

HOMILY FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
Sunday, 19 February 2023

- 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: 79

Reading 1 Lv 19:1-2, 17-18

The LORD said to Moses,
"Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them:
Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy.

"You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.
Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen,
do not incur sin because of him.
Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
I am the LORD."

Responsorial Psalm Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13

R. (8a) The Lord is kind and merciful.
Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all my being, bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.
He pardons all your iniquities,
heals all your ills.
He redeems your life from destruction,
crowns you with kindness and compassion.
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.
Merciful and gracious is the LORD,
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he put our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,

so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

Reading 2 1 Cor 3:16-23

Brothers and sisters:

Do you not know that you are the temple of God,
and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person;
for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.
Let no one deceive himself.

If any one among you considers himself wise in this age,
let him become a fool, so as to become wise.
For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God,
for it is written:
God catches the wise in their own ruses,
and again:
The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,
that they are vain.

So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you,
Paul or Apollos or Cephas,
or the world or life or death,
or the present or the future:
all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Alleluia 1 Jn 2:5

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
Whoever keeps the word of Christ,
the love of God is truly perfected in him.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mt 5:38-48

Jesus said to his disciples:
"You have heard that it was said,
An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.
When someone strikes you on your right cheek,
turn the other one as well.
If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic,
hand over your cloak as well.
Should anyone press you into service for one mile,
go for two miles.

Give to the one who asks of you,
and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

"You have heard that it was said,
You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.
But I say to you, love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you,
that you may be children of your heavenly Father,
for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good,
and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.
For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have?
Do not the tax collectors do the same?
And if you greet your brothers only,
what is unusual about that?
Do not the pagans do the same?
So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

What is holiness? This is a good question to ask these days.

I don't imagine that many of us spend much time thinking about a question like this. In truth, I spend more time thinking about why people are content, even eager, to spend their lives doing things that are just plain evil.

Evil - I know it when I see it. Holiness? This is more complicated.

Lots of people equate holiness with purity. If sin is a kind of stain on our soul, then holiness must mean being free of this stain. This view of holiness, certainly, has led to an unhealthy (and un-Biblical) preoccupation with our sexuality. Sex, we are to believe, is "dirty." Sins related to our sexuality are always "grave, of their very nature" (*ex toto sui generis grave*).

But the linking of holiness with purity goes far beyond hang-ups regarding our sexuality. Look at the moral judgments we impose on the poor. Just the other day, someone said to me, "Mexicans are dirty."

I think my conversation partner was trying to convince herself that she was clean, a least in comparison to "those dirty Mexicans." Since cleanliness is next to Godliness, I guess this makes her more holy than our Mexican families here at Saint Leo's.

Holiness, misconstrued as purity, I'm afraid, is widespread.

My question about holiness gets even more difficult when you look at the first reading. The reading is from the Book of Leviticus, the third of the five books of the Torah.

The LORD said to Moses,
"Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them:
Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy.

What could it possibly mean for us to be holy as God is holy?

There may be an answer to this difficult question in today's Gospel. The reading is a section from the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, Jesus' words have become too familiar - so read them slowly and carefully.

Jesus said to his disciples:
"You have heard that it was said,
An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.
When someone strikes you on your right cheek,
turn the other one as well.
If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic,
hand over your cloak as well.

An eye for an eye seems immanently fair to me. Let the punishment fit the crime. Jesus, apparently, is not interested in fairness. His preaching doesn't make much sense, at least in the eyes of the world I inhabit. Jesus' teaching is radical.

But Jesus is just getting warmed up.

You have heard that it was said,
You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.
But I say to you, love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you.

This defies common sense as much as turning the other cheek defies common sense. Ask Charles Darwin - life is a knife-fight, and only suckers play by the rules. Try loving your enemies and see how far it gets you.

And yet, I can think of plenty of people who, in big ways and in little ways, practice the Sermon on the Mount in their daily lives.

Nelson Mandela, after spending twenty-seven years in prison, went on to become the president of his country, South Africa. Mandela invited his guards to his inauguration. When asked about this, he said,

“If I continued to hate those who imprisoned me for all those years and years, I would still be their prisoner.”

I wonder if God doesn't say the same thing about us as well. God refuses to hate us, despite our penchant for excluding Him from our lives or using Him to justify our stubborn refusal to love and forgive.

“Mexicans are dirty,” we say, and yet God continues to love us.

We strike God on the right cheek every time we bruise another human being. And then, God turns the other cheek. With our violence and self-righteousness and our contempt for the poor, we defiantly proclaim that we are God's enemy. And yet, God continues to love us.

God, it seems, has taken the Sermon on the Mount to heart.

What does it mean to be holy? And even more mysteriously: What does it mean to be holy as God is holy?

It means that we have to learn to turn the other cheek to those who strike us. For this is what God does. It means that we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. For this is what God does.

It means that we must change the way we live our lives. It means that we have to struggle to be faithful to the incomprehensibly difficult commandments we find in the Sermon on the Mount.

And the Good News is that God does not just lay these commandments on us as a burden. By practicing what Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount, God is helping us to bear this burden.

Perhaps this is holiness. This is what it means to be holy as God is holy.

The LORD said to Moses,
"Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them:
Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy.

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?