

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Sunday, 19 December 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: 12

Reading I Mi 5:1-4a

Thus says the LORD:

You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah
too small to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel;
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient times.

Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time
when she who is to give birth has borne,
and the rest of his kindred shall return
to the children of Israel.

He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock
by the strength of the LORD,
in the majestic name of the LORD, his God;
and they shall remain, for now his greatness
shall reach to the ends of the earth;
he shall be peace.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19.

R. (4) Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

O shepherd of Israel, hearken,
from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.

Rouse your power,
and come to save us.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Once again, O LORD of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see;
take care of this vine,

and protect what your right hand has planted
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

May your help be with the man of your right hand,
with the son of man whom you yourself made strong.
Then we will no more withdraw from you;
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.
R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Reading II Heb 10:5-10

Brothers and sisters:

When Christ came into the world, he said:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight.
Then I said, ‘As is written of me in the scroll,
behold, I come to do your will, O God.’”

First he says, “Sacrifices and offerings,
holocausts and sin offerings,
you neither desired nor delighted in.”

These are offered according to the law.

Then he says, :Behold, I come to do your will.”

He takes away the first to establish the second.

By this “will,” we have been consecrated
through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Alleluia Lk 1:38

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.

May it be done to me according to your word.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 1:39-45

Mary set out

and traveled to the hill country in haste
to a town of Judah,

where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting,
the infant leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,
cried out in a loud voice and said,

“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears,

the infant in my womb leaped for joy.
Blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the Lord
would be fulfilled.”

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

When I was a college student in the seminary, I used to hang out with an elderly gentleman. He was always neatly dressed: pressed slacks, a button-down shirt and a trim mustache. In winter, he would come through the front door of the seminary wearing a khaki trench-coat and sporting a furred umbrella. If he had owned a bowler hat, you would think he was a British banker.

In those days, I worked evenings on the switchboard (long before we had cellphones). John would come by and sit in the office with me. Other students would gather around when they saw him sitting with me. We liked to hear John tell stories.

I am not sure if John actually murdered anybody, but J. Edgar Hoover (the first Director of the FBI) certainly thought so. This is why John spent thirty-two years in prison - twenty of them in Alcatraz.

As a kid, John ran with the notorious Dillinger gang. It was during the Depression. John was driving a car up to the Biograph Theater in Chicago when the FBI shot his boss. John drove off without stopping. Later, however, gang-members were in a shoot-out in which an FBI agent died. John was sentenced to life in prison in 1935. Hoover insisted that he go directly to Alcatraz - the first inmate to be sent to “The Rock” immediately after sentencing - and kept him there for twenty years. John served another twelve years in Leavenworth (Kansas) until he was finally paroled, over Hoover’s objections, in 1966.

Father Clark, the Catholic chaplain who worked at Alcatraz, arranged for John to be released to Catholic Social Services of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. John moved down to the college seminary in Mountain View where he worked as a janitor until his death in 1973.

In fact, all the janitors at the seminary were ex-cons in those days. Frank, Louie, Kootch, and John - they all had done time. (I think John was the only one who did time on Alcatraz, however). The

prison chaplains would contact people at Catholic Social Services and they would bring parolees down to the seminary to work as janitors or cooks. I washed dishes in the kitchen with Kootch. He had a great sense of humor. All of us in the seminary community liked these guys.

John told great stories about Alcatraz. He knew Al Capone. If I recall correctly, Mr. Capone was not very cordial. I think John said that Capone used to smoke cigars. John knew the Birdman of Alcatraz as well. I have read that there were lots of mental health problems, especially on Block D (solitary confinement), but John didn't talk about that very much and we didn't push him to talk about this.

"John, the views of the Bay must have been great from Alcatraz."

No cell in the prison had an outside wall, let alone a window. There were no views of the Bay from the recreation yard either. The cells were very cold. The food was pretty good.

John lived quietly during his years at the seminary, but he liked to stop in and sit with me as I operated the switchboard in the evening. We all liked John. He died in 1973, a few months after I graduated. We sang for him at his funeral.

John is buried in the cemetery behind the old seminary building.

I am not sure if John killed that federal agent. I do know that he had made amends for his sins and was happy to live a quiet life with us at the seminary.

He outlived Mr. Hoover by about eighteen months. Hoover never forgave him for what John had done with Dillinger and his gang. We, in contrast, never forgave John either. We never forgave him for the simple fact that we never accused him of anything. He was just a part of our little community.

In the Gospel last week, John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to Jesus with instructions to ask him if he is the Messiah.

"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

And Jesus said to them in reply,

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard:
the blind regain their sight,
the lame walk,
lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.

I said that we never forgave John because we never accused him of anything. Maybe this is why John felt comfortable telling us stories about his time on Alcatraz: he knew we wouldn't accuse him of anything. Mr. Hoover's accusation over the course of thirty-two years was more than enough.

The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and John, our quiet, unassuming janitor, lived his quiet life with us, unaccused. Surely, the Advent of the Messiah must be very near.

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:

- o 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?