

HOMILY FOR THE EIGHTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 13 March 2022

- 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: 27

Reading I Gn 15:5-12, 17-18

The Lord God took Abram outside and said,
"Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can.
Just so," he added, "shall your descendants be."
Abram put his faith in the LORD,
who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.

He then said to him,
"I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans
to give you this land as a possession."
"O Lord GOD," he asked,
"how am I to know that I shall possess it?"
He answered him,
"Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat,
a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."
Abram brought him all these, split them in two,
and placed each half opposite the other;
but the birds he did not cut up.
Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses,
but Abram stayed with them.
As the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abram,
and a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him.

When the sun had set and it was dark,
there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch,
which passed between those pieces.
It was on that occasion that the LORD made
a covenant with Abram,
saying: "To your descendants I give this land,
from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates."

Responsorial Psalm Ps 27:1, 7-8, 8-9, 13-14.

R. (1a) The Lord is my light and my salvation.

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom should I fear?

The LORD is my life's refuge;
of whom should I be afraid?

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Hear, O LORD, the sound of my call;
have pity on me, and answer me.

Of you my heart speaks; you my glance seeks.

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Your presence, O LORD, I seek.

Hide not your face from me;
do not in anger repel your servant.

You are my helper: cast me not off.

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

I believe that I shall see the bounty of the LORD
in the land of the living.

Wait for the LORD with courage;

be stouthearted, and wait for the LORD.

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Reading II Phil 3:17-4:1

Join with others in being imitators of me, brothers and sisters,
and observe those who thus conduct themselves
according to the model you have in us.

For many, as I have often told you
and now tell you even in tears,

conduct themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their end is destruction.

Their God is their stomach;
their glory is in their "shame."

Their minds are occupied with earthly things.

But our citizenship is in heaven,

and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He will change our lowly body

to conform with his glorified body

by the power that enables him also

to bring all things into subjection to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters,
whom I love and long for, my joy and crown,
in this way stand firm in the Lord.

Verse Before the Gospel Cf. Mt 17:5

From the shining cloud the Father's voice is heard:
This is my beloved Son, hear him.

Gospel Lk 9:28b-36

Jesus took Peter, John, and James
and went up the mountain to pray.
While he was praying his face changed in appearance
and his clothing became dazzling white.
And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah,
who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus
that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.
Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep,
but becoming fully awake,
they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.
As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus,
"Master, it is good that we are here;
let us make three tents,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
But he did not know what he was saying.
While he was still speaking,
a cloud came and cast a shadow over them,
and they became frightened when they entered the cloud.
Then from the cloud came a voice that said,
"This is my chosen Son; listen to him."
After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.
They fell silent and did not at that time
tell anyone what they had seen.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Luke tells a marvelous story in his account of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes three of his disciples to the top of a mountain to pray, and while Jesus prays, he is transfigured before their eyes.

It's quite a scene. Jesus's clothes become "dazzling white." The disciples see Moses and Elijah conversing with him. Moses represents the Law and, thus, the roots of Jewish tradition. Elijah is the prophet who is to come

at the end of time. He represents the hope of the Jewish people that God will be faithful to his promises. And then, Luke reports that,

a cloud came and cast a shadow over them,

This cloud is the *'araphel*, the "thick darkness" of God. It descended on the Temple in Jerusalem when God took his throne before a speechless Solomon. It is the darkness which descended on Mount Sinai when God gave Moses the Law. *'Araphel* is also the "deep, terrifying darkness" that enveloped Abraham when God ratified the Covenant (see the first reading for today). *'Araphel* is the darkness of God that descends upon all of us when we go through the crises of faith that envelop all of us at one time or another.

Luke gives us so much to imagine in his account of the Transfiguration that I sometimes fail to notice his first comment: while Jesus was praying,

his face changed in appearance.

What could be the meaning of this little detail?

Christians have always had a fascination with the face of Jesus. In Italy, starting in the early Middle Ages at least, devotion to the face of Jesus has been called the *Volto Santo*.

It's Lent and we are meditating on the Stations of the Cross at Saint Leo's. The Sixth Station is the *Volto Santo*: as Jesus carries his cross, a woman named Veronica steps out of the crowd, removes the veil covering her hair and wipes the blood and sweat from the face of the Savior.

None of this is in the Bible, but I like this story about Veronica and the compassion she showed to Jesus as he carried his cross. The tradition is that the Holy Face (the *Volto Santo*) was imprinted on Veronica's veil. The name "Veronica," by the way, means "true image" (*vera icon*).

Let me tell you another story about the *Volto Santo* - the Holy Face of Jesus.

Some time ago, after mass, a woman asked me to anoint her. I went into the sacristy to fetch the *Oleum Infirmorum* (the oil of the sick). Somewhat as an afterthought, I also grabbed a purificator so I could wipe the oil off my fingers after I anointed her. (The purificator is the cloth we use to clean the chalice after we receive communion at mass).

As is customary, I asked the woman if she wanted to confess before I anointed her. She told me a few sins. Then, I asked her about her sickness. She has cancer.

But cancer is hardly all that afflicts her. She told me of her father's alcoholism and how he abandoned the family while she was still a girl. She had to leave school after the second grade to go to work sweeping floors to support the family. (At this, I thought of my own grandmother who left school after the third grade for the same reason). She had other difficulties as well that I don't want to mention. Suffice it to say that life can just get overwhelming for creatures as fragile as we are.

The woman began to weep unconsolably. Not knowing what else to do, I gave her the purificator, which I held in my hand, so she could dry her tears.

She wept into the purificator for about an hour before I absolved her of her sins and then, at long last, anointed her and blessed her.

Now somewhat composed, she held up the purificator and said,

"I am so sorry, Padre, I have soiled your cloth."

It was soiled with more than just her tears. She had poured years of suffering into that purificator. I told her not to worry, the women who work in the sacristy would take care of it.

With some embarrassment, she placed the purificator in my oily hands and went her way, unburdened, I hope, by her confession and comforted by the Church's anointing.

Back in the sacristy, I went to place the purificator in the hamper for dirty linens. Then, suddenly, a number of thoughts came to me.

Holding the soiled purificator, I thought of the Sixth Station of the Cross. I thought of Veronica's veil and the *Volto Santo*. As I looked at the purificator in the sacristy, I realized that I was holding a relic - something miraculous and precious. This woman, who has suffered far more than her fair share, had left something of her soul on this simple piece of cloth. The purificator bore the image of all that she has suffered and her tears had etched the Holy Face of Christ on the cloth.

I thought of all this as I held the purificator in the sacristy. So, I carefully folded the purificator, put it in my pocket and brought it home, not knowing exactly what I was going to do with it.

In the end, I decided to wash the purificator carefully. (I even used a little bleach). I washed out all that soiled the purificator, but I am confident that even the bleach did not wash away the *Volto Santo* from it.

Then, I ironed the purificator and brought it back to the sacristy, placing it reverently in the drawer with all the other purificators.

This is where it belongs.

We are slowly being transfigured by what we suffer. The woman's confession and her anointing bear witness to this truth. Through all the tears that we weep, our faces are "changing in appearance," as Luke tells us of Jesus at his Transfiguration. In fact, our faces are being transfigured into the *Volto Santo* - the Holy Face of Christ himself. Don't lose track of this teaching as we make our way through the deserts of Lent.

And also, please know, that when you see Father Jojo or me using a purificator to clean the chalice after communion at mass, we may be cleaning the chalice with a relic - our own Veronica's Veil - which bears the Holy Face of the Savior.

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?