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This Advent, we must celebrate the season of Jesus' coming

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I remind us that as we reflected last Sunday, this season of Advent is the season of celebration of coming. We might think first of all of the coming of Jesus at his birth in Bethlehem, but that's not really what this season is about. It's about that coming as we look back and remember it, but even more about the coming of Jesus at the end of time, the fulfillment of all of history. In between that first coming of Jesus and that final coming is the time in which we live now.

These lessons are intended to help us during this time in between. It's a long period of time, obviously, and many terrible things can happen. That's why the first lesson today is given to us through this book of the Prophet Baruch. It's a lesson that enables us to reinforce our understanding that God is with us so we can always have hope and trust. It actually had been a very terrible time that the people had undergone.

There had been a war just before the passage of today. God had sent a great sorrow. This was Jerusalem, and God speaking through the symbol of Jerusalem. "I have seen the captivity of my sons and daughters." God caused a great nation to come against them, a ruthless nation, with an unknown language. They had no respect for the old, no pity for the infant. They took away the only son of the widow, as well as her daughter, and left her alone.

It was a time of terrible pain and suffering and exile. If you want to get a sense of what it probably was like, all we have to do is look at what is going on in the Middle East today. It's that same area. Look at Syria right now. People are being driven from their homes. Young people are being brutally killed. Others are being made orphans. Hundreds of thousands of people have been driven into exile.

That's what was happening back then. Here is what Baruch tells us: "Jerusalem, put off your garment of

mourning and unhappiness. Put on the splendor and glory of God forever, for God will show you your splendor. God will call your name forever, peace and justice, glory in the fear of the Lord. Rise up, Jerusalem. Stand on the heights. Look toward the east. See your children gathered together from the setting of the sun to its rising, by the voice of the Holy One rejoicing because God has remembered them."

In the midst of all their pain and suffering, the prophet is reminding them that God still remembers them. God has their deepest concerns. They are God's concerns. That is something that can give us a spirit of trust and confidence, even as we face terrible calamities, sufferings, difficulties and wars in our world. We know that God is still with us, and God will bring us through these sufferings to a new life, a new hope.

That's a good message for us to hear and for us to try to reflect on now to make part of our daily life, that spirit of hope and confidence in God. In the Gospel lesson, we might think -- as we first hear it -- that John the Baptist is announcing the birth of Jesus, but that's not so. This is in the third chapter of Luke's Gospel, and Luke has already told the story of the birth of Jesus in the first two chapters of the Gospel.

This is not about Jesus coming to be born into our human history. This is about our being ready for when Jesus comes again. Luke puts all of this within the framework of the history of his day. It was the 15th year in the rule of the Emperor Tiberius. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Herod had authority over Galilee, and so on. He's naming all of those who are rulers to put it right into the context of the everyday life of the people.

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God will break in at any moment, at any time when God returns. To be ready for that, John proclaims what he calls the baptism for repentant people, to obtain forgiveness of sins. He went through the whole countryside, Luke says, proclaiming -- as it was written in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah -- "I hear a voice crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' " Here, Luke is calling Jesus Lord, because he's talking about the resurrected Jesus, not just Jesus, son of Mary, but Jesus resurrected and now son of God in glory.

John is calling for us to prepare the way for this coming of Jesus as Lord, son of God in power. What do we have to do? We have to make his path straight. Valleys must be filled in. The mountains and hills made low. Everything crooked must be made straight. The rough pass must be made smooth, and every human being will come to see the saving love of God. As we begin to smooth out following Jesus as the way -- "Make ready the way of the Lord" -- that not only means making a path for Jesus, for the Lord, but also following Jesus, who is the way.

So in order to be ready for this final coming of Jesus, we begin to think about how we can follow more faithfully Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. John says, "Prepare this." Our lives have to be concerned with how we most faithfully follow Jesus: the way, the way to fullness of life, the way to peace, the way to everlasting life. Of course, there are many aspects of the life of Jesus that we have learned about and where he teaches us the way -- his way.

The one that I thought we might reflect on especially this morning is how Jesus proclaims as his way a way of justice. In fact, last Sunday, we reflected on how when Jesus comes, his mission is to proclaim good news to the poor, give the blind new sight, heal the broken-hearted, set the downtrodden free, and break those bonds of oppression so that every person is redeemed of the yoke of injustice. They are free to be full human beings.

In our society, there are many ways in which we have to make justice happen, but one of the ways right now is to be very concerned about what is happening within our own state with the right-to-work laws. If we pay any attention to Catholic social teaching, we have to know that almost 125 years now, the Catholic church has been teaching the right of people to organize, the need for unions, to strengthen them, to make them able to function effectively so that everybody has an opportunity for a just wage so that people cannot be exploited.

We have championed within the church justice for workers, and yet so often now we fail to do that, not only because we sometimes try to suppress unions, but just because we don't live up to the teaching about living wage. Every person has the right, according to Catholic social teaching, for a living wage. That is a wage that is enough to support a family. Our current legal living wage if someone works full-time does not provide that a person would be able to keep his or her family out of poverty because there is not justice.

If we move forward with these right-to-work laws and unions are broken, wages will go down even more throughout our whole economy. That's not justice. The way of Jesus calls for justice, for a fullness of life for everyone. According to our teaching and the scriptures, every person has the right to a full human life. Every person has a right to the goods of the earth that God gave for all and not for a few.

If we deprive anyone of what they need in order to have a full human life, we're acting against the way of God and the way of Jesus. As we continue through this season of Advent, we certainly look forward to celebrating with joy the remembrance of Jesus born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, but even more we must celebrate the season of coming, celebrate and look forward to the coming of Jesus at the end of time when every mortal, every human being will be able to see the saving love of God and enter into the saving love of God.

It's our task during this in-between time to work to follow the way of Jesus, to make the way of Jesus the way of the life of our world and our society. It's a difficult task, and it may seem overwhelming to bring about that fullness of justice that Jesus calls for, but if we listen to what St. Paul tells his beloved community at Philippi today, we can hear Paul speaking to us. "Since God began such a good work in you, that is the good work of following Jesus, I am certain that God will complete it in the final days."

"This is my hope for you. I carry all of you in my heart. Even when I am in prison, defending and confirming the Gospel, you are with me and share the same grace." Paul is praying for us, that we will experience the same deep love of God that he experienced, that he shares with those Christians at Philippi, he shares with us this morning. As that prayer of Paul is responded to by each of us, as we experience God's love overflowing in our hearts, we will be able to follow the way of Jesus and prepare for his coming again.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Church, 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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