

HOMILY FOR TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 16 August 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: 118

Reading 1 IS 56:1, 6-7

Thus says the LORD:

Observe what is right, do what is just;
for my salvation is about to come,
my justice, about to be revealed.

The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
ministering to him,

loving the name of the LORD,
and becoming his servants—

all who keep the sabbath free from profanation
and hold to my covenant,

them I will bring to my holy mountain
and make joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and sacrifices

will be acceptable on my altar,
for my house shall be called

a house of prayer for all peoples.

Responsorial Psalm PS 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8

R. (4) **O God, let all the nations praise you!**

May God have pity on us and bless us;
may he let his face shine upon us.

So may your way be known upon earth;
among all nations, your salvation.

R. **O God, let all the nations praise you!**

May the nations be glad and exult
because you rule the peoples in equity;
the nations on the earth you guide.

R. **O God, let all the nations praise you!**

May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you!
May God bless us,
and may all the ends of the earth fear him!
R. **O God, let all the nations praise you!**

Reading 2 ROM 11:13-15, 29-32

Brothers and sisters:
I am speaking to you Gentiles.
Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles,
I glory in my ministry in order to make my race jealous
and thus save some of them.
For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world,
what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?
For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.
Just as you once disobeyed God
but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,
so they have now disobeyed in order that,
by virtue of the mercy shown to you,
they too may now receive mercy.
For God delivered all to disobedience,
that he might have mercy upon all.

Alleluia MT 4:23

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**
Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom
and cured every disease among the people.
R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel MT 15:21-28

At that time, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.
And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out,
“Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!
My daughter is tormented by a demon.”
But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her.
Jesus’ disciples came and asked him,
“Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us.”
He said in reply,
“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, "Lord, help me."
He said in reply,
"It is not right to take the food of the children
and throw it to the dogs."
She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps
that fall from the table of their masters."
Then Jesus said to her in reply,
"O woman, great is your faith!
Let it be done for you as you wish."
And the woman's daughter was healed from that hour.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Friday was the feast of Saint Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941). Saturday was the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. These two feasts are tied to one another in a way that speaks directly to us all in the USA at this difficult time in our history.

Let me explain.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe was born in Poland to a father who was of German extraction. This will be important later in his story. At the tender age of twelve, he had a vivid dream in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to him, asking him to choose between two crowns: a white crown signifying the Immaculate Conception and a red crown signifying martyrdom. The little boy responded to the Virgin by telling her that he wanted both crowns. This will become significant later in the story as well.

Eventually Maximilian became a Franciscan priest. He was sent to Rome for a doctoral degree in philosophy and then to China, Japan and eventually India before contracting tuberculosis and returning to Poland. In Poland he started a newspaper and radio station in order to address the political situation. Remember, in the 1930s, Poland was wedged between Adolf Hitler to the West and Joseph Stalin to the East.

At this time, despite all the good he was doing, the Church recognizes that Kolbe was also what I will call a "typical anti-Semite." His writings contain occasional references to bizarre theories about an "international conspiracy of Jewish bankers" bent on destroying Poland. I don't think it accurate to say that Kolbe subscribed to the "scientific" race theory that fueled the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. Instead, Kolbe's anti-Semitism was rooted in the old Polish ethnocentrism and fear of strangers. Poles could feel good about themselves by demonizing their Jewish neighbors. Shamefully, this tribal mentality is surging again in Poland today. It is surging here in the United States as well.

The beginning of the Second World War brought a horrific darkness down on Poland. The Russians invaded from the East and the Germans invaded from the West with horrible consequences for the people of Poland. Kolbe turned his monastery into a hospital.

The Gestapo told Kolbe that he could sign its *Deutsche Volksliste*, its official roster of “true Germans” born in Poland. He refused to sign. If Kolbe had established himself officially as a German, the Nazi racial laws would have made it illegal for him to give communion to any Polish person. The Catholic Church in Germany was already struggling under this law.

Eventually Kolbe started to hide Jews in his monastery as Hitler’s “final solution” began to build momentum. This began after desperate Jews came to people in the village near his monastery asking for bread. The villagers asked Father Kolbe if they could feed the Jews “in good conscience.”

Kolbe’s reply was unequivocal: “Yes,” he said. In fact, “it is necessary to do this, because all men are our brothers.”

Maybe as many as 2,000 Jewish people were sheltered within the monastery until the Gestapo closed it, arresting the priests and sending Maximillian Kolbe to its work-camp in the little Polish town of Auschwitz.

Maximillian Kolbe became prisoner No. 16670.

I said above that there is a connection between this saint and the Feast of the Assumption. Let me explain what I mean. Remember Kolbe’s dream as a little boy? The Blessed Virgin held out two crowns to him. The white crown signified the Immaculate Conception.

What does this mean?

The documents for Kolbe’s canonization say that the white crown of Mary Immaculate signifies “purity.” I don’t think this interpretation is adequate for us today. (In fact, I often become suspicious of Catholics who talk about “purity.”) There is a deeper meaning in this part of Kolbe’s dream that awaits us.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception teaches that Mary was conceived without the stain of Original Sin. Think about this for a moment. Without the stain of Original Sin, Mary is the image of our original innocence. She is an icon of the life of the human race before our rebellion against the Creator and our fall into guilt. Mary represents our humanity as God originally created us to be and as God always intended us to be.

But not only this. Mary is the image of the humanity that God is creating us to be once again. Through his obedience on the Cross, Christ has been raised up out of death by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ is now the “New Adam,” the raising up of our fallen humanity. Mary is the icon of our original humanity. Christ is the realization of our resurrected humanity.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, therefore, is inseparable from the ancient teaching of the Church that Mary never tasted of death. She was “assumed” into heaven. This is a truth

that exceeds my ability to imagine. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, which we celebrated Saturday, shows us that God never intended that we would go through life haunted by the power of death. Only by falling away from our original communion with God did the power of death enter this world.

And what a power this is. Our fallen humanity, haunted by death, compulsively feeds on one atrocity after another.

Since Mary is the image of our original humanity, unstained by Original Sin and unhaunted by the specter of death, she was not required to taste the bitterness of death. She was “assumed” into heaven.

In choosing the white crown, offered to him by the Blessed Virgin in his dream, Kolbe was embracing our original humanity. Or, perhaps I should say, he embraced our Christian hope that the Holy Spirit is slowly replacing our fallen humanity with the New Humanity that has been established in Cross of the Risen Christ.

This is a humanity, always new but forever ancient, that lies hidden within every human being. It is a universal humanity. No sinner is excluded from the New Humanity revealed in the Cross and Resurrection.

But it is also a humanity that has been obscured by sin, brutalized by violence and utterly denied by anti-Semitism, by Jim Crow laws, by suppression of the right to vote, by slander against LGBT people, by the oppression of the poor, by the marginalization of women (including their marginalization in the Church), by the separation of children from their parents at the border and by the mass murder of our Mexican families at the Walmart in El Paso.

If you look deep enough into the face of George Floyd, you will see this New Humanity, revealed in the Cross and Resurrection. If you look deep enough into the face of the one who knelt on George Floyd’s neck, you will see this New Humanity as well.

Last Friday, on his feast day, the Church invited us to look deeply into the face of Maximillian Kolbe. He accepted the white crown from the Blessed Virgin in an act of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to restore our original innocence before God by raising us up to the New and Universal Humanity of Christ.

This brings me to the second of the two crowns.

In addition to the white crown, the Blessed Virgin offered the little boy the red crown of martyrdom. Kolbe, like everybody else, was stained by Original Sin and therefore would taste the bitterness of death when his life on earth was completed.

After being arrested for sheltering Jews, Kolbe was taken to Auschwitz. There, he was beaten repeatedly. When a prisoner escaped the death-camp, the deputy commandant of Auschwitz, SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl Fritsch, picked ten men to be starved to death in an underground bunker. When one of the men pick to die cried out, "My wife! My children!," Maximillian Kolbe volunteered to take his place.

Kolbe survived for two weeks in an underground cell and then was given a lethal injection. The date was 14 August, 1941. His body was cremated the following day, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.

Maximillian Kolbe was canonized a saint by a fellow Pole, Pope John Paul II, in 1982.

During the canonization ceremony, the Pope John Paul called Kolbe "the patron saint of our difficult century." John Paul II knew about how difficult the twentieth century was. He grew up with Jews in his native Poland and watched as five million Polish citizens, over half of them Jews, died as a result of German (and Russian) aggression. He was a witness to the fact that Poles were heroic in defending the innocent during the war. He also was a witness to the fact that Poles sometimes collaborated with the Nazis as well.

(By the way, making this last statement is currently a crime in Poland).

If Kolbe is a saint, and indeed, if he is "the patron saint of our difficult century," I don't think we should cover over his casual anti-Semitism. Instead, we should reflect in wonderment over the fact that his anti-Semitism was overcome by the mysterious grace of God. Maximillian Kolbe came to recognize in his Jewish neighbors the universal humanity whose image is the Immaculate Conception.

"Yes," he said to the Catholics in his village when they asked about giving bread to desperate Jews, "it is necessary to do this, because all men are our brothers."

In an irony that makes me shudder, Kolbe's devotion to the Immaculate Conception did not lead him to share in Mary's Assumption into heaven. Instead, Kolbe's faith in our universal humanity led him to trade places with a man the Nazis had selected for starvation.

Kolbe was offered two crowns. He accepted both. In accepting the white crown, he was led by the grace of Christ to accept the red crown as well.

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?