

HOMILY FOR TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 20 September 2020

- 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: 133

Reading 1 IS 55:6-9

Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call him while he is near.
Let the scoundrel forsake his way,
and the wicked his thoughts;
let him turn to the LORD for mercy;
to our God, who is generous in forgiving.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts.

Responsorial Psalm PS 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18

R. (18a) **The Lord is near to all who call upon him.**

Every day will I bless you,
and I will praise your name forever and ever.
Great is the LORD and highly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.

R. **The Lord is near to all who call upon him.**

The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and of great kindness.

The LORD is good to all
and compassionate toward all his works.

R. **The Lord is near to all who call upon him.**

The LORD is just in all his ways
and holy in all his works.

The LORD is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth.

R. **The Lord is near to all who call upon him.**

Reading 2 PHIL1:20C-24, 27A

Brothers and sisters:

Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me life is Christ, and death is gain.

If I go on living in the flesh,
that means fruitful labor for me.

And I do not know which I shall choose.

I am caught between the two.

I long to depart this life and be with Christ,
for that is far better.

Yet that I remain in the flesh
is more necessary for your benefit.

Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Alleluia ACTS 16:14B

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Open our hearts, O Lord,
to listen to the words of your Son.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel MT 20:1-16A

Jesus told his disciples this parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner
who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage,
he sent them into his vineyard.

Going out about nine o'clock,
the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace,
and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard,
and I will give you what is just.’

So they went off.

And he went out again around noon,
and around three o'clock, and did likewise.

Going out about five o'clock,
the landowner found others standing around, and said to them,
‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’

They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’

He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’

When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman,
‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay,
beginning with the last and ending with the first.’

When those who had started about five o'clock came,
each received the usual daily wage.
So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more,
but each of them also got the usual wage.
And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying,
'These last ones worked only one hour,
and you have made them equal to us,
who bore the day's burden and the heat.'
He said to one of them in reply,
'My friend, I am not cheating you.
Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?
Take what is yours and go.
What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?
Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?
Are you envious because I am generous?'
Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

I'll bet you have noticed that we are increasingly surrounded by people with an alarming certainty in regard to just about everything. This certainty is surprising (and all the more alarming), given the amount of misinformation flying about the world these days. I am more and more convinced that this militant certainty is related to the slow erosion of social solidarity in the United States and other parts of the world.

Let me offer two thoughts about this cyclone of certainty we face today.

First, people of faith need to get ahead of the curve on this matter. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus singled out peace makers, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those persecuted for their righteousness. He never said, "blessed are those with an uncompromising certainty." I suspect that we will have to remind ourselves of this more and more in the future.

Second, in spiritual direction, at least in Catholic tradition, certainty is not necessarily a sign of faith. This is especially the case when the certainty in question shows itself as a matter of compulsion or as something driven by fear. Faith is about hope and humility. Faith is not about power. And faith is not about certainty. To the contrary, faith is about being set free by grace to hope in God as we try to discern God's will amid the inescapable ambiguities of our life here on earth.

Today's readings offer us a rich harvest in this matter. They are speaking directly to us all right now.

In the Gospel today, Jesus gives us yet another parable about the Kingdom of God.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner
who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.
After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage,
he sent them into his vineyard.

For those of you reading this homily that aren't from here in Sonoma, I need to point out to you at Saint Leo's, we know a good deal about growing grapes and the frenzy of "the crush" (as we call the harvest season). We also know the value of skilled farm labor, which is in short supply these days. In Jesus's parable, the landowner hires a crew to go out into his vineyard early in the morning. And then,

Going out about nine o'clock,
the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace,
and he said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard,
and I will give you what is just.'

The grower hires more workers at noon and yet more workers at three o'clock. Then, at five o'clock, with the sun nuzzling the horizon in the West, he sends more workers into the vineyard. He will pay them all "what is just."

None of this would have come as a surprise to Jesus's listeners. They all understood how grapes get picked during the crush.

Then comes the shocker.

Evening draws neigh and the landowner tells his foreman to gather the laborers so he can pay them. And the shocker is that all the laborers get paid the same amount, "beginning with the last and ending with the first." (Jesus is such a careful storyteller). Those that were hired late in the day get paid as much as those who have been working since the early morning and through the heat of the day.

This is what the coming Kingdom of God will be like: wildly at odds with what common sense teaches us to expect; widely at odds with what we think of as fair. The Kingdom of God, apparently, will be unfair – at least unfair according to human standards of fairness. The grape grower isn't thinking like the rest of us think. The grape grower is thinking like God thinks.

The Prophet Isaiah, in the first reading, says straight out in the plain language of his poetry what Jesus is saying by means of his story about harvesting grapes and paying your workers.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts.

If we think we know what God is thinking, we need to think again. Since this is the case, where does all this certainty come from today? Especially where does all the compulsive attachment to certainty come from? I am not referring only to religious people who are certain that they know what God is thinking. Not all fundamentalism is religious. There are many kinds of fundamentalisms, and they all have one thing in common: a compulsive attachment to certainty that is a sign of a lack of faith in the mysterious Providence of God.

We can know this for certain: faith in the God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are above our thoughts leads us to hope and humility, not certitude and power.

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?