

## Oct. 1, 2006 Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 5, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

In order to reflect on these Scriptures today, it's very important, I think, for us to remind ourselves of the context within which we hear these particular readings. Three Sundays ago we began a short cycle of readings that all have to do with hearing God's Word. On that first Sunday, we had a passage from Isaiah where we were instructed about what it means to be a disciple. Each of us is a disciple of Jesus. "Morning after morning God wakes me up to hear, to listen, like a disciple." To be a disciple means to be a learner, to listen, to hear and Isaiah speaks about how God, every morning, alerts him so that he can listen, he can hear. And this is what we must do. We must commit ourselves to hearing deeply God's Word because that is what will form us, help us to become truly, authentically a disciple of Jesus. And our lessons have shown us where we must turn to listen. We listen to God's Word in the Scriptures. We listen to God's Word as it's proclaimed through the whole community of disciples -- the Church.

But today we hear something quite different -- that we must also listen for God's Word not just from within the institutional church, not just within our own community of disciples, but even beyond that, from outsiders if you will.

I've mentioned before that when the different Gospel writers put down the different sayings of Jesus, all the various things Jesus had said, what he had taught, what he had done and so on, most of the time they were putting it down within a context of what was happening within their community, at the time that the writer was gathering together the words and the ideas of Jesus and putting them into writing. Before that they had all been oral tradition passed on from person to person down from the first generation to the next.

And in this instance of today's Gospel lesson, it seems pretty obvious that Mark was dealing with a problem within that community of disciples. They were being very exclusive. They were insisting that the only way God would speak would be through the organized structure, the institutional structure of their community, and so in a very dramatic way, Mark shows how outside the community someone may be speaking and be speaking for God. John, one of the disciples, one of the favorite disciples of Jesus, one in the inner circle of disciples if you will, was all upset because someone was proclaiming in God's name and he wasn't part of the group, he wasn't part of the community, part of the church. John said "We have to stop him," but Jesus says: "No, listen. Anyone who's not against us is for us. He can be speaking for God, speaking for me and so listen, even to those outside your community."

When you hear how this Gospel is part of that framework where Mark was dealing with a problem within the community, it's very clear why we have the first lesson today. The same thing had happened with Moses and the community of Chosen People as they were going through the desert. There was this group who had come together in a very special way and Moses had prayed over them. God had imparted his spirit to them; they were to be the ones speaking for God, then all of a sudden these two others, Eldad and Medad, are out there preaching, claiming to be filled with the spirit. Joshua, Moses' number one assistant, says, "We have to stop them. They're not part of the community," -- the church, as it were, at that time. Moses says, "No, listen to them. They have something to say to us. We're the Chosen People, we're God's community, but they also can speak

for God and speak to us."

And of course it's very easy then to apply these ideas, this instruction, within our own church, within our own world. What the scriptures are telling us today is that we have to listen to those even who are not part of our community. They can be speaking for God and we as disciples must learn. I think one of the most dramatic examples of this happened when Pope Paul VI was writing a Peace Day statement for 1976. He was concerned about the buildup of weapons of mass destruction in the world. He was concerned that the world was going to destroy itself and in that context he asked: Who is our model for today, within this time of violence, horrendous war, terrorism? Who's our model? Paul VI's message points to "the weak man Gandhi." Because he teaches us the way of God, the way of love, the way of resistance with love, not with violence, not with killing, not with war. We have to listen, even to outsiders as we might call them. They too can speak for God.

In last Sunday's Gospel, you may remember, one of the things described by Mark was how Jesus, in order to teach his disciples a very powerful lesson, brought a little child into their midst, and Jesus pointed to that child and said, "Look, when you accept this child, you're accepting me." A vulnerable, weak child. Someone ordinarily not respected within the community, especially the community in which Jesus lived. Children were not counted as very important. Jesus was saying that you can learn, even from these most vulnerable; those who, in a sense, don't count.

Well I think the same thing is true, not just with children in our midst, but those who would seem to be the little people that don't count. Sometimes they speak to us very powerfully God's word, a word about justice, perhaps. And I'm thinking specifically of a documentary film produced, in fact, by someone who until a year or so ago was a member of our community, Martina Guzman. She now lives in North Carolina and is producing documentary films and for one of them she spent weeks in Mexico, going to village after village interviewing the people in those villages, and they're almost all women and children because the men have left. They've snuck into the United States, and for many in this country they're a big problem.

But in this film, Martina and those working with her, are interviewing these women, listening to their voices, trying to understand *why did the men leave?* Well, of course, it's because of the injustice that is being perpetrated against Mexico because of the North American Free Trade Agreement. They've lost their jobs, their ability to farm because of the [competition] put against their produce and because of the subsidies given to our farmers. They can't compete, they've left the land. They flee trying to find work someplace to support their families. And it's a very sad message that these women speak. They haven't seen their husbands sometimes for years, the children are without their fathers. They are proclaiming to us, "This is unjust." Even the little ones speaking to us, we need to hear them, to listen to them. This is God speaking through these prophets. And this will continue to go on.

I think another example of how we might listen to those outside our structured, institutional church, would be to listen to the Christians of other denominations, where it seems, at least to me and to many, more justice is done for women, who are allowed to have leadership positions in the church. A woman bishop is the head of the whole Episcopal church in the United States. I think that's a message being spoken to us from an outsider, I guess you could call them, but it's really God's word speaking a word of justice for women in our church. We need to listen, to change.

And perhaps that's what Jesus means in the last part of today's Gospel, that if we listen, we'll begin to change even radically. I suppose most of us don't like that image of cutting off your hands, cutting off your feet, plucking out your eyes. And, of course, Jesus doesn't mean that literally. It's a good analogy because we are willing to do such things. For example, if your hand is gangrenous, you would have it cut off rather than die

from the gangrene. And so it's an image, an analogy. And Jesus is saying we must sometimes act just as radically. If we're going to be faithful to the Word of God, if we're really going to listen, and let it change us, there may be radical changes in our lives.

Perhaps we would listen more carefully to what James says about how when you pile up riches nothing happens but that they rot. It won't do you any good ultimately, so instead of piling up riches, act for justice. See that the people in Mexico have a chance for a full human life. Perhaps that's going to require some radical changes in our lives. That's what Jesus is talking about. If we're going to act according to the Word of God that we hear, even from outsiders, from a Hindu like Gandhi, or from the Anglicans or Episcopalians in our country or from the poor of Mexico, if we listen we will see the need for change and then perhaps we will pray for the courage to make the radical changes that are required in our lives to act for justice, to hear God's Word, and to do God's Word in order to change our world and make it into the reign of God. Once more we're being called to listen and to change and to act for justice to make the reign of God happen.

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