

HOMILY FOR THE EASTER SUNDAY

Sunday, 18 APRIL 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: 47

Reading I Acts 3:13-15, 17-19

Peter said to the people:

“The God of Abraham,
the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,
the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus,
whom you handed over and denied in Pilate’s presence
when he had decided to release him.
You denied the Holy and Righteous One
and asked that a murderer be released to you.
The author of life you put to death,
but God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses.
Now I know, brothers,
that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did;
but God has thus brought to fulfillment
what he had announced beforehand
through the mouth of all the prophets,
that his Christ would suffer.
Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away.”

Responsorial Psalm 4:2, 4, 7-8, 9

R. (7a) Lord, let your face shine on us.

When I call, answer me, O my just God,
you who relieve me when I am in distress;
have pity on me, and hear my prayer!

R. Lord, let your face shine on us.

Know that the LORD does wonders for his faithful one;
the LORD will hear me when I call upon him.

R. Lord, let your face shine on us.

O LORD, let the light of your countenance shine upon us!

You put gladness into my heart.

R. Lord, let your face shine on us.

As soon as I lie down, I fall peacefully asleep,
for you alone, O LORD,
bring security to my dwelling.
R. Lord, let your face shine on us.

Reading II 1 Jn 2:1-5a

My children, I am writing this to you
so that you may not commit sin.
But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father,
Jesus Christ the righteous one.
He is expiation for our sins,
and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world.
The way we may be sure that we know him is to keep
his commandments.
Those who say, "I know him," but do not keep his commandments
are liars, and the truth is not in them.
But whoever keeps his word,
the love of God is truly perfected in him.

Alleluia Cf. Lk 24:32

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
Lord Jesus, open the Scriptures to us;
make our hearts burn while you speak to us.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 24:35-48

The two disciples recounted what had taken place on the way,
and how Jesus was made known to them
in the breaking of bread.
While they were still speaking about this,
he stood in their midst and said to them,
"Peace be with you."
But they were startled and terrified
and thought that they were seeing a ghost.
Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled?
And why do questions arise in your hearts?
Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself.
Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones
as you can see I have."
And as he said this,
he showed them his hands and his feet.
While they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed,
he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

They gave him a piece of baked fish;
he took it and ate it in front of them.
He said to them,
“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you,
that everything written about me in the law of Moses
and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.”
Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.
And he said to them,
“Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer
and rise from the dead on the third day
and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins,
would be preached in his name
to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
You are witnesses of these things.”

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

One day in October 2007, in Nickel Mines, PA, a young woman and her three small children gathered in the cemetery to bury her husband. Nickel Mines is in Lancaster County. It's Amish County.

It was a lonely funeral. The man had shot himself. But then, a group of Amish people approached the grave site. They said some prayers and offered words of comfort to the widow and her children.

This was the second funeral in as many days for these Amish families. They had just buried five of their own children. The previous week, the widow's husband had entered an Amish schoolhouse with a gun. He shot ten little girls, wounding five and killing five. When the authorities showed up, he turned his gun on himself.

The families of the dead and wounded had come to offer words of comfort to the widow of the man who had shot their children. They also had come to tell her that they had begun to forgive her husband for what he had done.

In the days after this funeral, some people were saying that the Amish had somehow “shrugged it off” and now were “getting on with their lives.”

This is nonsense. The Amish people were struggling to practice their Christian faith.

We are commanded to forgive. Obedience to this command takes us into the depths of our faith. Maybe I should say that obedience to this command *throws* us into the depths of our faith – for forgiving those who have trespassed against us can be terrifying to contemplate. We are not only commanded to forgive. We have also been given the grace to obey this commandment. With this grace comes the awe-full responsibility to forgive.

Last week, in the Gospel reading from John, the Risen Christ says to his disciples,

“Peace be with you.
As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
“Receive the Holy Spirit.
Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
and whose sins you retain are retained.”

In becoming witnesses to the Risen Christ in the world, we have been given the power to forgive those who sin against us. And since we have been given the power to forgive, we have the responsibility to forgive. The responsibility to forgive begins at our Baptism. And every time we are obedient to the command to forgive, we are plunged into the waters of Baptism anew. This is the meaning of Easter.

Let me say it again: The Amish folk were not just “getting on with their lives.” The Amish were pursuing the difficult practice of Christian faith. We are commanded to forgive.

This story of obedience opens up the second reading for us. Practice *lectio divina* with the words of the second reading (the First Letter of John) once again:

My children, I am writing this to you
so that you may not commit sin.

I suspect that the sin in question here is the sin of despair. If obedience to the command to forgive is faith, then the refusal to forgive is despair. Do not confuse a righteous refusal to forgive with virtue. The refusal to forgive is the opposite of faith: it is despair.

But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father,
Jesus Christ the righteous one.
He is expiation for our sins,
and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world.

In rising from the dead, the Risen Christ has become “expiation of our sins.” I suspect that herein lies the profound connection between forgiving sins and the resurrection of our flesh. The Risen Christ is expiation not only for our sins, but “those of the whole world.” Remember what we say at mass,

“Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world.
Happy are those who are called to his supper.”

In our Holy Communion with the Lamb of God, we become the one “who takes away the sins of the world.”

And this is how we come to know that Christ is rising in our own flesh.

The way we may be sure that we know him is to keep his commandments.

Those who say, “I know him,” but do not keep his commandments are liars, and the truth is not in them.

After the funeral of the five little girls who died, the Amish community established a fund to support the families touched by the violence. Then they established a fund to help support the widow of the man who committed this terrible sin and his three children.

The widow of the shooter has been going every week to the home of one of these girls. The girl cannot speak and still suffers seizures. This good woman washes the girl’s hair and reads to her. The widow reports that she thinks the girl knows who she is. I think the little girl has forgiven the shooter as well.

Obedience to the command to forgive is eucharistic: it leads, slowly and often with great difficulty, to Holy Communion.

Sometimes I think that the practice of the faith is never more difficult than it is in the commandment to forgive. But this is how Christ rises in our wounded flesh. Feeling forgiveness toward those who have wounded us does not come first. Obedience to the command to forgive comes first. And this is hard.

So I recommend that you dwell a while on the last verse of John’s letter and do not lose hope:

But whoever keeps his word,
the love of God is truly perfected in him.

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?