

HOMILY FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 20 February 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: 81

Reading I 1 Sm 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23

In those days, Saul went down to the desert of Ziph with three thousand picked men of Israel, to search for David in the desert of Ziph.

So David and Abishai went among Saul's soldiers by night and found Saul lying asleep within the barricade, with his spear thrust into the ground at his head and Abner and his men sleeping around him.

Abishai whispered to David:

"God has delivered your enemy into your grasp this day. Let me nail him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I will not need a second thrust!"

But David said to Abishai, "Do not harm him, for who can lay hands on the LORD's anointed and remain unpunished?"

So David took the spear and the water jug from their place at Saul's head, and they got away without anyone's seeing or knowing or awakening.

All remained asleep, because the LORD had put them into a deep slumber.

Going across to an opposite slope, David stood on a remote hilltop at a great distance from Abner, son of Ner, and the troops.

He said: "Here is the king's spear.

Let an attendant come over to get it.

The LORD will reward each man for his justice and faithfulness.

Today, though the LORD delivered you into my grasp, I would not harm the LORD's anointed."

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 II 1 Cor 15:45-49

Brothers and sisters:

It is written, *The first man, Adam, became a living being,*
the last Adam a life-giving spirit.

But the spiritual was not first;
rather the natural and then the spiritual.

The first man was from the earth, earthly;
the second man, from heaven.

As was the earthly one, so also are the earthly,
and as is the heavenly one, so also are the heavenly.

Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one,
we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one.

Alleluia Jn 13:34

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

I give you a new commandment, says the Lord:
love one another as I have loved you.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 6:27-38

Jesus said to his disciples:

“To you who hear I say,
love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.
To the person who strikes you on one cheek,
offer the other one as well,
and from the person who takes your cloak,
do not withhold even your tunic.
Give to everyone who asks of you,
and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back.
Do to others as you would have them do to you.
For if you love those who love you,
what credit is that to you?
Even sinners love those who love them.
And if you do good to those who do good to you,
what credit is that to you?
Even sinners do the same.
If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment,
what credit is that to you?
Even sinners lend to sinners,
and get back the same amount.
But rather, love your enemies and do good to them,
and lend expecting nothing back;
then your reward will be great
and you will be children of the Most High,
for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.
Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Stop judging and you will not be judged.
Stop condemning and you will not be condemned.
Forgive and you will be forgiven.
Give, and gifts will be given to you;
a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing,
will be poured into your lap.
For the measure with which you measure
will in return be measured out to you.”

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

“For after all, an oak tree is really rooted in the sky.”

Thomas Merton said this. He was a gifted young man who led a rather frivolous, bohemian life as a youth, mostly in Europe (his

parents were vagabond artists). Later, he studied at Columbia University.

As a college student, he recalls lying in bed with his window open onto the light well of his apartment building listening to the blaring of multiple radios. Suddenly, he realized that his soul was like the light well – a thousand contradictory voices, with little or nothing to say, all contending for attention.

Merton would soon become a Catholic and, in fact, a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky. Somewhere along the way, he discovered something important about oak trees: they are really “rooted in the sky.”

I think of Merton’s teaching, sometimes, when I am driving home on Arnold Drive. After you pass Leveroni Road (heading north), look off to the right when you are about half-way to Brocco’s Barn. There, gracefully opening its soul up into the sky above the Valley is a magnificent oak tree. (Actually, there is a whole grove of oaks, but I am confident you will know the oak I am talking about).

Look closely (but drive safely!). This oak is really rooted in the sky.

I think it safe to say that human beings have been created by God to be like oak trees. Like that great oak on the Leveroni ranch, we are really rooted in this sky.

Yes, of course, our feet are entangled in the vicious logic of markets and nation-states and power-politics. They are entangled in what Saint Paul calls “the powers and dominions” that insist on having the final say about our lives. They are entangled in the insane competitiveness that drives us to become creatures which God can barely recognize any longer.

Never mind your feet. We are really rooted in the sky. Like that oak tree on the Leveroni ranch, our souls are opened up into the transcendence of God. This is where our lives find their stability and draw their sustenance.

I recommend that you reflect on oak trees when you read the Gospel for today. The Church is giving us a taste of the Sermon on the Mount.

Not a few very secular people have said the Sermon on the Mount is the most radical political statement ever written. I tend to agree. The world would come to a stop if we ever tried to put into practice what Jesus is teaching in his famous Sermon.

Jesus lays before us a vision for a new way of living – a New Life that is quite absurd when measured by the logic of the world.

Love your enemies,
do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you,
pray for those who mistreat you.
To the person who strikes you on one cheek,
offer the other one as well,
and from the person who takes your cloak,
do not withhold even your tunic.

In his Sermon, Jesus is relentless.

Give to everyone who asks of you,
and from the one who takes what is yours
do not demand it back.

We might rightly ask: Who can live this way?

And so, I recommend reading the Sermon on the Mount with that oak tree on the Leveroni ranch in mind. Oak trees are really rooted in the sky, and the same is true of ourselves. We would do well to remember this when we struggle with Jesus's famous words.

You all know the Easter Teaching: In the Resurrection of Christ, our sins have really been forgiven. And what is more, through the Resurrection of Christ, we have been given the power to forgive the sins of others.

This great teaching lays down an enormous challenge before us. Since our sins have been forgiven, it is now possible for us to live the New Life Jesus is preaching in his Sermon on the Mount. Not only are we commanded to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us, but in the New Life of the Resurrection, doing so is possible.

Jesus's challenge has been laid down before us. Now it is up to us to take up this challenge.

But in his Sermon, Jesus challenges us not only with what he demands. He also challenges us with the hope that he holds out to us.

Stop judging and you will not be judged.
Stop condemning and you will not be condemned.
Forgive and you will be forgiven.
Give, and gifts will be given to you;
a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and
overflowing,
will be poured into your lap.
For the measure with which you measure
will in return be measured out to you.”

In each instance, the Lord first lays down a demand (“stop judging”) and then follows it up with an assurance (“you will not be judged”). What is more challenging? The demand or the hope that accompanies the demand?

We are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. We are to bless those who curse us and turn the other cheek when we are struck.

Who can do such things?

Before you answer this question for yourself, drive north on Arnold Drive and check out the oak trees. Then try to remember where these magnificent creations are really rooted.

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?