

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Sunday, 19 March 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: 31

Reading 1 1 Sm 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a

The LORD said to Samuel:

"Fill your horn with oil, and be on your way.
I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem,
for I have chosen my king from among his sons."

As Jesse and his sons came to the sacrifice,
Samuel looked at Eliab and thought,
"Surely the LORD's anointed is here before him."
But the LORD said to Samuel:
"Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature,
because I have rejected him.
Not as man sees does God see,
because man sees the appearance
but the LORD looks into the heart."
In the same way Jesse presented seven sons before Samuel,
but Samuel said to Jesse,
"The LORD has not chosen any one of these."
Then Samuel asked Jesse,
"Are these all the sons you have?"
Jesse replied,
"There is still the youngest, who is tending the sheep."
Samuel said to Jesse,
"Send for him;
we will not begin the sacrificial banquet until he arrives here."
Jesse sent and had the young man brought to them.
He was ruddy, a youth handsome to behold
and making a splendid appearance.
The LORD said,
"There—anooint him, for this is the one!"
Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in hand,

anointed David in the presence of his brothers;
and from that day on, the spirit of the LORD rushed upon David.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 23: 1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6

R. (1) The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

In verdant pastures he gives me repose;

beside restful waters he leads me;

he refreshes my soul.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

He guides me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk in the dark valley

I fear no evil; for you are at my side

With your rod and your staff

that give me courage.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

You spread the table before me

in the sight of my foes;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Only goodness and kindness follow me

all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

for years to come.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Reading 2 Eph 5:8-14

Brothers and sisters:

You were once darkness,

but now you are light in the Lord.

Live as children of light,

for light produces every kind of goodness

and righteousness and truth.

Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness;

rather expose them, for it is shameful even to mention

the things done by them in secret;

but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,

for everything that becomes visible is light.

Therefore, it says:

"Awake, O sleeper,

and arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light."

Verse Before the Gospel Jn 8:12

I am the light of the world, says the Lord;
whoever follows me will have the light of life.

Gospel Jn 9:1-41

As Jesus passed by he saw a man blind from birth.
His disciples asked him,
"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents,
that he was born blind?"
Jesus answered,
"Neither he nor his parents sinned;
it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him.
We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day.
Night is coming when no one can work.
While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."
When he had said this, he spat on the ground
and made clay with the saliva,
and smeared the clay on his eyes,
and said to him,
"Go wash in the Pool of Siloam" –which means Sent–.
So he went and washed, and came back able to see.

His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier
as a beggar said, "Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?"
Some said, "It is, "
but others said, "No, he just looks like him."
He said, "I am."
So they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?"
He replied,
"The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes
and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.'
So I went there and washed and was able to see."
And they said to him, "Where is he?"
He said, "I don't know."

They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees.
Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a sabbath.
So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.
He said to them,
"He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see."
So some of the Pharisees said,

"This man is not from God,
because he does not keep the sabbath."
But others said,
"How can a sinful man do such signs?"
And there was a division among them.
So they said to the blind man again,
"What do you have to say about him,
since he opened your eyes?"
He said, "He is a prophet."

Now the Jews did not believe
that he had been blind and gained his sight
until they summoned the parents
of the one who had gained his sight.
They asked them,
"Is this your son, who you say was born blind?
How does he now see?"
His parents answered and said,
"We know that this is our son and that he was born blind.
We do not know how he sees now,
nor do we know who opened his eyes.
Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself."
His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews,
for the Jews had already agreed
that if anyone acknowledged him as the Christ,
he would be expelled from the synagogue.
For this reason his parents said,
"He is of age; question him."

So a second time they called the man who had been blind
and said to him, "Give God the praise!
We know that this man is a sinner."
He replied,
"If he is a sinner, I do not know.
One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see."
So they said to him,
"What did he do to you?
How did he open your eyes?"
He answered them,
"I told you already and you did not listen.
Why do you want to hear it again?
Do you want to become his disciples, too?"
They ridiculed him and said,
"You are that man's disciple;

we are disciples of Moses!
We know that God spoke to Moses,
but we do not know where this one is from."
The man answered and said to them,
"This is what is so amazing,
that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes.
We know that God does not listen to sinners,
but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him.
It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes
of a person born blind.
If this man were not from God,
he would not be able to do anything."
They answered and said to him,
"You were born totally in sin,
and are you trying to teach us?"
Then they threw him out.

When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out,
he found him and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"
He answered and said,
"Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"
Jesus said to him,
"You have seen him, the one speaking with you is he."
He said, "I do believe, Lord," and he worshiped him.
Then Jesus said,
"I came into this world for judgment,
so that those who do not see might see,
and those who do see might become blind."

Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this
and said to him, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?"
Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin;
but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

The story of the man born blind is the sixth of the "seven signs" performed by Jesus in John's Gospel (the wedding at Cana is the first, the raising of Lazarus is the last). John is a great storyteller and doesn't waste a word.

I think John's story tells us wonderful things about what it means to be a "synodal" Church - a community of faith that is "on the road together.

Let me explain.

Pope Francis likes to say,

Ideas are debated; reality must be discerned.

I recommend that Catholics here in the United States pay close attention to the Pope's teaching. It comes out of the experience of the Church in Latin America which is considerably more advanced in the practice of synodality than we are here in the United States. The Latin American Church has been meeting in synods for many decades now.

Ideas are debated. At times, it seems that ideas are endlessly debated in the United States. But, when Francis asks us to see the Church as a synodal community, he is not saying that the Church is like a parliament or legislature. The Church is a community of faith, "on the road together." Concretely, being on the road together means that we have a responsibility to listen patiently to one another as we try to discern what the Holy Spirit is bringing about in the world.

This is what theologians call "discernment." Discernment is what we must do as we make our way "on the road together."

The Holy Spirit is creating a future for us and calling us to embrace this future with Christian faith. Don't be distracted by all the noise and posturing that surrounds us. Try to pay attention to what is really going on. The work of the Spirit is what is real. This is what the Pope means by "reality."

Ideas are debated; reality must be discerned.

John's story of the man born blind tells us wonderful things about discerning the reality of the Spirit's work as we make our way "on the road together."

Look how the story begins:

As Jesus passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.
His disciples asked him,
"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents,
that he was born blind?"

The disciples are interested in debating ideas. Blindness, they presume, must be God's punishment for sin. Is the blind man the sinner or is his blindness a punishment meted out to his parents?

Jesus won't get into this debate. Instead, he invites us to discern the new reality that God is bringing about in the world.

Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned;
it is so that the works of God might be made visible
through him."

Don't debate about who is the sinner. Open your eyes and see what the Savior is bringing about in the world. The man born blind can now see. All around the world, those who were blind are being given the gift of sight as well. We have all the skills we need to discern the new reality that the Spirit is revealing to us. Now we must become a people who discern this new reality.

This means that there is a profound irony in John's story. The Evangelist is telling us, "open your eyes and witness what God is bringing about in the world." Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud and the man born blind is able to see. But the real question is: are WE able to see what the Savior is doing?

Are we able to see that, today, the Holy Spirit is taking away our blindness? Are we able to see that we are not condemned, eternally, to debate ideas, but that now, through the mercy of the Savior, we can open our eyes and discern the new reality that the Spirit is preparing for us?

Ideas are debated; reality must be discerned.

John's story shows us that we prefer to debate ideas rather than to embrace the difficult task of discerning reality.

Take the man's neighbors, for instance.

His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said, "Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is," but others said, "No, he just looks like him."

The neighbors don't get it. They are distracted by their debates and fail to see the "works of God" that Jesus is bringing about.

Take the Pharisees for instance. The Pharisees find out that Jesus cured the man of his blindness on a sabbath, and they are off to the races with debates about sabbath regulations.

So some of the Pharisees said,
"This man is not from God,
because he does not keep the sabbath."
But others said, "How can a sinful man do such
signs? And there was a division among them.

We prefer to debate ideas rather than engage in the difficult and painstaking work of opening our eyes to discern the reality of what God is bringing about in the world.

This is an important lesson that we, a people called to be a synodal Church, must take to heart. Debating ideas means winning arguments. And, to tell the truth, I like winning arguments. There are lots of issues facing our Church that we can argue about, and I want to win those arguments.

But Pope Francis doesn't want us to win arguments. He wants us to listen to one another. He wants us to share our faith. He wants us to look at the world from the perspective of the poor and marginalized. Most of all, Francis wants us to come together to discern the reality of what the Spirit is bringing about in the world today.

Let us commitment ourselves to being a people “on the road together, remembering that there will always be ideas are debated. Reality, on the other hand, must be discerned. Don’t be afraid: we can do this on the road together.

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La historia del ciego de nacimiento es la sexta de las “siete señales” realizadas por Jesús en el Evangelio de Juan (la boda de Caná es la primera, la resurrección de Lázaro es la última). John es un gran narrador y no desperdicia una palabra.

Creo que la historia de Juan nos enseña cosas maravillosas sobre lo que significa ser una Iglesia “sinodal”, una comunidad de fe que está “juntos en el camino”.

Dejame explicar.

Al Papa Francisco le gusta decir,

Las ideas se debaten; hay que discernir la realidad.

Recomiendo que los católicos aquí en los Estados Unidos presten mucha atención a las enseñanzas del Papa. Surge de la experiencia de la Iglesia en América Latina que está considerablemente más avanzada en la práctica de la sinodalidad de lo que estamos aquí en los Estados Unidos. La Iglesia latinoamericana se reúne en sínodos desde hace muchas décadas.

Las ideas se debaten. A veces, parece que las ideas se debaten interminablemente en los Estados Unidos. Pero, cuando Francisco nos pide que veamos a la Iglesia como una comunidad sinodal, no está diciendo que la Iglesia sea como un parlamento o una legislatura. La Iglesia es una comunidad de fe, “juntos en camino”. Concretamente, estar juntos en el camino significa que tenemos la responsabilidad de escucharnos con paciencia mientras tratamos de discernir lo que el Espíritu Santo está obrando en el mundo.

Esto es lo que los teólogos llaman "discernimiento". El discernimiento es lo que debemos hacer mientras estamos en marcha "juntos en el camino".

El Espíritu Santo está creando un futuro para nosotros y llamándonos a abrazar este futuro con fe cristiana. No les distraigan con todo el ruido y las posturas que nos rodean. Trate de prestar atención a lo que realmente está pasando. La obra del Espíritu es lo que es real. Esto es lo que el Papa quiere decir con "realidad".

Las ideas se debaten; hay que discernir la realidad.

La historia del hombre ciego de nacimiento nos dice cosas maravillosas acerca de discernir la realidad de la obra del Espíritu a medida que avanzamos "juntos en el camino".

Mira cómo comienza la historia:

En aquel tiempo, Jesús vio al pasar a un ciego de nacimiento, y sus discípulos le preguntaron:
"Maestro, ¿quién pecó para que éste naciera ciego, él o sus padres?"

Los discípulos están interesados en debatir ideas. La ceguera, suponen, debe ser el castigo de Dios por el pecado. ¿Es el ciego el pecador o su ceguera es un castigo impuesto a sus padres?

Jesús no entrará en este debate. En cambio, nos invita a discernir la nueva realidad que Dios está realizando en el mundo.

Jesús respondió: "Ni él pecó, ni tampoco sus padres. Nació así para que en él se manifestaran las obras de Dios."

No discutan sobre quién es el pecador. Abre sus ojos y mira lo que el Salvador está obrando en el mundo. El ciego de nacimiento ahora puede ver. En todo el mundo, a los que eran ciegos también se les está dando el don de la vista. En la Iglesia, tenemos todas las habilidades que necesitamos para discernir la nueva realidad que el

Espíritu nos está revelando. Ahora debemos convertirnos en un pueblo que discierna esta nueva realidad.

Esto significa que hay una profunda ironía en la historia de Juan. El evangelista nos dice: "abre los ojos y sé testigo de lo que Dios está haciendo en el mundo". Jesús escupe en el suelo y hace barro y el ciego de nacimiento puede ver. Pero la verdadera pregunta es: ¿podemos NOSOTROS ver lo que está haciendo el Salvador?

¿Somos capaces de ver que, hoy, el Espíritu Santo nos está quitando la ceguera? ¿Somos capaces de ver que no estamos condenados, eternamente, a debatir ideas, sino que ahora, por la misericordia del Salvador, podemos abrir los ojos y discernir la nueva realidad que el Espíritu nos prepara?

Las ideas se debaten; hay que discernir la realidad.

La historia de John nos muestra que preferimos debatir ideas en lugar de abrazar la difícil tarea de discernir la realidad.

Por ejemplo: los vecinos del hombre.

Entonces los vecinos y los que lo habían visto antes pidiendo limosna, preguntaban: "¿No es éste el que se sentaba a pedir limosna?" Unos decían: "Es el mismo". Otros: "No es él, sino que se le parece".

Los vecinos no lo entienden. Están distraídos por sus debates y no ven las "obras de Dios" que Jesús está realizando.

También, los fariseos, por ejemplo. Los fariseos descubren que Jesús curó al hombre de su ceguera en el sábado, el día de reposo, y se van a las carreras con debates sobre las regulaciones del día de reposo.

Algunos de los fariseos comentaban: "Ese hombre no viene de Dios, porque no guarda el sábado". Otros replicaban: "¿Cómo puede un pecador hacer semejantes prodigios?" Y había división entre ellos.

Preferimos debatir ideas en lugar de comprometernos en el trabajo difícil y arduo de abrir nuestros ojos para discernir la realidad de lo que Dios está haciendo en el mundo.

Esta es una lección importante que nosotros, un pueblo llamado a ser Iglesia sinodal, debemos tomar en serio. Debatir ideas significa ganar argumentos. Y, a decir verdad, me gusta ganar debates. Hay muchos problemas que enfrenta nuestra Iglesia sobre los que podemos discutir, y quiero ganar esos argumentos.

Pero el Papa Francisco no quiere que ganemos discusiones. Él quiere que nos escuchemos unos a otros. Él quiere que compartamos nuestra fe. Él quiere que miremos el mundo desde la perspectiva de los pobres y marginados. Sobre todo, Francisco quiere que nos reunamos para discernir la realidad de lo que el Espíritu está obrando en el mundo de hoy.

Ojala que comprometámonos a ser un pueblo "en camino juntos," recordando que siempre habrá ideas que se debatan. La realidad, por otro lado, debe ser discernida. Que no tengamos miedo: podemos hacer esto juntos en el camino.

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?