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We must emulate the example of Jesus during Holy Week to undergo transformation

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The Peace Pulpit

Editor's note: This homily was given at a Palm Sunday Mass on March 24.

As we were reminded at the beginning of our ceremony this morning, we have been engaged for five weeks in this season of Lent -- the season when we try to undergo a deep conversion of life, a total turning around of our values and our attitudes and our actions. Now, we enter into the final week of Lent when we, perhaps, must try to even intensify our efforts -- at prayer, alms-giving, acts of charity and discipline.

The lessons today are very helpful if we really want to enter into this final week of Lent with a new determination to change our lives, to undergo conversion -- profound radical change -- the way of Jesus. That's exactly what St. Paul had said to the church at Philippi, who had begun to be in dispute among themselves. He pleaded with them: "Have that kind of a mind and attitude as in Christ Jesus, who, though he was God, did not think his divinity something to be clung to, but emptied himself -- underwent a total change, to become human like us in every way, open to become a slave among us." Paul is saying: Have that kind of a mind and attitude.

Our first lesson today reminds us of how this happens. The servant says, "God has taught me, so I speak as a disciple." A disciple is one who learns, who learns to follow. "Morning after morning, God wakes me up to hear, to listen, like a disciple." That's what we must be about this week, trying to listen, to hear like a disciple, to take in what God is saying to us, to let it transform us radically. It's not just listening to the words; it's watching Jesus, seeing his example. He speaks as powerfully through what he does as what he says.

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord
Luke 19:28-40
Isaiah 50:4-7
Psalms 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24

Philippians 2:6-11
Luke 22:34-23:56
Full text of the readings

I think we're maybe more aware of that than we might have been otherwise because of Pope Francis. Aren't we all kind of excited because he's beginning to act differently? He hasn't said all that much yet, but he's acting differently. He took the name "Francis," which immediately he tells us he wants to follow the radical way that Francis brought back into the world, radically following the Gospel of simplicity and poverty and of giving up violence and power, being a peacemaker. Just by taking that name, he showed us that our church and each one of us needs to undergo radical change.

It is, again, encouraging and inspiring that he's refusing some of the trappings that have been built up around the pope to make him look like a worldly monarch -- someone so totally separated from the rest of the people. No; instead, he's mingling. He's giving up some of the trappings. He has lived very simply in an apartment, cooking for himself, refusing, even after he's pope, to ride in the limousine, getting into the bus with everyone else. He's pledged himself this week on Holy Thursday to go among young people in detention. These are actions that show us he's going to be different. He's going to try to follow the way of Jesus.

So we, too, then, especially this week, must try to listen to Jesus, but mostly, watch how he acts. Even this morning, if we were alert to it, we notice that Jesus began to do what St. Paul said: empty himself, take upon himself the form of our humanness, be one like us, but even be a slave among us. Remember back in the beginning of Lent and the first Sunday of Lent, we heard about the temptations of Jesus and how the devil had said, "You may have all the kingdoms of the earth if you fall down and adore me," and Jesus said, "No! Be gone, Satan! I will not accept the power, the might, the kingdoms of the earth. I've come to be in a different way."

They wanted to make him king. He'd already refused to be king. He had gone into hiding when they tried to make him king before. Now, even though they're insisting, they're gathered in great crowds, and many of them are thinking he's going to be like a human king: "He will be like the great warrior, King David, and he will free us from the Romans and their cruel occupation. He'll do it through war and violence." If he were to do that, he would have ridden into Jerusalem on a war horse, armed and ready to wage war. What does he do? He remembers the words of the Prophet Zechariah about the Messiah coming into Jerusalem, not riding on a war horse, but on a donkey, a beast of burden, the kind of animal a poor person would have.

So just by showing us that, Jesus is showing us he's rejecting worldly power, violence, war, anything that goes with that. On through this week, if you listen to and watch Jesus, he will continue to show us that if you really want to be a follower of Jesus, you must reject violence, must reject war, any tendency toward worldly power, domination. I could go through a whole list of things, but I just invite you to watch during this week, and I'll suggest just a couple. Watch what happens on Holy Thursday night after Jesus shares the Passover meal for the last time with his disciples.

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He goes into the darkness and he finds a crowd coming toward him, armed with clubs and swords, ready to take him through violence and power. And who's leading them? Judas, the one who is the betrayer, which was an act of violence against Jesus. A friend, Judas, is leading this crowd to arrest Jesus, to torture him, to kill him. What does Jesus do? He walks up to Judas and embraces him and calls him friend. "Friend, why have you come?" He's pleading with Judas to change. Judas doesn't -- at the moment, at least -- but Jesus shows us that he's willing to reach out in forgiveness, reach out in reconciliation, draw back by love.

But then, later on during that night, another incident happens where Jesus acts in the same way, only the outcome is different. Remember, we heard it in the account of the Passion, Peter saying, "If everyone else denies you, I'll never deny you," but then he does, three times, just as Jesus said. Again, that's an act of defiance. How would you feel if a friend said, "I don't even know you, I've nothing to do with you, you're nothing to me?" That's what Peter was doing, three times.

Then, as Luke describes during part of that night as Jesus is being taken from one place to another, he looks across at Peter, and it's a look of love obviously, because Peter is touched deeply, and he goes out and weeps bitterly. Jesus has reached out to reconcile, reached out in love, in response to violence and hatred, and heals. That's how Jesus goes on through his whole Passion and death. As he's dying, he does exactly what he had told his disciples, "Don't just love those who love you, love your enemy. Do good to those who hurt you. Return good for evil, never violence for violence or hatred for hatred, but good for evil." He prays for those, "God, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is the example of Jesus that we must watch and follow during this week. Listen to his words, watch how he acts, so that we can undergo deep, profound transformation and become true disciples, followers of Jesus, always ready to reach out, forgive, and to love. As we do this, surely we'll go through the Passion and death of Jesus to celebrate his resurrection. We'll be somewhat closer to what Paul cries for us to do: "Have this mind in you, which was in Christ Jesus." We will begin, more than ever, to have the mind, the heart, the attitude, of Jesus. So we enter into this week to listen, to watch, and to follow Jesus in the way of love that leads to peace.

[Homily given at Gesu Parish, 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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