

God's word is not an easy word to accept

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 22, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

I don't think most of us are prepared to hear a Gospel like we just heard, where Jesus says, "I didn't come to bring peace. I came to bring division" and extreme division among nations, among peoples, even within families, where it's the most hurtful. We think of Jesus as we sing on Christmas, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to people on Earth," that Jesus brings peace. We think of Jesus coming on Easter Sunday night and saying to the disciples, "Peace be with you."

So what is happening here? Well, first of all, we should realize that when Jesus makes these distinctions today, he is not giving his goal or his vision, that he really wants division, he wants people to hate each other. No. But he's saying, "As I preach the word [and] try to show you God's ways, some will listen and some will not, and there will be divisions because of what I say [and] what I teach; those who accept it and those who reject it, even with hatred."

This, I guess, shouldn't really surprise us because when Jesus was presented in the temple as a baby, remember what Simeon said about him? "He will be a sign of contradiction. Some will follow, and some will reject." And in his own life, that happened. There's that beautiful passage in the fourth chapter of Luke where Jesus preaches in the synagogue. It's right after he's come back from the desert and he's ready to begin his public life, and he is offered the chance to read the Scriptures.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10
Psalms 40:2, 3, 4, 18
Leviticus 24:1-4
Luke 4:1-15

He reads from the book of the prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim God's year of jubilee -- a time when the reign of God will happen. Everyone will share fully in all the goods of the Earth." Then he says, "This day, the Scripture passage is fulfilled as you listen." So he's saying he's come to proclaim the reign of God and to begin to prepare the way that the reign of God will come into fullness of being.

At that point in the Gospel, Luke tells us, "All agreed with him and were in awe and wonder at his words. It sounded so beautiful." But then it was just a short time later when they began evidently to think about what he had said: If that reign of God is going to happen, well then, we have to change our lives. We have to try to make sure that everyone has a chance for a full human life, so that the downtrodden will be set free, that the poor will be given enough food; everyone will share in the goods of the Earth.

We have to begin to change, and people must have begun to think about that because just a short time later, when Jesus comes to preach in Nazareth, the people begin to say, "Who is this? He's Joseph's son, so what. But who is he?" Then Jesus says to them, "No prophet is honored in his own country," and he goes on to speak to them some more and then on hearing all of these words, the whole assembly became indignant.

They rose up and brought him out of town to the edge of the hill on which Nazareth is built, intending to throw him down the cliff to kill him. See, people find it hard to hear the word of Jesus and then to change [their] lives. Jesus is fulfilling his role as a prophet and, as we heard in our first lesson today, prophets, when they are really speaking God's truth, are not always well received and fully accepted.

In that time of Jeremiah, the king -- the young king, new king -- had been taken off to Babylonia, and the chosen people were being subdued. Then there were those who wanted to go to war, and Jeremiah said, "No, that's not God's way. We have to reject war. We have to resolve our conflicts without violence." So what do they do to Jeremiah? They throw him down into the well so he sinks into the mud. They want to kill him, and he's rescued at the last moment. Sometimes the prophetic word of God is rejected, whether Jesus speaks it or other prophets speak it. It's not an easy word to accept.

Maybe just one thing we could think about today as to whether or not we are really listening to God's word: The word that I think is maybe most important right now in our world is a word to reject violence. We're not ever going to bring peace to our world through war, through killing. What's going on in Egypt right now? It's a terrible kind of slaughter of unarmed people protesting against the military in their country that had taken over their democratically elected leader -- put him in jail -- and now run the country.

They open up fire and begin to kill innocent people who gathered in huge protests, and they've killed hundreds and hundreds of them now. You might say, "Well, that's not my responsibility. What have I got to do with that?" Well, do you know who paid for those guns that are being used? We did: \$1.3 billion a year we give in military assistance to Egypt.

They're using the weapons we paid for, we manufactured; they're using them to kill innocent people. Most of us aren't even aware of it. Most of us never think that we might have to protest that, that there is another way -- the way Jeremiah preached, the way Jesus preached -- to reach out to your enemies, love your enemies, do good to your enemies, return good for evil.

I think that's the hardest message in the Gospel of Jesus, that we really have to reject violence. We find it so difficult to accept that. It seems to us foolish, but "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." Those are the words of St. Paul, and so we have to try to bring ourselves to understand what is the way of Jesus and to follow that way, and it can bring division.

There will be arguments about it. People will become angry and even hateful, but we should then think about what we heard from the letter to the Hebrews today: There are many people that have gone before us who have shown us the ability to believe and to follow what God has taught, what Jesus has even more clearly taught. All of those witnesses of faith who accepted God's word, starting with Abraham and Sarah, down through the thousands of years before Jesus.

Then today, the writer says, "What a cloud of innumerable witnesses surround us." If we begin to think about the people in our world who have followed the way of Jesus, there are witnesses who are ready to even give their lives rather than go against the way Jesus taught: Oscar Romero -- I'm just thinking people in El Salvador recently -- [who was] murdered because he was rejecting violence.

The four women religious murdered in 1980, sisters from the United States -- Dorothy Kazel, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Jean Donovan -- real people; the Jesuits murdered at the university in 1989 because they were reaching out to the poor and rejecting violence: These are the witnesses that have gone before us. There are many today who are working for peace in very nonviolent ways. They are the innumerable witnesses that we hear about in today's second lesson.

So then we're urged: Let us be rid of every encumbrance, especially of sin, to persevere in running the race marked out before us by Jesus. Keep your eyes fixed on him, and that's what we must try to do above all else: keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Follow his way, and then his real vision, his real goal -- peace -- will happen in our hearts, in our families and in our world.

[Homily given at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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