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Give up violence to prepare for the final coming of God

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

During this day, when we are spending time as a Pax Christi group, trying to determine how we can best live out the commitment we make when we join Pax Christi, it is very clear that our Scripture lessons provide us with very important ideas and important things for us to reflect on, think about, to become truly peacemakers, making Pax Christi the peace of Christ come about in our world.

We're celebrating the season of Advent, of course, and I'm sure all of us remember that and realize and experience that this is a season of hope -- hope for the coming of Jesus. But we also have to remember that Jesus came historically almost 2,000 years ago, and we can hardly hope for something that has already happened. So what are we hoping for? We're hoping and looking forward to his final coming, or for those moments when he breaks into our lives in a very dramatic way, in our prayer.

We're looking for his new coming ... that final coming, when the reign of God will come in its fullness: a reign of peace and joy and justice, love, fullness of life for everyone, for all of creation. These lessons teach us not only to hope for that coming, but also that now, since he came 2,000 years ago and we're going to remember and celebrate that, we also are preparing -- and must prepare for -- that final coming, for the reign of God.

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalms 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

Romans 15:4-9

Matthew 3:1-12

Full text of the readings

John the Baptist in the Gospel says this so clearly: "Change your ways; the reign of God is now at hand." That's what has to happen -- we have to change our ways. We have to begin to live within the framework of the reign of God; that is, live with God's way being our way, God's teachings being our teachings, God's word being our guide.

Live according to the ways of God, and who shows us that more than anyone? Of course: Jesus. And so that's why we celebrate his coming and remember his coming, and look back to his coming, so that we can be very active in doing what John the Baptist says: "The reign of God is happening. Change your

lives so that you enter into that reign of God."

John suggests also the underlying attitude that we must have if we're going to change our lives. It seems kind of abrupt, and we're not quite sure why he suddenly says such harsh things to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but what he's asking them to do (and there must have been some evidence that they weren't): He wants them to be authentic. "Let it be seen that you are serious in your conversion," and that's for us, too.

Not some superficial way of changing, but a deep change within ourselves -- our attitudes, our way of acting -- must change profoundly so that, as Paul puts it in one of his letters, we have that mind, that heart, that attitude that was in Christ Jesus, that we become more and more like Jesus.

Our first lesson last week, and I recall this for you because it's so important, last week we also heard from the prophet Isaiah, and that lesson is so important what we've been reflecting about today -- the spirituality of nonviolence. We have to reject violence because, as Isaiah says, "In the last days when the reign of God comes to its fullness, the mountain of God's house shall be set over the highest mountains, shall tower over the hills and all nations shall stream to it saying, 'Come, let us go to the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Jacob, that God may teach us God's ways, and we may follow in God's paths.' "

Then here's the profound teaching if we're going to follow in God's ways: "Those who follow God's ways," Isaiah tells us, "will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not raise sword against nation. They will train for war no more." In other words, as we said earlier today, we have to say no to war. John Paul cried that out; Paul VI cried out: "No to war; war never again."

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In a nation that's heavily armed with nuclear weapons, a nation that has thousands of those nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, isn't this something very important for us to reflect on, continue to work for: the elimination of such weapons before we destroy our very planet? Isaiah makes it so clear when the fullness of God's reign happens, there will be no more swords. We will have plowshares, agricultural tools. No more spears, but rather, pruning hooks. The war will be no more. This is something we must work for as we change our lives, and it's so clear.

But then in today's first lesson, Isaiah also reminds us of how we have to change our lives dramatically if we're going to enter into the reign of God, which is at hand. The first thing we do is, Isaiah tells us, "Open ourselves to God's spirit. The spirit of God will rest upon us -- a spirit of wisdom and understanding; a spirit of counsel; a spirit of knowledge; a spirit of reverence for God."

So if we really open ourselves to that wisdom of God, there will be a transformation of all the earth. Peace will be everywhere. "The wolf will dwell with the lamb. The leopard will rest beside the kid. The calf and the lion cub will feed together. Befriending each other, the cow and the bear will see their young ones lie down together. Like cattle, the lion will eat hay, and by the cobra's den, the infant will play. The child will put his hand into the viper's lair. No one will harm or destroy over my holy mountain, for as water fills the sea, the earth will be filled with the knowledge, the goodness of God."

That's the reign of God, and again, we have to work to make this happen so that we nurture creation -- we love what God has given to us and we are careful not to destroy any parts of God's creation. Tremendous change, obviously, we have to bring about in our lives, and yet again, we're assured by John that it's

possible: "I baptize you in water for a change of heart." So we follow John and we see that change of heart through baptism of water.

"But the one who comes after me" -- he's talking about Jesus -- "is more powerful than I am. Indeed," John says, "I'm not even worthy to carry his sandals, and he will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit." Bring that tremendous change about within each of us that will enable us to recognize that the reign of God is at hand, and that we must change our lives.

First of all, the most dramatic change will be to give up violence -- the violence that can destroy any one of us, our communities, our families, or our world. We must always act as Jesus taught us in words and by his example to give up violence, to always love, even to love our enemies.

As I think about this and pray about this, and I hope all of us do, we maybe can call to mind the extraordinary example of Nelson Mandela -- a person recognized by people everywhere in the world as one who had first been committed to violence, but came to understand violence does not bring about a change that brings good things to people; violence begets violence.

In his autobiography called *The Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela recalled how he had undergone conversion. He says, in a very brief sentence ... and remember, he was 27 years in prison, 18 years of solitary confinement, but he had learned. He said, "I came to understand that I had to work for the freedom of the oppressor, not only for the freedom of the oppressed."

In other words, he had to love his enemies -- the minority white people who were oppressing the rest of the nation, the majority of blacks. ... "I must work for the freedom of the oppressor as well as the freedom of the oppressed -- my people -- because," he said, and this is an extraordinary insight, "anyone who has hatred in his heart for another, and anyone who oppresses another, is a prisoner of that hatred in his heart."

So what Mandela is saying, "I have to work to bring about the freedom of my people who are oppressed, but also do that by loving the oppressor, and helping the oppressor to break out of that prison of hatred that causes them to oppress." What a beautiful way to express what Jesus teaches us -- that we don't just love those who love us. We love our enemies; do good to those who hurt us, so these are the ways we have to change our lives. Be authentic; make sure we're praying deeply, reflecting carefully, so that when we try to change, it's according to the way of Jesus, and make those changes in our whole attitude toward violence.

Change ourselves to always be actively loving and transforming the world through love, and that we also cherish our planet -- our earth -- and bring that fullness of life, even to all of creation. What a tremendous vision this season of Advent presents to us, and a tremendous challenge. The reign of God is at hand. It can happen, and will happen in my life, if I change my life and follow the way of Jesus.

[Homily given at St. Richard of Chichester Catholic Church, Jackson, Miss. 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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