

HOMILY FOR THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME  
Sunday, 30 January 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: 108

Reading 1: Gn 18:1-10a

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the terebinth of Mamre,  
as he sat in the entrance of his tent,  
while the day was growing hot.  
Looking up, Abraham saw three men standing nearby.  
When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them;  
and bowing to the ground, he said:  
"Sir, if I may ask you this favor,  
please do not go on past your servant.  
Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet,  
and then rest yourselves under the tree.  
Now that you have come this close to your servant,  
let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves;  
and afterward you may go on your way."  
The men replied, "Very well, do as you have said."

Abraham hastened into the tent and told Sarah,  
"Quick, three measures of fine flour! Knead it and make rolls."  
He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice steer,  
and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it.  
Then Abraham got some curds and milk,  
as well as the steer that had been prepared,  
and set these before the three men;  
and he waited on them under the tree while they ate.

They asked Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?"  
He replied, "There in the tent."  
One of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year,  
and Sarah will then have a son."

Responsorial Psalm Ps 15:2-3, 3-4, 5

R.(1a) He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

One who walks blamelessly and does justice;  
who thinks the truth in his heart  
and slanders not with his tongue.

R. He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Who harms not his fellow man,  
nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;  
by whom the reprobate is despised,  
while he honors those who fear the LORD.

R. He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Who lends not his money at usury  
and accepts no bribe against the innocent.

One who does these things  
shall never be disturbed.

R. He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Reading II: Col 1:24-28

Brothers and sisters:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake,  
and in my flesh I am filling up  
what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ  
on behalf of his body, which is the church,  
of which I am a minister

in accordance with God's stewardship given to me  
to bring to completion for you the word of God,  
the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past.

But now it has been manifested to his holy ones,  
to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory  
of this mystery among the Gentiles;  
it is Christ in you, the hope for glory.

It is he whom we proclaim,  
admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom,  
that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

Alleluia

Alleluia: Cf. Lk 8:15

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Blessed are they who have kept the word with a generous heart  
and yield a harvest through perseverance.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel: Lk 10:38-42

Jesus entered a village  
where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him.

She had a sister named Mary  
who sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak.  
Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said,  
"Lord, do you not care  
that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving?  
Tell her to help me."  
The Lord said to her in reply,  
"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things.  
There is need of only one thing.  
Mary has chosen the better part  
and it will not be taken from her."

#### PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

In the first reading today, the Church gives us one of the great stories from the Torah: Abraham welcoming the three strangers at the terebinth of Mamre. A terebinth is a tree that has traditionally been understood as a mighty oak and Mamre was not far from the biblical city of Hebron, south of Jerusalem. The storytelling is clever. The account of the visit of the three strangers begins by informing us that,

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the terebinth of Mamre,  
as he sat in the entrance of his tent,  
while the day was growing hot.

In the next verse, however, we are told, without explanation, that

Abraham saw three men standing nearby.

Who is at the edge of camp? The Lord or three guys? This is a common motif in the Torah. For example, Jacob, Abraham's grandson, has a famous wrestling match with an adversary at Jabbok brook. This story is never quite clear if his opponent is an angel or God Himself.

In any event, Abraham is extravagant in his display of hospitality to the three strangers. Bowing to the ground, Abraham says,

"Sir, if I may ask you this favor,  
please do not go on past your servant.  
Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet,

and then rest yourselves under the tree.  
Now that you have come this close to your servant,  
let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh  
yourselves;  
and afterward you may go on your way."

Sarah bakes rolls and a steer (no less) is slaughtered and put on the BBQ so the three strangers can be wined and dined. Such traditions of extravagant hospitality can be observed among the Bedouins of the deserts of the Middle East down to this very day.

And the point of this story in the Torah is important indeed. After welcoming the strangers and showing them hospitality, Abraham and Sarah are surprised to receive a blessing from them:

They asked Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?"  
He replied, "There in the tent."  
One of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son."

Is it the three strangers who bring this blessing to Abraham or is it the Lord God Himself? Or perhaps, we need to ask a more sensible question: Is it not that the Lord God likes to visit us and, indeed, to bless us, under the guise of strangers who appear at the edge of our camp, just as the day is "growing hot"?

Welcoming the stranger is, for us, a practice of the faith.

God can be visiting us when strangers appear at the edge of our camp. Welcoming the stranger may turn out to be welcoming the Lord Himself. At least, this is the teaching of the Torah. In welcoming the strangers, Abraham and Sarah received a blessing of a son: Isaac would be born to them within the year.

I want to tell you another story about the importance of welcoming strangers. It's about a fine old woman who, despite her wretchedness, learned from her mistakes and gained wisdom in her old age.

This woman had a son who went off to the Korean War in the early 1950s. Her son only got as far as Japan. When his tour of duty was over, he came back to his parents in the Mid-West with a Japanese girl in tow.

His parents were appalled. Interracial marriage was unimaginable in those days. What would the neighbors say? Besides, hadn't we incarcerated people of Japanese ancestry during the previous War as dangerous and untrustworthy?

"How could you think of marrying a Japanese girl?"

I am sorry to say that the young woman was sent home summarily. The woman's son went on to marry "a nice Catholic girl" and live unhappily with her for many years. The mother suffered to see the unhappiness of her son. Decades later, in her nineties, the woman told me her story burdened with regret. Then she said something remarkable.

"I should have welcomed that girl as if she were my own daughter."

I hope that, when I am in my nineties, I have the grace to look back on my shame and foolishness with the wisdom of this old woman. Here was a woman who had learned from her mistakes. She had come by her wisdom the hard way, through much suffering, but I have no doubt that her wisdom was a blessing that comes only from God.

I wonder what kind of blessing the Japanese girl might have brought to this old woman if she had only welcomed the girl as a daughter.

Showing hospitality to the stranger is an ancient Christian spiritual practice. The great masters of the French School of spirituality wrote of *accueil* as a spiritual practice. For Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Francis de Sales, Pierre de Bérulle and Jean-Jacques Olier, *accueil* means welcoming or receiving another. It means to be skillful in making a space within our hearts for the Lord by making a space within our lives for those who are strangers to us and, oftentimes, unwelcomed by others. Hospitality is a spiritual practice.

We can trace this practice back in time through the Benedictine monks of the Middle Ages to the Desert Fathers and Mothers out in the wilderness of Syria and Egypt before them. The story of Abraham and the three strangers shows us that this practice goes back into the Jewish roots of Christian faith. The Torah tells us

that Abraham, the Father of Faith, welcomed the three strangers at Mamre and, to his great surprise, received a blessing from those he welcomed.

Welcoming those who are strangers to us is a virtue we need to cultivate these days when there is so much mistrust. Let us dedicate ourselves to learning the skill of creating a space in our lives for those who are strange and unfamiliar.

In doing so, we will create a space within our hearts for the Lord who is always standing at the edge of camp waiting to bless us.

### 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?