

HOMILY FOR NEW YEAR'S DAY

Sunday, 1 January 2023

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 18

Reading I Nm 6:22-27

The LORD said to Moses:

"Speak to Aaron and his sons and tell them:

This is how you shall bless the Israelites.

Say to them:

The LORD bless you and keep you!

The LORD let his face shine upon
you and be gracious to you!

The LORD look upon you kindly and
give you peace!

So shall they invoke my name upon the Israelites,
and I will bless them."

Responsorial Psalm Ps 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8

R. (2a) May God bless us in his mercy.

May God have pity on us and bless us;
may he let his face shine upon us.

So may your way be known upon earth;
among all nations, your salvation.

R. May God bless us in his mercy.

May the nations be glad and exult
because you rule the peoples in equity;
the nations on the earth you guide.

R. May God bless us in his mercy.

May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you!

May God bless us,

and may all the ends of the earth fear him!

R. May God bless us in his mercy.

Reading II Gal 4:4-7

Brothers and sisters:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son,
born of a woman, born under the law,
to ransom those under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as sons.

As proof that you are sons,
God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,
crying out, "Abba, Father!"

So you are no longer a slave but a son,
and if a son then also an heir, through God.

Alleluia Heb 1:1-2

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets;
in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 2:16-21

The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph,
and the infant lying in the manger.

When they saw this,
they made known the message
that had been told them about this child.

All who heard it were amazed
by what had been told them by the shepherds.

And Mary kept all these things,
reflecting on them in her heart.

Then the shepherds returned,
glorifying and praising God
for all they had heard and seen,
just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision,
he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel
before he was conceived in the womb.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Happy NEW Year to all!

I am emphasizing the "new" in my greeting this year. I do not want you to have just another year. I am praying that you have a NEW year. By this, I don't mean to suggest that

2022 was an especially bad year. But I think it safe to say that the world has a passel of problems.

On this New Year's Day, let us resolve to have a NEW year, not just another year.

A friend of mine, the other day, asked what for a moment seemed like an innocent question. He said to me,

Father Jim, are you optimistic about the future?

This question might seem innocent enough until I tell you that my friend is in his mid-twenties, well educated, healthy and smart and possessed of all the talents and gifts one would need for success in life. And yet, as I thought a moment about how to answer his question, I realized that my young friend was hinting that he is not optimistic about the future. In fact, I think that he may be afflicted with a touch of despair.

Before I tell you what I said to my friend in reply, I need to share with you a conviction I have about despair. This teaching is a little controversial, and since I'm your priest, I think you are owed an explanation. It's just this:

I prefer despair to optimism... at least sometimes.

Optimism can be a way of pretending not to be in despair. Despair, on the other hand, can have an incomparable value. Despair quite often turns out to be the path that leads to a genuine hope in what God is bringing about in the world.

Hope, to be clear, is not to be confused with mere optimism. And despair, to be clear, is not to be confused with mere pessimism. Christian faith allows us to be neither optimistic nor pessimistic. The Church, however, recognizes a deep meaning in despair: God has made a habit of finding us in our despair. And when He finds us there, He invites us with his grace to embrace hope.

So, what did I say in reply to my young friend's question? I quoted him a passage from Saint Augustine:

God created human beings so that there might be a beginning. For before us, there was no creature that could do this.

*Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo,
ante quem nullus fuit*

Hanna Arendt, a philosopher who, like me, loves Augustine, quoted this passage. It comes from Augustine's *City of God*.

In creating the world, God must have realized that he needed a creature who, should there ever be the disaster of the Fall and even if creation itself should then become subject to futility (as Saint Paul says), there would be a creature capable of beginning the adventure of intimacy with God again.

And this is why God created us. Among all the other creatures in His wondrous world, He created human beings so that there might be the possibility of beginning again - a New Beginning. For, until He got around to creating us on the sixth day, there was no creature capable of beginning again.

Happy New Year to you all.

I want you to have a truly NEW year in 2023. But I want much more than this. I want us at Saint Leo's to be a sign to my young friend, who is suffering from a touch of despair even as he starts out to find his way in this world. The Church teaches that we are not allowed to be either optimistic or pessimistic. God doesn't look for us in places like these.

God finds us in our despair. And then, through the grace of God, there is a New Beginning.

Happy NEW Year to you all.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is

an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as “a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys”). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don’t rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?