

HOMILY FOR THE THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 15 November 2020

- 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: 157

Reading 1 [PRV 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31](#)

When one finds a worthy wife,

her value is far beyond pearls.

Her husband, entrusting his heart to her,

has an unfailing prize.

She brings him good, and not evil,

all the days of her life.

She obtains wool and flax

and works with loving hands.

She puts her hands to the distaff,

and her fingers ply the spindle.

She reaches out her hands to the poor,

and extends her arms to the needy.

Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting;

the woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Give her a reward for her labors,

and let her works praise her at the city gates.

Responsorial Psalm Ps [128:1-2, 3, 4-5](#)

R. (cf. 1a) **Blessed are those who fear the Lord.**

Blessed are you who fear the LORD,

who walk in his ways!

For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;

blessed shall you be, and favored.

R. **Blessed are those who fear the Lord.**

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine

in the recesses of your home;

Your children like olive plants

around your table.

R. **Blessed are those who fear the Lord.**

Behold, thus is the man blessed
who fears the LORD.
The LORD bless you from Zion:
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
R. Blessed are those who fear the Lord.

Reading 2 [1 THES 5:1-6](#)

Concerning times and seasons, brothers and sisters,
you have no need for anything to be written to you.
For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come
like a thief at night.
When people are saying, "Peace and security,"
then sudden disaster comes upon them,
like labor pains upon a pregnant woman,
and they will not escape.

But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness,
for that day to overtake you like a thief.
For all of you are children of the light
and children of the day.
We are not of the night or of darkness.
Therefore, let us not sleep as the rest do,
but let us stay alert and sober.

Alleluia [JN 15:4A, 5B](#)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
Remain in me as I remain in you, says the Lord.
Whoever remains in me bears much fruit.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel [MT 25:14-30](#)

Jesus told his disciples this parable:
"A man going on a journey
called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them.
To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one--
to each according to his ability.
Then he went away.
Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them,
and made another five.
Likewise, the one who received two made another two.

But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

"After a long time

the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.

The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five.

He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents.

See, I have made five more.'

His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.

Since you were faithful in small matters,

I will give you great responsibilities.

Come, share your master's joy.'

Then the one who had received two talents also came forward and said,

'Master, you gave me two talents.

See, I have made two more.'

His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.

Since you were faithful in small matters,

I will give you great responsibilities.

Come, share your master's joy.'

Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said,

'Master, I knew you were a demanding person,

harvesting where you did not plant

and gathering where you did not scatter;

so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground.

Here it is back.'

His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant!

So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant

and gather where I did not scatter?

Should you not then have put my money in the bank

so that I could have got it back with interest on my return?

Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten.

For to everyone who has,

more will be given and he will grow rich;

but from the one who has not,

even what he has will be taken away.

And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside,

where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'"

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Some years ago, I gave a lecture at the University of Beijing.

Before starting the lecture, I remember looking at the students and thinking that each one of these eager young people beat out about seven hundred and fifty million other students to get accepted to this most prestigious of universities in China. I spoke about interreligious dialogue and the need, as well, for dialogue among cultures. As my lecture proceeded, I was encouraged by the way my students were responding. They clearly liked what I was saying.

Then, in my lecture, I touched on an idea that didn't go down so well. I told these students that, in the dialogue of religions and cultures,

“we should think of ourselves as pioneers.”

They were okay with that. But then I added,

“and we need to remember that it's the pioneers that make all the most interesting mistakes.”

I thought they might be intrigued by my point about pioneers making mistakes that were “the most interesting.” But in fact, they would have none of it. They were amazed that I would suggest that a professor, such as myself, would admit to making any kind of mistake (interesting or otherwise).

They were even more surprised when I said that we should look on “making mistakes” as something of value. Professors and other authority figures, it seems, must always be right. In a society where “losing face” is something to be avoided at all costs, taking risks can be really dangerous.

Discussion ensued. I asked them to share their views and concerns. Then I said something like the following: The best scholars achieve greatness by making mistakes and learning from them. All human beings come to wisdom through failure. We gain very little wisdom through success. In fact, sometimes we are blinded by success. Therefore, we shouldn't be afraid to fail.

Perhaps most important of all, I told the students that if we are too afraid to take a risk that might lead to failure, we will never get very far at all in making the world a better place.

I think this is good advice for college students – Chinese or otherwise. In fact, I think it is good advice for just about everybody.

I also think this exchange with my students at the University of Beijing helps us to enter deeply into the parable Jesus tells us in today's Gospel.

The "parable of the talents" is often associated with last week's parable of the "wise and foolish virgins." The virgins are waiting for the long-delayed bridegroom. When he finally shows up, some are prepared to greet him and some are not. In today's parable, before going on a journey a man gives his servants money to invest.

To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one –
to each according to his ability.
Then he went away.

By the way, a "talent" is a tremendous amount of money. I'll spare you the economics, but, adjusted for inflation over the last 2000 years, one talent was enough silver to pay a day laborer for – believe it or not – sixteen years of work. And also, apparently the word "talent" in English, meaning a gift or an ability, comes from the use of this ancient word for a quantity of silver in Jesus's parable.

The first servant, the most capable, took his five talents and started doing deals. He doubled his master's money. The same goes for the second servant, who was given two talents.

When the master comes back from his journey, he says to each of these enterprising servants,

"Well done, my good and faithful servant.
Since you were faithful in small matters,
I will give you great responsibilities.
Come, share your master's joy."

This is not the case with the third servant.

But the man who received one [talent] went off and dug a hole in the ground
and buried his master's money.

On his master's return, this servant says something revealing.

"Master, I knew you were a demanding person,
harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter;
so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground.
Here it is back."

Jesus is nothing if not a careful storyteller. The third servant is motivated by fear. He tells his master,

"out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground."

According to this fearful servant, the master is a guy who is a "demanding person" and who harvests where he did not plant and gathers where he did not scatter.

There is an irony in this. As a matter of fact, the fearful servant is not dealing with a master who harvests where he did not plant and gathers where he did not scatter. He is dealing with a master that entrusted to him an unbelievable amount of money and has now returned expecting to harvest and gather what he has planted with his servant.

The third servant was afraid to take a risk with the gift he had received and out of this fear, he buried his talent in a hole.

I taught college students for thirty years. Being a priest, my goals as a teacher were pretty simple. I wanted to help my students to recognize their talents and develop these talents. In addition, I wanted my students to understand that they have a responsibility to use their talents to make this world a better place. They were not to dig a hole after they graduated from college and bury their talent in the hole out of fear.

But most of all, I wanted my students to see that their talents were really gifts given to them by God – like the servants Jesus’s parable who received their talents of silver from the master.

What I tried to teach my students (here in the United States and in China) is what we must teach all our young people. Moreover, this is what we must constantly learn again and again for ourselves: God has blessed us with all the grace we need to make this desert into a garden. We have been given all the resources we need to do something beautiful for God by doing something beautiful for our neighbor. Let’s pray to God for the courage to do something with our talents. And in this life of discipleship, let us not be afraid to fail.

Jesus’s parable teaches an important lesson: what we fear most within ourselves is not necessarily that part of ourselves that is sinful and weak. What we fear the most is often what is best within us – and we fear what is best within us because what is best can be so demanding. What is best within us can be a summons to responsibility. But it is a responsibility that has been given to us as a gift from God.

Remember what I told those Chinese students in Beijing: Don’t be afraid to think of yourself as a kind of pioneer. Pioneers make the most interesting mistakes, at least in the eyes of God.

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?