

HOMILY FOR THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
Sunday, 14 August 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: 120

Reading 1 Jer 38:4-6, 8-10

In those days, the princes said to the king:
"Jeremiah ought to be put to death;
he is demoralizing the soldiers who are left in this city,
and all the people, by speaking such things to them;
he is not interested in the welfare of our people,
but in their ruin."

King Zedekiah answered: "He is in your power";
for the king could do nothing with them.

And so they took Jeremiah
and threw him into the cistern of Prince Malchiah,
which was in the quarters of the guard,
letting him down with ropes.

There was no water in the cistern, only mud,
and Jeremiah sank into the mud.

Ebed-melech, a court official,
went there from the palace and said to him:
"My lord king,
these men have been at fault
in all they have done to the prophet Jeremiah,
casting him into the cistern.
He will die of famine on the spot,
for there is no more food in the city."

Then the king ordered Ebed-melech the Cushite
to take three men along with him,
and draw the prophet Jeremiah out of the cistern before
he should die.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 40:2, 3, 4, 18

R. (14b) Lord, come to my aid!
I have waited, waited for the LORD,

and he stooped toward me.
R. Lord, come to my aid!
The LORD heard my cry.
He drew me out of the pit of destruction,
out of the mud of the swamp;
he set my feet upon a crag;
he made firm my steps.
R. Lord, come to my aid!
And he put a new song into my mouth,
a hymn to our God.
Many shall look on in awe
and trust in the LORD.
R. Lord, come to my aid!
Though I am afflicted and poor,
yet the LORD thinks of me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
O my God, hold not back!
R. Lord, come to my aid!

Reading 2 Heb 12:1-4

Brothers and sisters:
Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us
and persevere in running the race that lies before us
while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus,
the leader and perfecter of faith.
For the sake of the joy that lay before him
he endured the cross, despising its shame,
and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God.
Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners,
in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart.
In your struggle against sin
you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

Alleluia Jn 10:27

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord;
I know them, and they follow me.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 12:49-53

Jesus said to his disciples:
"I have come to set the earth on fire,
and how I wish it were already blazing!"

There is a baptism with which I must be baptized,
and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!
Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division.
From now on a household of five will be divided,
three against two and two against three;
a father will be divided against his son
and a son against his father,
a mother against her daughter
and a daughter against her mother,
a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

John C Hirsch, a professor of Medieval literature at Georgetown University, wrote a letter to the New York Times a few years ago. The *Times* had published a number of reports on opposition to Pope Francis from Catholics who think of themselves as "traditional."

In truth, the Pope takes a lot of heat from these self-styled "traditionalists" as well as from people who place their faith in "free markets" and demagogues.

In his letter, Hirsch made a valuable and remarkably insightful observation about the Pope:

He is, when all is said and done, an agent not only of reform but also of a kind of Christian stability that insists on pastoral change, and that is what will ever distress his adversaries.

"Pastoral change" is the authentic form of "Christian stability." This is hard for some Catholics (actually not many) to accept. Some of us harbor a nostalgia for an idealized past. This is cowardice. Faith calls for courage. The authentic "stability" of our faith requires us to recognize that the Holy Spirit is calling us to set out into the future which God has promised his people.

Last Sunday, I preached about Abraham, the Father of Faith. The Lord spoke to Abraham, commanding him to turn away from his past and step out into the future. Abraham set out into the desert, trusting in God's promise to lead him, someday, "to a land that I

will show you." Like Abraham, we are commanded to step out into the future that God has promised us.

I think this is what John Hirsch means when he says that Pope Francis is an agent of "a kind of Christian stability that insists on pastoral change." Unfortunately, John Hirsch is also correct when he says, "this is what will ever distress his adversaries."

John Hirsch's insight in Pope Francis helps us to appreciate the upcoming "Synod on Synodality."

I have mentioned, many times in the past, that the Pope has called for a synod of bishops for October of 2023. This is nothing new. The Second Vatican Council stipulated that bishops representing the local churches around the world should meet regularly in Rome to assist him in his responsibility to bring the whole church together and to encourage us to "step out into the desert" in fidelity to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The issue to be discussed in next year's meeting will be "synodality" itself.

Synodality is a fundamental part of the Church's character, although we have not always been good at it. We are a people who are "on the path together." The Greek word for this is *syn-hodos*. This is where we get the word "synod."

Before Pope Francis became the Bishop of Rome in 2013, synods were often boring. Officials in Rome made sure that the bishops attending the synods knew what they were allowed to say. More than once these synods were compared with meetings of the Communist Party in China: lots of enthusiastic agreement and no surprises.

Jorge Bergolio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, used to dread going to synods in Rome for this reason. They were often a waste of time - quite unlike the regional meetings the local churches in Latin America had been holding since even before the Second Vatican Council.

Jorge Bergolio became Pope Francis in 2013. When he invited the bishops to come for his first synod, he told them to speak with *parrhesia*. This term comes from the Bible. It means "bold speech," or "speaking frankly." When Saint Paul gave Saint Peter a piece of his mind at the Council of Jerusalem (c 50 AD), he was speaking with *parrhesia*.

At the up-coming synod, Francis does not want to hear what the bishops think Rome wants them to say. He wants them to speak with *parrhesia* as pastors of their local churches, reflecting on the problems of the local churches and, for that matter, the problems of the world. *Parrhesia* means that we tell the truth to one another. But speaking with *parrhesia*, Francis reminds us, means that the truth we speak must be spoken with humility. We are a people "on the path together."

When I think about how Pope Francis has been criticized and, in fact, slandered, by those who are afraid to "set out into the desert" with the faith of Abraham, I am drawn to the first reading for today's mass.

The reading is taken from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. The Lord God raised up Jeremiah to speak a troubling truth to the power-elite of the Kingdom of Israel. God's word was not a bit popular with these elites. The princes go to the king and say,

"Jeremiah ought to be put to death;
he is demoralizing the soldiers who are left in this city,
and all the people, by speaking such things to them;
he is not interested in the welfare of our people,
but in their ruin."

And the king has no backbone:

King Zedekiah answered: "He is in your power"

Jeremiah ends up in a cistern, left for dead. He spoke God's word with *parrhesia* and ended up sunk in the mud of a cistern. His name has become synonymous with lamentation.

Pope Francis has had to contend with a few plotting princes as well. And like the Prophet Jeremiah, I presume that he gives way to lamentation, at least occasionally.

But more importantly, I admire Pope Francis for his ability to look out into the desert, like Abraham, and focus on God's promise. He has a remarkable ability to envision where the Church must be a hundred years from now and then discern what we must do today, as we take another step out into the future once again.

We must stay focused on the Kingdom of God, for this is what the Lord has promised us. Then we must discern what we must do today in order to be faithful to that promise.

This is what it means to be a synodal Church, "on the way together." This is also the true basis for what John Hirsh wisely recognizes as the "Christian stability that insists on pastoral change."

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:

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

