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Jesus came to preach reconciliation and healing

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Last Sunday, we heard the earlier part of Matthew's Gospel where Matthew describes how John the Baptist is the one coming to prepare the way of the Lord. Remember, John began to teach in the desert of Judea. His message was, "Change your ways, the reign of God is at hand." Matthew said it was about him, this is John the Baptist, about whom the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said, "A voice is crying in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight." That was John the Baptist, a powerful preacher, one drawing great crowds to follow him, providing those crowds with a baptism of water for the repentance of sin.

Now in today's Gospel, we see a totally different John the Baptist. To me, it's a very poignant scene. Here is this great prophet preaching so powerfully. Clearly, God was with him. Now he's in a dungeon, a prison, because he had rebuked Herod the king and Herod punished him, humiliated him, threw him into this prison, and John was just left there. His followers had dispersed. Many of them were, in fact, following Jesus.

John must have begun to have some doubts about his own role and now about Jesus. So he sends these disciples of his -- a few that are there to be with him and provide him some assistance -- to ask Jesus this very important question: Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else? John had thought the reign of God was ready to break forth and that Jesus was now the Messiah, the one sent by God, the anointed one to make the reign of God happen.

Yet it seemed not to be happening. John was, it seems to me, almost in desperation wanting to find out: Who is Jesus? What is he doing? It's possible, and some Scripture commentators suggest that John really had confidence in Jesus. He knew he was the anointed one, and he was just sending the disciples so they would begin to attach themselves to Jesus and leave him behind. But I really think it's the other way. John

was wondering because there were different ideas about the kind of Messiah who was going to come.

In the Jewish traditions, there were a variety of images of the Messiah. Some expected the anointed one, the Christ, to come from among the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or the Essenes. Some expected the Messiah to emerge from the priestly caste. Others looked for a prophet like Moses, that great leader that brought them out of the captivity of Egypt. Many expected a son of David cut from the same combative cloth. David was a warrior king who restored the unity of Israel and Judea, brought the two kingdoms together, and who developed the chosen people into a powerful nation unified under him -- but a warrior king.

So John was wondering, "Jesus doesn't seem to fit any of these categories," so he's trying to find out. In fact, remember last Sunday, John, it seems to me, indicated that he was more like those who expected a warrior king -- someone who would come and would force, bring about the overthrow of the Roman occupiers, establish the reign of God quickly in its fullness. John preached a powerful lesson and even one that seems kind of harsh.

Remember how John spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees in last Sunday's Gospel: "Brood of vipers! Who told you that you could escape the punishment that is to come? Be serious in your conversion. Do not think we have Abraham for our father. I tell you God can raise children for Abraham from these very stones." Then John said, "The axe is already laid to the roots of the trees, and any tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire."

John was foreseeing a harsh judgment when the Messiah, the anointed one, came, and from that then would come the reign of God. And so he ascends and asks the questions, and it's marvelous, I think, how Jesus, as he often does, instead of just giving an answer, instead of saying, "I am the Messiah, I am the anointed one": No, he says, "go back and tell John what you hear and see." In today's Gospel, "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the good news is reaching the poor. How blessed is anyone who does not find in me a stumbling block."

What Jesus is suggesting, what is so clear in our first lesson today where Isaiah, looking to the coming of a new king to Israel, after David's kingdom had begun to fall apart and the chosen people had been driven into exile and their land was occupied, everything was destroyed, and Isaiah preaches a message of hope -- a message that really shows what the reign of God will be like. Besides what Jesus declares in today's Gospel, Isaiah speaks about how the wilderness and the arid land shall rejoice, the desert will be glad and will blossom -- the dessert covered with flowers that sing and shout with joy.

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Isaiah is saying, "Yes, the reign of God is coming, and all of creation will be brought to its fullness." Isaiah said, "Give vigor to weary hands, strength to enfeebled knees, say to those who are afraid, Have courage, do not fear. See, your God is coming, bringing true justice, right relationships between each of us and God -- between all peoples and God -- that's the justice. And then the eyes of the blind will be open, the ears of the deaf unsealed, the lame will leap as a deer and the tongue of the mute sing and shout."

The very thing that Jesus said, "Look, this is what's happening," so he tells John, "The reign of God is indeed coming." But it's a reign of God brought by a Messiah, an anointed one who is different from any of the images that were prevalent at the time and especially the image of the warrior king like David. No, this Messiah is a Messiah who is going to bring healing, bring life, restore life to people, give everyone a chance for a full life. The poor will find themselves touched by the word of God, the good news will be preached to the poor.

It's a whole different vision, and it's to be brought about not through power and might, not through a warrior king, but through a Messiah, an anointed one who brings about the reign of God and makes it begin to happen through reconciliation, forgiveness and love. Jesus is truly the Messiah, and he expects, yes, John will reflect on this and will see that in fact, the reign of God is breaking forth as Jesus goes around ministering, healing, especially reaching out to the poor, the oppressed, to the sinner, to those who seem to have failed. Jesus is bringing that healing and fullness of life.

These are very good Scripture lessons to reflect on now as we continue our preparation to celebrate once more that coming of Jesus into our world 2,000 years ago and the coming of Jesus that we look forward to at the end of time -- to celebrate this Jesus who is born into our midst. Also, as we prepare to celebrate that, we prepare to renew our own commitment to follow this Jesus, this Messiah.

In heaven, we have an extraordinary example, during this past week, of someone who, in fact, brought about reconciliation, healing and freedom for his people -- Nelson Mandela. Last week, there was this tremendous gathering -- tens of thousands of people coming together from all over the world, world leaders from almost every nation, there to celebrate what Nelson Mandela had left behind, his legacy.

President [Barack] Obama spoke at this event, and I think he identified so clearly the legacy of President Mandela. "It took a man like Nelson Mandela to free not just the prisoner but the jailer as well to show that you must trust others so that they may trust you; to teach that reconciliation is not a matter of ignoring a cruel past, but a means of confronting it with inclusion and generosity and truth." Nelson Mandela came out of that jail a free man, but he also wanted his jailer to be free, and he invited the jailer to his inauguration when he became president of the nation under a new constitution a few years after he was released from jail.

He himself spoke about how he intended to bring about reconciliation, overcome the hatred and the evils that had been perpetrated against his people for so long, not through a violent revolution but through reconciliation, forgiveness and love. That's the message of Jesus. When we see a person like Nelson Mandela live it and bring about extraordinary change through this forgiveness and love even of an enemy, isn't it important for us to see that example?

To see how clearly it speaks about what Jesus came to preach -- the message of love, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, new life and fullness of life for every people and justice -- all of that Jesus came to preach and to bring it about again not through violence, not through power, not through armies, not through war, but through love.

"This is my one commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you." That love of Jesus for us is an unlimited love, an unconditional love. Jesus loved us not when we merited that love, but Jesus loved us when we were sinners and brought to us the peace, the goodness and the love of God. We must prepare ourselves to recommit as we celebrate this coming of Jesus that happened 2,000 years ago and look forward to the coming that will happen at the end of time.

In between times, [we] commit ourselves to keep trying to make the reign of God happen by following the

way of Jesus and taking advantage of the great example like that of Nelson Mandela. In fact, in our country right now, President Obama really seems to be trying to bring about a spirit of reconciliation. We should support that, enter into negotiations and diplomacy with Iran, make this country that we have been enemies with for so long, a friend.

In fact, when he was in South Africa, he stopped deliberately to shake the hand of Raul Castro, the president of another country where we have been enemies for over 50 years. We imposed a very hurtful embargo against the tiny nation of Cuba. It seems like President Obama was extending a hand of friendship. Some people have already protested that.

Seems to me if we are listening to today's Scriptures, we would strongly support reaching out, doing as what President Obama says about Nelson Mandela: "He showed us that you must trust others so they may trust you; teach that reconciliation is not a matter of ignoring a cruel past, but a means of confronting it with inclusion and generosity, forgiveness and truth."

In our second lesson today, St. James says, "Be patient, beloved, until the coming of Jesus. Do not lose heart because the Lord's coming is near." The more we want to bring that about, together with Jesus, the nearer it becomes. The more we rejoice, the more we give thanks to God that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who is to come, and that he has begun the reign of God and calls us to be with him in bringing it to completion.

[Homily given at St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Los Gatos, Calif. 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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