and the blind, mothers and women in labor, a great throng will enter the reign of God."

So the challenge to us this morning, if we try to listen deeply to God's word and if we really want to avoid the ultimate catastrophe that we've done 50 years going in the opposite direction: We were saved 50 years ago because the president refused to go to war and found a way to make an offer to the Soviets that they accepted. We resolved the crisis without war, but ever since then, we've been building up weapons. We spend more on military might and power and weapons -- all of those things that can destroy the whole planet -- than the next 10 nations combined. We're not following the way of Jesus. We're following the way that will lead ultimately to the disaster that confronted the chosen people in the time of Jeremiah.

So I think it's important for us to listen deeply to today's lessons and to pray for the healing, to get that insight of faith and to ask God for the courage to follow the way of Jesus. We must try to listen deeply and be converted, and then our world can be saved. The choice seems so clear, really. It's a choice between the way of Jesus or the way of the world, which will bring about the end of the world as we know it. Pray. Pray with great fervor that our sight will be healed, we will see with the eyes of faith, and that we'll have the courage to follow the way Jesus shows us.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. 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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