

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Sunday, 10 March 2024

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: 32

Reading I 2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23

In those days, all the princes of Judah,
the priests, and the people
added infidelity to infidelity,
practicing all the abominations of the nations
and polluting the LORD's temple
which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers,
send his messengers to them,
for he had compassion on his people
and his dwelling place.

But they mocked the messengers of God,
despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets,
until the anger of the LORD against his people
was so inflamed
that there was no remedy.

Their enemies burnt the house of God,
tore down the walls of Jerusalem,
set all its palaces afire,
and destroyed all its precious objects.

Those who escaped the sword
were carried captive to Babylon,
where they became servants of
the king of the Chaldeans and his sons
until the kingdom of the Persians came to power.

All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD

spoken by Jeremiah:

“Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths,
during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest
while seventy years are fulfilled.”

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia,
in order to fulfill the word of the LORD
spoken by Jeremiah,
the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia
to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom,
both by word of mouth and in writing:

“Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia:

All the kingdoms of the earth
the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me,
and he has also charged me to build him a house
in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
Whoever, therefore, among you
belongs to any part of his people,
let him go up, and may his God be with him!”

Responsorial Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

R. (6ab) Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

By the streams of Babylon
we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

On the aspens of that land
we hung up our harps.

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

For there our captors asked of us
the lyrics of our songs,
And our despoilers urged us to be joyous:
“Sing for us the songs of Zion!”

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

How could we sing a song of the LORD
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand be forgotten!

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!
May my tongue cleave to my palate
 if I remember you not,
If I place not Jerusalem
 ahead of my joy.
R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

Reading II Eph 2:4-10

Brothers and sisters:

God, who is rich in mercy,
because of the great love he had for us,
even when we were dead in our transgressions,
brought us to life with Christ —
by grace you have been saved —,
raised us up with him,
and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,
that in the ages to come
He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace
in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.
For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not from you; it is the gift of God;
it is not from works, so no one may boast.
For we are his handiwork,
created in Christ Jesus for the good works
that God has prepared in advance,
that we should live in them.

Verse Before the Gospel Jn 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.

Gospel Jn 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
so that everyone who believes in him
may have eternal life.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might not perish

but might have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world
to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.
Whoever believes in him will not be condemned,
but whoever does not believe
has already been condemned,
because he has not believed in the name
of the only Son of God.

And this is the verdict,
that the light came into the world,
but people preferred darkness to light,
because their works were evil.
For everyone who does wicked things hates the light
and does not come toward the light,
so that his works might not be exposed.
But whoever lives the truth comes to the light,
so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Perhaps not all of you are aware that the first reading for today's mass figures prominently in the presidential election this November. Many Evangelical Protestants see in this reading a way for them to support Donald Trump.

As Catholics, we need to understand what these Christians are saying about this passage from the Old Testament and why it helps them to support Mr. Trump.

In addition, I'm hearing a great deal of talk these days about "Christian nationalism." To be sure, we need to understand the danger of Christian nationalism. But we also need to understand that Christian faith has important things to say about American politics and the common good. Our faith, rooted as it is in the Bible, makes significant demands on a pluralistic democracy like the United States.

First, let's look at the reading.

It is taken from the Book of Chronicles and tells about the corruption and religious decay of the Jewish people in the days leading up to the Babylonian Exile.

The Babylonians conquered the Kingdom of Israel, razed the Temple in Jerusalem and herded the leaders of the people into exile.

The author of Chronicles sees these political events as an act of God:

All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD
spoken by Jeremiah:

“Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths,
during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest
while seventy years are fulfilled.”

Then, Cyrus the Great arises in Persia and trounces the Babylonians. He allows the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

The author sees this as the work of God as well.

In order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by
Jeremiah, the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia
to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom...

“Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia:
All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD,
the God of heaven, has given to me,
and he has also charged me to build him a house
in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part
of his people, let him go up, and may his God be
with him!”

What does all this have to do with electing a president this November? Many Evangelical Christians see Donald Trump as a new Cyrus.

Cyrus, of course, was a gentile and an idol-worshiper. He was also ruthless and immoral. But for the author of Chronicles, Cyrus was chosen by God to fulfill God's plan to restore the Jewish people to their kingdom and rebuild the Temple.

Cyrus was God's unwitting servant.

Mr. Trump, these Evangelicals say, is like Cyrus – an immoral man in some ways, but God's instrument all the same. Only, in Mr. Trump's case, God is using a politician to restore Christian values in a godless America.

I cannot object that some Christians are using this reading to embrace Mr. Trump as a political leader.

In days past, some Christians spoke passionately about Martin Luther King as a prophet in the Biblical sense. He had been raised up by God to bring America back to its senses. I certainly believe MLK's preaching about racial justice and non-violence has deep roots in the Bible.

If other Christians want to hold up Mr. Trump as a kind of latter-day Cyrus, a servant of God, I will not say it is an abuse of the Bible.

However, I do object to Christian nationalism, and I think you should as well.

I define Christian Nationalism, narrowly, as the belief that we should unite Church and state the way the tribes of Israel did in Biblical days and the way the Puritans did in colonial New England.

Today, an alarming number of Christians are promoting what can only be called a theocracy. Sometimes they call it "Dominion Theology." Christian nationalists claim that they want to bring the United States under the dominion of Biblical faith.

I reject this as a citizen but also as a Christian. Christian nationalists are not trying to make America more Christian. They are trying to make Christianity more American. The Gospel, however, does not fit comfortably into the mold of American politics.

However, I am not at all convinced that Christian nationalism is the only problem we face as we get ready to elect a president this November.

We also must resist the claim that political arguments coming from religious believers, especially from Catholics and Evangelicals, must be rejected as inadmissible within a secular democracy. Christian faith does not make one automatically a foot soldier in a theocratic insurgency.

In fact, the Catholic Church and the Main Line Protestant Churches have a sophisticated social ethics that has much to say to America today.

In today's Gospel, John assures us,

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might not
perish but might have eternal life.

We would be foolish to expect that all Americans will accept this teaching. And yet, these words have profound implications for how we live our lives with one another today. Christians who try to put this teaching to work in American political life are not to be dismissed as fanatics.

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?