

HOMILY FOR THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 20 March 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: 30

Reading I Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian.

Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush.

As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed.

So Moses decided,

"I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned."

When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely,

God called out to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

He answered, "Here I am."

God said, "Come no nearer!

Remove the sandals from your feet,

for the place where you stand is holy ground.

I am the God of your fathers," he continued,

"the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob."

Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

But the LORD said,

"I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt

and have heard their cry of complaint

against their slave drivers,

so I know well what they are suffering.

Therefore I have come down to rescue them

from the hands of the Egyptians

and lead them out of that land

into a good and spacious land,
a land flowing with milk and honey."

Moses said to God, "But when I go to the Israelites
and say to them,
'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,'
if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?"
God replied, "I am who am."
Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites:
I AM sent me to you."

God spoke further to Moses,
"Thus shall you say to the Israelites:
The LORD, the God of your fathers,
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob,
has sent me to you.

"This is my name forever;
thus am I to be remembered through all generations."

Responsorial Psalm Ps 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11.

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.
The LORD secures justice
and the rights of all the oppressed.
He has made known his ways to Moses,
and his deeds to the children of Israel.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.
Merciful and gracious is the LORD,
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

Reading II 1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,
that our ancestors were all under the cloud
and all passed through the sea,
and all of them were baptized into Moses
in the cloud and in the sea.
All ate the same spiritual food,
and all drank the same spiritual drink,
for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them,
and the rock was the Christ.
Yet God was not pleased with most of them,
for they were struck down in the desert.

These things happened as examples for us,
so that we might not desire evil things, as they did.
Do not grumble as some of them did,
and suffered death by the destroyer.
These things happened to them as an example,
and they have been written down as a warning to us,
upon whom the end of the ages has come.
Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure
should take care not to fall.

Verse Before the Gospel Mt 4:17

Repent, says the Lord;
the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Gospel Lk 13:1-9

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans
whose blood Pilate had mingled
with the blood of their sacrifices.
Jesus said to them in reply,
"Do you think that because these Galileans
suffered in this way
they were greater sinners than all other Galileans?
By no means!
But I tell you, if you do not repent,
you will all perish as they did!
Or those eighteen people who were killed
when the tower at Siloam fell on them—
do you think they were more guilty
than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem?
By no means!

But I tell you, if you do not repent,
you will all perish as they did!"

And he told them this parable:

"There once was a person who had a fig tree
planted in his orchard,
and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none,
he said to the gardener,
'For three years now I have come in search of fruit
on this fig tree but have found none.

So cut it down.

Why should it exhaust the soil?'

He said to him in reply,

'Sir, leave it for this year also,
and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it;
it may bear fruit in the future.

If not you can cut it down.'"

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

I hope you can be patient with me. I'm afraid that I will
make a jumble of this homily today. I need to talk
about a topic that is very important: despair.

To tell the truth, I am not ready to address this
problem with any confidence yet. Despair seems so
overwhelming these days. But many of you are talking
about despair and I am very affected by your
willingness to share your faith with me.

I am asking you to be patient with me. But I also want
to ask you to be patient with yourselves as we try to
cope with a world that seems to be losing its grip. In
this homily, I want to tell you about God's patience
with the world and with all of us. But let me start with a
story about my own impatience.

Actually, it's a pretty funny story, which is a little
strange, given the fact that I am trying to talk about
despair.

I have a fig tree in my backyard. It's a Mission Fig. The
tree has been in the ground for three years and hasn't
produced any fruit.

About a month ago, I stood with Antonio in my garden and said,

What's the matter with this Mission Fig? Pull it up and toss it into the green bin. It's not giving us any fruit.

And, as if following a script, Antonio said,

No Padre, let it go another year.
I will give it a little chicken manure.

Antonio is a patient man. More patient than I am. There is little he doesn't know about fruit trees and vegetables and grapes. So, I said,

Okay, give it another year - but make sure you fertilize it.

I hope you can understand why I laughed out loud when I read the last part of today's Gospel.

And he told them this parable:
"There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard,
and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener,
'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none.
So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?'
He said to him in reply,
'Sir, leave it for this year also,
and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future.
If not you can cut it down.'"

In this parable, I suppose lots of people will think that the man who owns the fig tree is God. God is impatient with His useless people. I don't think this is correct. I think God is the gardener. I am the guy impatient with the fig tree that isn't bearing fruit.

I am the one who is in despair, and God is the one who hasn't lost hope in the world that isn't producing fruit.

Despair seems to be gripping all kinds of people today. Despair makes us surly and uncooperative. In the worst days of the pandemic, I smiled (behind my mask) at a check-out clerk at the grocery store and said to her,

"I want to thank you for working."

She teared up and told me about a customer who got unruly earlier that day when she asked him to put on a mask.

This is not a display of manly honor and freedom. This is despair.

Mr. Putin is lying about "Nazis in the Ukraine" and lots of people are eager to believe him. This passion for lies and for defending "Holy Mother Russia" is a sign of despair as well.

Saint Augustine knew a lot about despair. In 410 AD, he saw the city of Rome sacked by barbarians. I think it safe to say that this was a bigger shock to the people of his day than the atrocities of 9/11 were to us. And yet, when he reflected on his life in his *Confessions*, he wrote a prayer that should be on our lips these days.

Do not abandon what You have begun in me,
but go on to perfect all that remains unfinished.

Augustine's prayer helps to explain why I am not ready to talk very clearly about despair. As your priest, I want to comfort you, of course. But, in the end, I have to challenge you as well. Put your despair aside. There are plenty of good reasons for abandoning hope as the world comes apart at the seams. But the Church doesn't have time for despair. We are being called to be of service to those around us. We are here to give hope to those who are in despair.

So, I am giving you Augustine's prayer today as a gift. Jot it down and put it by your toaster so you see it in the

morning. Pray to God that He not abandon what He has begun in you. Pray to God that He might “go on to perfect all that remains unfinished” within you.

Don’t be confused by your despair: you are a work in progress.

I went out this morning to look at my Mission Fig. Antonio, my wise and patient gardener, has cultivated the ground around it and fertilized it, just like in Jesus’s parable. Now spring has come to the Valley, and the tree is pushing out leaves. Just below the leaves, I counted ten little buds that, by summer’s end, will ripen into figs.

Put your despair aside. Be patient with the world and be patient with yourselves. Pray to God that He not abandon what He has begun in us. God is bringing to perfection all that remains unfinished.

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?