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Who do you say Jesus is?

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned in introducing the Gospel, it's kind of a confrontation because Jesus is demanding of his disciples after he's been with them for maybe a year, year and a half, close to two years: "Who do you really think I am? What do people say about me?" You heard the answers, but then he confronts them directly: "Well, OK, who do you say I am?"

<p>As we know, God's word is a living word, so Jesus is saying that to each of us this morning: "Who do you say Jesus of Nazareth is?" It makes a huge difference. If he's just a good person going around doing a lot of good things, that's one thing, but if he really is the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the living God, well then, that should make a huge difference if we recognize that and say, "Yes, he is the Christ, the son of the living God." It should mean, once we really recognize that, extraordinary changes in our lives.</p> <p>If you look in Matthew's Gospel for this same event, the same challenge that I just presented, you get a little bit more, and you get a better understanding of the kind of challenge that Jesus is making. In Matthew's Gospel, after Peter speaks up and says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," "From that day, Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, that he would suffer many things from the Jewish authorities, and that he would be killed."</p>	<p>Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time Zechariah 12:10-14; 13:1 Psalms 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9 Isaiah 52:7-10 Luke 9:18-22 Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 16</p>
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After he says that, Peter comes back -- the one who had said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" -- Peter took him aside and began to reproach him: "Never, Lord, never! This must not happen to you. You don't have to go to Jerusalem, be handed over to those who hate you, be tortured and killed. No, no!" See, Peter's saying, "No, that isn't the way to go," because after all, at this point in the life of Jesus, he's known as a wonder-worker. Crowds are following him; he can command whatever he wants.

You don't have to give yourself over to death. You can have a whole band of soldiers fighting for you. But that isn't the way of Jesus, and so Matthew tells us [that] Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, you

Satan! You are an obstacle in my path. You are not thinking as God does, but as people do."

Jesus was proclaiming a new way to transform our world -- not through power and might and violence, killing and war, none of that. He was rejecting all of that and saying, "The only way to change the world, to transform it into the reign of God, is through the power of love." That's why that first lesson today reminds us of what happened on Calvary. This person who was mourned among the chosen people had been pierced somehow and suffered. He had been stabbed to death, and we think of Jesus, who on the cross [said]: "Father, forgive them."

Even as he's being put to death, being pierced in the side with the soldier's sword, Jesus is rejecting any retaliation, any revenge, any violence. He's pouring forth his love on the world, and so now when Jesus says, "If you want to be my disciples, deny your very self, pick up your cross, and follow me," I think we begin to understand the challenge. If we're going to be a disciple of Jesus, we must follow his way.

Last week, I had to give a talk at a peace conference, and I wanted to emphasize how important [it is] as followers of Jesus, who have to choose this way of love, and so I went back to the pastoral letter that the Catholic bishops of the United States wrote back in 1983, when we were being challenged by the arms race and nuclear weapons were being produced and arsenals were being built up at a rapid pace.

In the pastoral letter, the bishops said at the time in the following pages: "We should like to spell out some of the implications of being a community of disciples of Jesus in a time when our nation is so heavily armed with nuclear weapons and is engaged in a continuing development of new weapons, together with strategies for their use." So here we are -- a community of disciples in a country where this is happening, and it's still happening.

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Now last week, President [Barack] Obama gave a speech in Berlin in which he [said] we have to reduce this arsenal that much; meaningless, really. There's no reason we should have any arsenal of nuclear weapons; they're weapons of mass destruction. They'll bring about the destruction of our whole planet when we use them and, as you have just heard, we are in a country developing constantly new strategies for their use.

How can we be disciples of Jesus and support these kinds of weapons? The Jesus who poured forth his love as he's being executed on the cross is trying to show us the only way to change our world, to end violence and war and suffering, is to follow his way: the way of love.

When we begin to think of what it means to be disciples of Jesus -- and we recognize [him] as the son of God, who we're following -- we must take very seriously his way. It has to do, I think, most of all with this whole idea of the transforming power of love if we're going to follow Jesus, the son of Mary and the son of God.

But now I want to show you something else that comes through in the letter of Paul to the Christians in Galatia, because when we listen to Matthew's Gospel or Luke's Gospel and we say we will follow Jesus, we're thinking of Jesus in his humanness, and so we're going to try to live like Jesus, the son of Mary, lived; follow his way. But now Paul tells us, there's also following Jesus, who is the risen Christ, the son of God in glory, because that's what happens at baptism. We're buried in the waters of baptism; we rise to new life.

We live the risen life of Jesus Christ, and as his disciples, we must follow how Jesus is transformed, going through death and new life in his resurrection. It's not the same Jesus; he's not just resuscitated and walking around on the earth again. Totally transformed -- that's what resurrection does. Paul says, "All of you who were given to Christ through baptism have put on Christ." That's the gift of baptism: We put on Jesus Christ -- not just the human Jesus, but the glorified Jesus, the Jesus who is the son of God in glory.

Now we're transformed if we follow him. Here among the baptized, there is no longer any difference between Jew or Greek, between slave or free, between rich or poor, between man and woman. All of you are one in Christ Jesus, and now, if we follow Jesus, we will live that way. We will break down the barriers that we have set up that separate us, one from another -- by ethnicity, by race, by gender, by poverty or riches. We will live the way of Jesus, breaking down all of those barriers, and that will bring peace into our world. Bring fullness of life for every people when we break down those barriers between rich and poor.

I'll say something else that I think is very pertinent right here and now in this church. This church would not be closing if we were recognizing that we have new life in Christ -- neither male nor female in Jesus, everyone could be called to ministry. There would be no shortage of ordained ministers because Jesus has taken away that distinction, even between male and female. Every person is qualified to be another Christ celebrating the holy Eucharist at the altar. We would have plenty of ministers if we would just be listening to Jesus and following his way.

I invite you to reflect on who Jesus really is -- son of God, son of Mary -- and what it means to follow Jesus as one among us; like us in every way except sin, but also son of God in glory. Are we really ready to accept his challenge: "If you want to be my disciples, deny your very self and follow me"?

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, 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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