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Following Jesus' way during Lent transfigures our bodies, spirits for Easter

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

In order for us to reflect most effectively on the Scripture lessons today, I think that it's important to put the event described in today's Gospel in the context of what has been happening in the Gospel, especially the lessons that we listened to last week, and shortly before that, about the baptism of Jesus. Remember, at the baptism Jesus experienced, when he went apart to pray by himself, [he found] a profound presence of God.

He experienced the Spirit coming upon him in great power and God saying to him, "You are my chosen one. In you I delight." These words are from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Then Jesus went out into the desert for six weeks for prayer and penance, deep communion with God, and it was during that period of six weeks, as we heard in last Sunday's Gospel, that the devil came to tempt him. God had given Jesus a mission as the servant of Yahweh. The words God had spoken were from the 42nd chapter of the book of Isaiah, and Jesus would have recognized that.

Jesus knew that he was that servant who was called to bring justice to all the world and to do it in a very special way through the transforming power of love -- not through violence, not through war, not through the power of wealth or anything else. Those temptations -- the devil trying to turn Jesus away from the direction God was leading him, telling him, "Look at those stones. Change them into bread." In other words, have all the wealth you need; that's the way to get things done. Use the material goods of this world; gather them in abundance.

Jesus had said, "No, not by bread alone does anyone live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," and so he told Satan, "Be gone." Then Satan comes back and offers him all the kingdoms of the earth, all the power and might of any kingdom, with armies to wage war to get what you want, through

violence and power over others. Jesus says, "Be gone, Satan. You shall worship the Lord your God alone." Finally, Satan, as you remember, said, "Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple. Draw attention to yourself. Do these spectacles that will draw people to follow you in amazement."

Jesus said, "No. Be gone, Satan." Satan left him, as Luke said, for a time. But now it's two years later, and Jesus has been preaching, healing and reaching out with compassion to the poor, traveling throughout the Holy Land, gathering together a community of disciples who would be willing to leave everything, take up their cross and follow him. He was coming to the last journey of his life. Luke in the Gospel is going to begin a description of that journey in 20 more verses, and it will be the last journey of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem to go through death.

Before that, he has this extraordinary experience of God once more calling him to the mountain and being revealed to Jesus in a very intimate way. Remember, we're talking about Jesus in his humanness experiencing this powerful presence of God. This time, he takes three of his disciples: Peter, James and John, who are enveloped by the cloud and hear the voice, "This is my son, my beloved, listen to him. Listen to him as he makes his final journey now. Listen deeply and carefully to what he says."

They come down the mountain and Jesus begins the journey. It's going to culminate on Calvary where he will be tempted to give up the way of God, be tempted to want to use power over his enemies instead of simply pouring forth love upon them. Remember, these temptations of Jesus are real. Do you remember from the Good Friday liturgy, the Gospel of John, where Jesus cries out in despair: "Eli, Eli lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why do you abandon me?"

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Jesus is hearing the taunts of the soldiers and others standing at the foot of the cross. "If you're the Son of God, come down from the cross. Show your power; overwhelm your enemies." But Jesus must remain faithful to the way of God, which is the way of love, even loving your enemies, those who torture you, put you to death. That is the only way that God's kingdom can be brought forth through the power of love. Jesus doesn't weaken.

Now we're on this journey through Lent approaching Good Friday, the dying of Jesus, so that we can enter into new life with Jesus. But as he's going on the journey, we'll hear from this Gospel of Luke different teachings that Jesus is imparting to us as we try to follow him; take up your cross and follow him. We must make sure that we listen deeply, and I'll only mention a couple of examples of the teachings that Jesus mentions, proclaims for us during this last journey as he heads toward Jerusalem for the final encounter with Satan tempting him to give up God's way to follow the way of the world, the way of those who dominate in the world and try to overcome with power and wealth and so on.

One of the things Jesus teaches us is through the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is one of those parables that stands out in our minds. All of us remember it: A person who was robbed and beaten is on the side of the road, and first a priest passes by, and then a second person, a Levite, passes by. Then the Samaritan, an enemy of the Jew who was robbed and injured, comes and reaches out in love.

Jesus told the parable right after he had talked about the second of the two commandments, love your neighbor as yourself. This is your neighbor -- the one who's not part of your community, not part of your circle of friends, one who could even be identified as an enemy -- love that person. Just today in the paper, I read this small piece about what's going on in Syria, where that terrible civil war is happening -- the government troops are driving people out of the country, and they're overflowing into Lebanon.

This article talks about, "Quietly but inexorably, a human tide has crept into Lebanon, Syria's smallest and most vulnerable neighbor. As Syrians fleeing civil war pour over the border, the village priest here, Elian Nasrallah, trudges through muddy fields to deliver blankets. His family runs a medical clinic for refugees. When Christian villagers fret about the flood of Sunni Muslims, he replies that welcoming them is, 'The real Christianity.' "

That's the kind of thing we need to think about when Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself. He means love everyone, especially those in need. What about ourselves, as immigrants come across our border, not fleeing war but fleeing economic deprivation that is severe? Should we build a wall to turn them away? What's the real Christianity? Welcome them; listen to Jesus, God tells us. Hear what he says and follow him.

Another part of his teaching that comes up during this final journey to Jerusalem is about the need to, as Jesus puts it, avoid greed in any form. Avoid greed; don't be accumulating wealth for yourself. Find a way that everyone shares in the goods that God gave for all. Here, too: What's going on in our country right now? There is this struggle over how do we balance our national budget. Are we really ready to make the cuts in food stamps and other supports for the poor, cuts in education, cuts in social services?

Is that really avoiding greed in every form, or should we find a way to draw wealth from those who have so much while others have so little, and through taxes, enable us to continue to provide the services [for] those who are poor -- the nonworking people in our midst, children who need the benefit of the food stamps. Are we going to deprive them, or can we find a way this week before the so-called sequestration happens and all of those dollars that are to be used for the benefit of the poor are taken away? Avoid greed in any form. Make sure we're willing to share and find a way that we share our national resources for the benefit of all -- that's what Jesus says. Listen to him.

Finally, among the many examples that come up during this last journey, the example of the Pharisee and the publican who go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee, a religious leader, stands in front of the temple, "I thank you, God, I'm not like other people," and he names all the sinners he can think of. "I'm not like them. I do this, this and this." The tax collector who's working for the Romans and therefore a public sinner stands in the back of the temple and simply says, "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

Isn't there something about our so-called exceptionalism as the people of the United States that we're better than other nations? "We stand tall," as one of our Secretaries of State said, and that's why we have to use power. We stand tall, we see further. No. We should develop an attitude that yes, we fail in so many ways, like any nation does, any person does. We should have the humble spirit that the tax collector had in the back of the temple: God have mercy on us sinners.

So listen to Jesus. This is now what we have to do as we move into this season of Lent approaching the Holy Week, Good Friday, the sufferings and the death of Jesus. Be united with him through all of this so we pray more intensely. We try to be more aware of his presence in our daily lives. We try to discipline ourselves so that we reflect more regularly on what Jesus is saying so we can listen to him.

If we do that as we go through this final journey, the final weeks of Lent, the final journey of the life of

Jesus, we will come to Holy Week prepared to go more deeply than we ever have before through the experiences of the death of Jesus, where he continues to pour forth love, the transforming power of love; refuses to use power and might to overcome enemies, but rather transforms through love and draws all people to himself.

As we go through this experience with Jesus during Lent and finally at the end of Lent, then we will be able to celebrate the feast of Easter with great joy as we are refreshed and renewed with the risen life of Jesus on Easter. What Paul says in our second lesson today will become even more true of us: "For us, our citizenship is in heaven, from where we await the coming of our savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. He will transfigure our lowly bodies, making them like his own body, radiant in glory through the power, which is his to submit everything to himself, to transform our world into the reign of God."

Listening to Jesus, following his way during this season of Lent will enable us to experience the beginnings of the transfiguration of our bodies and spirits so that we are united deeply and closely with Jesus in his risen life on Easter.

[Homily given at the Church of the Holy Rosary, Detroit. 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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