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Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 20, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

I think most of us experience the readings of today -- and it always happens at the end of the church year -- as being kind of, well, frightening or perhaps kind of dismal. Even the kind of gloomy day that we have seems to fit in with the readings. And we find them puzzling, I think, and so perhaps the first thing we need to remind ourselves of as we try to reflect on these readings is that the Gospel reading and the passage from the Book of Daniel are both what we would call apocalyptic writings -- like the Book of the Apocalypse, the last book of the New Testament.

It's a very special kind of writing. For one thing, you never, never can take an apocalyptic passage or writing and read it literally. It's not historical. In fact the writing in many ways would seem to distort history. The passage from Daniel was written in the second century before Jesus, and yet the author makes it seem like it was written in the sixth century before Jesus. Jesus is sitting there with the disciples, supposedly, according to Mark, looking at this magnificent temple, but when the passage was written the temple had already been destroyed. It had been totally demolished.

Apocalyptic writings often are filled with symbols -- symbols of numbers, symbols of color. And so we have to be very careful when we begin to look into writings in the Scriptures that are apocalyptic and yet if we look carefully and listen carefully we can still learn very important things from these writings.

First of all, they're written, mostly, for people in times of persecution. They're written as a way of trying to encourage people, give people a spirit of strength, a spirit of hope. Even though things are bad and people are suffering, God is still present and God will still bring them through that suffering to new life, to greater joy, to new hope.

That was certainly true of the people in the second century before Jesus. They were suffering a terrible persecution during the time of the Maccabees and there's a whole book about that persecution -- the Book of the Maccabees -- in our Bible, and so the sacred writer goes back four centuries and reminds the people of what happened during the time when the Chosen People had been driven out of their land. They were in exile. Everything was lost, but God brought them back. They were restored. New life burst forth and so during that time of the Maccabees the people could have hope. They could understand, "Yes, we are suffering but God will bring us through."

At the time of Mark's community that we hear about in the Gospel, an actual persecution wasn't happening but there was the danger that it was going to break out at any moment and the people were afraid. But then even more, I think, the people also were convinced that Jesus was to return at any moment and "the world as we know it would end." So Mark reminds them: Look at that temple. It has been destroyed. That beautiful, huge, marvelous, rich temple is gone, but through Jesus, God has brought the people into a new covenant with God, a new relation with God through Jesus. Remembering what had happened with the destruction of the temple and

how God had worked through their suffering to bring them to a new life, they could have hope that even if the whole world ended God would bring them through it. And so they can have hope.

Certainly that is what the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of. No matter what is happening to the world around us, within our own lives, Jesus has been in our midst. Jesus has been the one who was totally obedient to God's will, who showed us a whole new way to overcome evil -- to love by giving himself over to being tortured, to being killed, but transforming that brutal action into one that we remember as a saving action that brings new life, new joy, new love into our world and that's a very important thing for us to remember, I think, as we, through this reading of the Gospel especially, think about, and it makes us think about it -- the end of the world -- not something we like to dwell on.

According to the astronomers and the scientists of today, our sun, which keeps our world going, will last for five billion more years before it finally flames out and destroys our planet and all the planets in its orbit. So from that point of view, the end of the world is not very imminent and even that won't mean the end of the universe, because the universe has already been around for 15 billion years. And it's still expanding. No one knows really what will happen -- will it keep expanding until it just dissipates or will it close in on itself as some scientists think and the universe will end in a Big Bang like it began? See, we don't know, but we know that there is an end to all created things and even if we don't know about the end of the world itself, the end comes for each of us when we die -- the end of our existence in this world as we know it -- and we pass into the light with God forever.

It's helpful to think about that, but to think, too, about how Jesus, through his obedience to God, giving himself over to death, guarantees us new life, even as he experienced new life. But as we reflect on all of this, I think there is one other very important thing to think about, because we're at a different period in history than the human race has ever been in before: We human beings could destroy our world as we know it, could destroy this planet. That's never been true before and it could happen.

The U.S. Catholic bishops wrote a pastoral letter in 1983 on war and peace. One of the important insights in that letter, I think, is the reminder that we have to overcome war, because war, for the first time, could bring about the destruction of our planet. Because of the kinds of weapons that we have and because our leaders have explicitly planned to use those weapons, we could destroy the planet. Other nations have these weapons. When there is an exchange, the planet will be destroyed. For the first time in human history, human beings can do something we could never do before -- we can reverse the very creative power and love of God, act against God in a way that, I think, kind of encapsulates all sin.

Sin is being defiant to God and God's will. With this capacity and our determination to use it, it's like total defiance to God, to God's love, to God's creative power. In a sense, it's the total sin, total evil. I've quoted this before, I think, but it's sobering to think of these words from the novelist Arundhati Roy. When she was protesting the nuclear weapons her nation, India, had developed, she reminds us that, "This bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that we have ever made." And she tells us, "If you are religious, then remember, this bomb is our challenge to God. It's worded quite simply, 'We have the power to destroy everything that you have created.'" Total defiance of God. "But even," she remarks, "if you're not religious, you're not a believing person, then look at it this way. This world of ours, this planet, has taken four thousand, six hundred million years" - that's 4,600,000,000 -- to evolve to the beautiful planet we have," and she says, "it could all be over in an afternoon."

That's what we can do. We can end the world as we know it -- something that those first disciples were fearful of, that the world was going to end and they didn't know what was going to happen. Well, we're in the situation where not only can the world end but we can bring it about.

And so that's, finally, why I think we have to listen very deeply to that passage from the Letter to the Hebrews

where we're reminded that Jesus stands before us offering himself out of total obedience to God, giving himself over to the forces of evil so that he could transcend them, transform them, not responding to that evil with evil but responding with love and forgiveness.

That's the lesson we have to learn if we're going to continue to make our world a world that continues to flourish, then we have to become like Jesus. Our whole goal in being a disciple is to be like Jesus who, though he was God, did not think his divinity something to cling to, but emptied himself, became human, even to the point of death, and even the ignominious death on the cross and therefore it was that God exalted him.

We must join with Jesus in giving ourselves over in total obedience to God's love and God's will, responding always to evil as Jesus did, with love. So we can join in his work of transforming our world into the reign of God; not ending our world, but transforming it into the reign of God through the power of love that we receive from Jesus and that we carry out in our own lives, imitating Jesus.

Our world will end sometime, but we pray that it will end in a way that will be through transformation, not through destruction. The reign of God is at hand and it can come into its fullness when we totally follow the way of Jesus.

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