

HOMILY FOR THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Sunday, 10 January 2021

- 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: 21

Reading I Is 42:1-4, 6-7

Thus says the LORD:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one with whom I am pleased,
upon whom I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth justice to the nations,
not crying out, not shouting,
not making his voice heard in the street.
a bruised reed he shall not break,
and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,
until he establishes justice on the earth;
the coastlands will wait for his teaching.

I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice,
I have grasped you by the hand;
I formed you, and set you
as a covenant of the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes of the blind,
to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

OR:

Is 55:1-11

Thus says the LORD:

All you who are thirsty,
come to the water!
You who have no money,
come, receive grain and eat;
come, without paying and without cost,
drink wine and milk!

Why spend your money for what is not bread,
your wages for what fails to satisfy?
Heed me, and you shall eat well,
you shall delight in rich fare.
Come to me heedfully,
listen, that you may have life.
I will renew with you the everlasting covenant,
the benefits assured to David.
As I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander of nations,
so shall you summon a nation you knew not,
and nations that knew you not shall run to you,
because of the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, who has glorified you.

Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call him while he is near.
Let the scoundrel forsake his way,
and the wicked man his thoughts;
let him turn to the LORD for mercy;
to our God, who is generous in forgiving.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
As high as the heavens are above the earth
so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts.

For just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down
and do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,
giving seed to the one who sows
and bread to the one who eats,
so shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
my word shall not return to me void,
but shall do my will,
achieving the end for which I sent it.

Responsorial Psalm [Ps 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10](#)

R. (11b) The Lord will bless his people with peace.
Give to the LORD, you sons of God,
give to the LORD glory and praise,

Give to the LORD the glory due his name;
 adore the LORD in holy attire.
R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.
The voice of the LORD is over the waters,
 the LORD, over vast waters.
The voice of the LORD is mighty;
 the voice of the LORD is majestic.
R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.
The God of glory thunders,
 and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
The LORD is enthroned above the flood;
 the LORD is enthroned as king forever.
R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.

OR:

Is 12:2-3, 4bcd, 5-6

R. (3) You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.
God indeed is my savior;
 I am confident and unafraid.
My strength and my courage is the LORD,
 and he has been my savior.
With joy you will draw water
 at the fountain of salvation.
R. You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.
Give thanks to the LORD, acclaim his name;
 among the nations make known his deeds,
 proclaim how exalted is his name.
R. You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.
Sing praise to the LORD for his glorious achievement;
 let this be known throughout all the earth.
Shout with exultation, O city of Zion,
 for great in your midst
 is the Holy One of Israel!
R. You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.

Reading II Acts 10:34-38

Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered
in the house of Cornelius, saying:
"In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.
Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly
is acceptable to him.
You know the word that he sent to the Israelites

as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all,
what has happened all over Judea,
beginning in Galilee after the baptism
that John preached,
how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth
with the Holy Spirit and power.
He went about doing good
and healing all those oppressed by the devil,
for God was with him."

OR:

1 Jn 5:1-9

Beloved:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God,
and everyone who loves the Father
loves also the one begotten by him.

In this way we know that we love the children of God
when we love God and obey his commandments.

For the love of God is this,
that we keep his commandments.

And his commandments are not burdensome,
for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world.
And the victory that conquers the world is our faith.
Who indeed is the victor over the world
but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ,
not by water alone, but by water and blood.

The Spirit is the one who testifies,
and the Spirit is truth.

So there are three that testify,
the Spirit, the water, and the blood,
and the three are of one accord.

If we accept human testimony,
the testimony of God is surely greater.

Now the testimony of God is this,
that he has testified on behalf of his Son.

Alleluia Cf. Jn 1:29

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

John saw Jesus approaching him, and said:

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel [Mk 1:7-11](#)

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed:
“One mightier than I is coming after me.
I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.
I have baptized you with water;
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee
and was baptized in the Jordan by John.
On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open
and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him.
And a voice came from the heavens,
“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

PART TWO: A HOMILY

Last Wednesday, the 6th of January, we were all witnesses to an act of political violence which cannot go unremarked. At the instigation of Mr. Trump, a mob stormed the Capital Building in Washington and disrupted the formal ratification of the presidential election by the House of Representatives and the Senate of the United States.

This abdication of civic responsibility needs to be understood from the perspective of our faith. In fact, as I have said before, our faith provides the most profound insights into the decay of our political life over the last several decades.

Happily, today is the feast of the Baptism of the Lord when the Church calls us to reflect on the meaning of the sacrament of baptism. I have been baptizing people, mostly infants, for forty-five years. Some of you may be surprised to know that I consider every one of these baptisms a political act. Given the disgraceful behavior we witnessed last Wednesday, I want to reflect with you on the political meaning of the baptism we all share.

Last year, I (re)read *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, by Hanna Arendt. (Arendt is the woman who coined the phrase “the banality of evil” in regard to the Holocaust). Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, has many causes. Among the most important causes, she argues, is human isolation.

For totalitarianism to thrive, human beings must first become lonely. Human community must be degraded. We must become strangers to one another. We must come to believe, as Thomas Hobbes taught, that human beings are fundamentally lone wolves preying on one another.

There are many forces at work in America today that are driving us apart and filling our heads with the lie that we are, at heart, just wolves preying on one another. COVID-19 is only the most visible force that separates us today. But the failure of our economic policies to provide for the

common good over many decades is a more serious threat to our community. The rise of “tribalism” and “populism,” fueled by the internet and social media, is another. Americans also have an unwholesome attachment to the illusion of “rugged individualism” and the libertarian falsehoods of *laissez faire* economics, both of which are incompatible with Christian faith.

With the exception of COVID-19, all these factors have been at work isolating us from one another for some time in the United States. Therefore, no one should be shocked by what happened last Wednesday in Washington.

I said that baptizing a child is a political act. I need to explain what I mean.

Every baptism is a recognition and a commitment on the part of the Church. In baptizing a child, we are recognizing that God has entrusted to us a human being who has been created in God’s own image and likeness. As a result, we must recognize that the child has a human dignity that can never be violated. In baptizing a child, we are making a public recognition that human beings are not wolves preying on one another. God has given us to one another and requires us to build our society into a community where the child can thrive.

But if the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism is a recognition about the child, it also entails a public commitment to the child.

When I baptize a child, I ask the parents and Godparents to renounce Satan and to recite the Creed in the name of the child. Then, the Church demands that they make a commitment. I ask,

Will you pass on to this child the mystery of our faith and the ethical demands that come from our faith?

All this is in keeping with the rite. But then, I go a step further. I ask the parents and Godparents,

Are you prepared to take responsibility for this child?
Will you care for this child and educate this child?

Then I turn to everybody else. If I am baptizing a child during mass, I turn to the whole congregation in church, and say,

And as for the rest of you – Do you take responsibility for this child as well?
Do you promise never to abandon this child?
When this child is sick or unemployed, or makes a bad choice, will you stand with the child?

I ask these questions for a very simple reason: if the Church is not willing to take on this responsibility, *we have no business baptizing anybody at all.*

Baptism, therefore, comes with demanding political consequences. Every baptism entails a commitment to resist the forces that isolate us from one another. Every baptism requires us to commit ourselves to building a society that is, in fact, a community appropriate to the God-given dignity of the child being baptized. Baptism is an act of human solidarity in a world hell-bent on isolating us from one another.

Mother Teresa of Kolkata once said,

Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other... if everyone could see the image of God in his neighbor, do you think we would still need tanks and generals?

In truth, I sometimes think that we are a long way from the Kingdom of God, were there will be no isolation, no wolves preying on the weak, no tanks and no generals. In truth, it sometimes seems that we are a long way from the time when our fear and loathing will finally be overcome by God's healing love – despite the fact that Jesus taught that "the Kingdom of God is near."

In the meantime, Christ calls us to be political, never forgetting Mother Teresa's teaching that "we belong to one another." We have been given the grace to change the world for the better. Therefore, we have the responsibility to work for the common good and to build bridges of solidarity with those who are isolated from us.

I say all this with confidence, even in light of what happened in the US Capital Building last Wednesday. After all, have we not all been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ? This baptism into Christ is a political act.

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?