

HOMILY FOR THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
Sunday, 18 September 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: 135

Reading 1 Am 8:4-7

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy
and destroy the poor of the land!

"When will the new moon be over," you ask,

"that we may sell our grain,

and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat?

We will diminish the ephah,

add to the shekel,

and fix our scales for cheating!

We will buy the lowly for silver,

and the poor for a pair of sandals;

even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!"

The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:

Never will I forget a thing they have done!

Responsorial Psalm Ps 113:1-2, 4-6, 7-8

R. (cf. 1a, 7b) Praise the Lord who lifts up the poor. or:

R. Alleluia.

Praise, you servants of the LORD,

praise the name of the LORD.

Blessed be the name of the LORD

both now and forever.

R. Praise the Lord who lifts up the poor.

or:

R. Alleluia.

High above all nations is the LORD;

above the heavens is his glory.

Who is like the LORD, our God, who is enthroned on high and

looks upon the heavens and the earth below? R. Praise the Lord

who lifts up the poor.

or:

R. Alleluia.

He raises up the lowly from the dust;
from the dunghill he lifts up the poor
to seat them with princes,
with the princes of his own people.

R. Praise the Lord who lifts up the poor.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading 2 1 Tm 2:1-8

Beloved:

First of all, I ask that supplications, prayers,
petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for
kings and for all in authority,
that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life
in all devotion and dignity.

This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who
wills everyone to be saved
and to come to knowledge of the truth.

For there is one God.

There is also one mediator between God and men, the
man Christ Jesus,
who gave himself as ransom for all.

This was the testimony at the proper time.

For this I was appointed preacher and apostle — I
am speaking the truth, I am not lying —,
teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting
up holy hands, without anger or argument. Alleluia

Cf. 2 Cor 8:9

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Though our Lord Jesus Christ was rich, he became poor, so
that by his poverty you might become rich. R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 16:1-13

Jesus said to his disciples,

"A rich man had a steward

who was reported to him for squandering his property. He
summoned him and said,

'What is this I hear about you?

Prepare a full account of your stewardship,
because you can no longer be my steward.'
The steward said to himself, 'What shall I do,
now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am
not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do
so that,
when I am removed from the stewardship,
they may welcome me into their homes.'
He called in his master's debtors one by one.
To the first he said,
'How much do you owe my master?'
He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.'
He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note.
Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.'
Then to another the steward said, 'And you, how much do you owe?' He
replied, 'One hundred kors of wheat.'
The steward said to him, 'Here is your promissory note;
write one for eighty.'
And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. "For
the children of this world
are more prudent in dealing with their own generation
than are the children of light.
I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that
when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. The person
who is trustworthy in very small matters
is also trustworthy in great ones;
and the person who is dishonest in very small matters
is also dishonest in great ones.
If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who
will trust you with true wealth?
If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another,
who will give you what is yours?
No servant can serve two masters.
He will either hate one and love the other,
or be devoted to one and despise the other.
You cannot serve both God and mammon."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Someone complained to me the other day about the fact that the size of
the containers of the cottage cheese she buys in the grocery store is
getting smaller. The new container looks exactly like the old container,
deceptively so, only it is about 20% smaller. The price, on the other
hand, has gone up a little.

I can't vouch for the truth of my friend's complaint about cottage cheese, but I can tell you about shampoo. The shampoo I usually buy is shrinking in size while the price is staying the same. I would never have noticed this little game of bait-and-switch unless I had not placed the new container right next to the old one in my shower.

Maybe I should be grateful to have something to ponder when I'm lathering up in the morning.

The Prophet Amos does more than ponder such curious things. He lived at a time when more and more wealth was being concentrated into the hands of fewer and fewer people. Little people were becoming more and more desperate because of what some people, today, call, "the magic of the market."

In the days of the Prophet Amos, the powerful were practicing bait-and-switch tactics as well – only the oligarchs weren't selling stuff in plastic containers. Instead, they said,

We will diminish the ephah,
add to the shekel,
and fix our scales for cheating!

The ephah, I am told, is a dry measure that is supposed to be about the size of a bushel. Just like with shampoo and cottage cheese today, in Amos' day, looks can be deceiving. Kings could "add to the shekel" by adulterating the coinage with lead to cheat those to whom they owed money. Do we need to worry about fixed scales at the grocery store these days? I don't think so.

However, the Church does teach that we should be worried about "free markets" when just a few corporations dominate the those markets. When that happens, containers of cottage cheese and shampoo, to say nothing of the ephah in Amos's day, have a mysterious way of shrinking.

The Prophet is not afraid to call out those who are running the show:

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy
and destroy the poor of the land!
"When will the new moon be over," you ask,

"that we may sell our grain,
and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat?"

The oligarchs were more than happy to keep the sabbath holy and observe the letter of the Law when it suited them. The prophets, however, preached that the Law demands justice for "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the land."

There are corporations that have their human resources department set up to help their underpaid employees to apply for food-stamps. This means that the taxpayer is, in effect, subsidizing these corporations by paying part of their employees' salaries.

Amos has this covered as well.

We will buy the lowly for silver,
and the poor for a pair of sandals;
even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!"

The "refuse of the wheat" refers to the Law of Moses. The Torah stipulates that whatever grain is left-over in the fields after the harvest can be gleaned by the poor. This is a matter of justice, not charity.

In regard to economic justice, the teaching of the Church is quite clear:

First, the economy is something created by human beings. Like everything else that we do, the economy is subject to moral judgment. Our economic relations are not the inevitable result of impersonal economic forces or an "invisible hand." Our economic relations are the result of decisions we make as individuals and as a political community.

Second, all of us are required to make sure that the economy serves the needs of all. This is not a matter of allowing everyone to compete. It is a matter of ensuring that the basic needs of all have been met in a way that respects the dignity of the human person and provides for the common good.

Third, the moral burden for a just economy falls on us all – but it falls more heavily on those who are economically secure and politically powerful than it does on those who are marginalized.

Three important implications come to us from these teachings.

First, the economy is a reflection of human sinfulness. Do not be pious or sanctimonious about it.

Second, our sinful economic relations are capable of being redeemed. So don't be cynical about the economy. Cynicism is a clever way of excusing ourselves from doing anything about it.

Third, we will be judged by God for our piety and our cynicism in regard to our economic relations.

The Prophet Amos gives his own testimony to this last point:

The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Never will I forget a thing they have done!

Don't be pious about our economic relations. There is nothing intrinsically virtuous about capitalism. Don't be cynical either. Cynicism is a way to shirk responsibility for making things better. If our sins can be forgiven, then our economy can be redeemed. This places a responsibility on us all.

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?