

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Sunday, 15 August 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: 622

Reading I Rv 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab

God's temple in heaven was opened,
and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple.
A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun,
with the moon under her feet,
and on her head a crown of twelve stars.
She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth.
Then another sign appeared in the sky;
it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns,
and on its heads were seven diadems.
Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky
and hurled them down to the earth.
Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth,
to devour her child when she gave birth.
She gave birth to a son, a male child,
destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod.
Her child was caught up to God and his throne.
The woman herself fled into the desert
where she had a place prepared by God.
Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:
"Now have salvation and power come,
and the Kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Anointed One."

Responsorial Psalm 45:10, 11, 12, 16

R. (10bc) The queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold.

The queen takes her place at your right hand in gold of Ophir.

R. The queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold.

Hear, O daughter, and see; turn your ear,

forget your people and your father's house.

R. The queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold.

So shall the king desire your beauty;
for he is your lord.

R. The queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold.
They are borne in with gladness and joy;
they enter the palace of the king.

R. The queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold.

Reading II 1 Cor 15:20-27

Brothers and sisters:

Christ has been raised from the dead,
the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.
For since death came through man,
the resurrection of the dead came also through man.

For just as in Adam all die,
so too in Christ shall all be brought to life,
but each one in proper order:

Christ the firstfruits;

then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ;
then comes the end,

when he hands over the Kingdom to his God and Father,
when he has destroyed every sovereignty
and every authority and power.

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.
The last enemy to be destroyed is death,
for "he subjected everything under his feet."

Alleluia

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Mary is taken up to heaven;
a chorus of angels exults.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 1:39-56

Mary set out
and traveled to the hill country in haste
to a town of Judah,
where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the infant leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,
cried out in a loud voice and said,
"Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears,
the infant in my womb leaped for joy.
Blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the Lord
would be fulfilled.”

And Mary said:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
and has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever.”

Mary remained with her about three months
and then returned to her home.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Many years ago, I spoke with an elderly woman from Guatemala, She was in a hospital bed, and she was dying. She spoke to me softly and said,

“It is so hard to live, Father, why must it be so hard to die?”

She had led a difficult life as a young woman in a country with far more than its fair share of injustices and now, in the hospital, she was struggling as well.

At the time, I don't think I gave a very good answer to her question. Today, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I would like to make another attempt at responding to this holy woman.

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is one of the great teachings of the Church. At the end of her life, the Blessed Virgin Mary did not taste the bitterness of death. Instead, she was “assumed” into heaven.

It’s a great image: instead of dying, she was “assumed.”

Christians have been telling this story about the Blessed Virgin since about the third century. The Eastern Orthodox speak of Mary’s “dormition,” but it means the same thing: Mary never tasted of the bitterness of death.

Ancient as it is, this teaching about Mary is not in the Bible. Instead, the Bible offers a peculiar teaching about the origin of death. God, in creating the first human beings, did not intend for his creatures to die.

The Book of Wisdom, for example, there is the following passage:

“God did not make death and he does not delight in the death of the living.”

Death and the dread of death must have entered the world after human beings were created. Death came after the fall of Adam and Eve.

In his Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul is talking about Adam when he writes,

... through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned.

There was no death in the Garden of Eden before our rebellion. Death began to haunt us only after our fall from innocence.

I don’t recommend that we take this biblical story about the origin of death literally. Instead, we must take it seriously. The story of Adam and Eve and the catastrophe that befell us all in their sin is a sacred narrative that reveals much about our human condition. Taking this part of the Bible literally will lead you astray.

Saint Paul also teaches that, if the power of death came over us all through the fall of the “First Adam,” then the specter of death has been overcome by the resurrection of the “Second Adam.” The Second Adam is Jesus Christ.

For example, in the second reading, Paul assures us,

Brothers and sisters:
Christ has been raised from the dead,
the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

For since death came through man,
the resurrection of the dead came also through man,

Death came through the fall of the First Adam. Redemption comes through the Resurrection of the Second Adam.

This victory over the power of death needs to be understood as a drama that is unfolding within the history of the world and, of course, in the history of our own lives as spiritual beings.

For just as in Adam all die,
so too in Christ shall all be brought to life,
but each one in proper order:
Christ the firstfruits;
then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ;
then comes the end,
when he hands over the Kingdom to his God and Father,

In Paul's vision of our redemption, Christ will come in the fulness of time and will

"put all his enemies under his feet."

And, Paul adds, pointedly,

"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

This teaching about the origin of death and the eventual banishment of death's power over us is the biblical framework within which we should imagine Mary's Assumption.

Mary, in the life of the Church, is certainly an historical figure. She was a peasant girl from the little town of Nazareth. But in the long history of the Church, Mary is not only an historical memory. She is also a "sign." She is an "emblem" of our original humanity, before our fall away from original innocence and our sojourn "East of Eden." She is the image of the "New Eve."

The First Eve, in the Book of Genesis, was never intended to taste of the bitterness of death. But through sin, Eve was plunged into this bitterness. And Mary, the Second Eve, is the emblem of the original innocence of the First Eve. Mary did not taste of the bitterness of death. She was assumed into heaven.

There is a great irony in this teaching that speaks directly to our lives as people of faith. Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, came into this world for one reason only: *to taste of the bitterness of death*. Christ died the death which God never intended for his creatures. Yet Mary, the Second Eve, *was not required to taste this bitterness*.

The irony is just this: Mary is the emblem of our original humanity that does not know of death. Christ is the great sacrament of our restored humanity who has embraced our death.

On this great feast, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I must be clear. We have no share in Mary's Assumption. Our share will be in Christ's Resurrection.

In the Fifth Glorious Mystery of the Rosary, after her Assumption into heaven, Christ honors his mother by placing a crown atop her head.

This must be understood correctly.

The coronation of the Blessed Virgin in heaven (the Fifth Mystery) celebrates the restoration of our fallen humanity to its original innocence. In heaven, Risen Christ will place a crown on the soul of our humanity itself. Mary, in her Assumption, is a sign of this eschatological truth.

In her hospital bed, the Guatemalan woman asked me,

“It's so hard to live, Father, why does it have to be so hard to die?”

This holy woman did not share in Mary's Assumption. None of us will. Instead, she died with Christ in order to share in his Resurrection. But today, the feast of the Assumption, we must proclaim to the world that, after passing through the portal of death, this woman was crowned in heaven just like Mary, the Second Eve. In a victory over the power of death, Christ placed a crown upon her head as the angels sang her praises out of pure joy.

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?