

## HOMILY FOR TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 23 August 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: 121

#### Reading 1 IS 22:19-23

Thus says the LORD to Shebna, master of the palace:

“I will thrust you from your office  
and pull you down from your station.

On that day I will summon my servant  
Eliakim, son of Hilkiah;

I will clothe him with your robe,  
and gird him with your sash,  
and give over to him your authority.

He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem,  
and to the house of Judah.

I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim’s shoulder;  
when he opens, no one shall shut  
when he shuts, no one shall open.

I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot,  
to be a place of honor for his family.”

#### Responsorial Psalm PS 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8

R. (8bc) **Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.**

I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with all my heart,  
for you have heard the words of my mouth;  
in the presence of the angels I will sing your praise;  
I will worship at your holy temple.

R. **Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.**

I will give thanks to your name,  
because of your kindness and your truth:  
When I called, you answered me;  
you built up strength within me.

R. **Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.**

The LORD is exalted, yet the lowly he sees,

and the proud he knows from afar.  
Your kindness, O LORD, endures forever;  
forsake not the work of your hands.  
**R. Lord, your love is eternal; do not forsake the work of your hands.**

**Reading II ROM 11:33-36**

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!  
*For who has known the mind of the Lord  
or who has been his counselor?  
Or who has given the Lord anything  
that he may be repaid?*  
For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
To him be glory forever. Amen.

**Alleluia MT 16:18**

**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**  
You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church  
and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.  
**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

**Gospel MT 16:13-20**

Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi and  
he asked his disciples,  
"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"  
They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah,  
still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."  
He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"  
Simon Peter said in reply,  
"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."  
Jesus said to him in reply,  
"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.  
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.  
And so I say to you, you are Peter,  
and upon this rock I will build my church,  
and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.  
I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.  
Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven;  
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Then he strictly ordered his disciples  
to tell no one that he was the Christ

## **PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS**

I'm searching my memory. As far as I can remember, I have only met one person in my entire life who was once a slave. I mean a real slave – what's called a "chattle slave." My friend was not an indentured servant or a blue-collar worker, unable to migrate and paid "slave wages." My friend was a piece of property who was sold to a factory owner.

I'll refer to her only by her nickname: Stefcha.

Stefcha was born in Poland around 1928 (I don't know exactly which year). Some years after the German invasion of Poland (1939) she was taken into custody and became the property of the German government. Stefcha worked, slept and ate in the factory behind barbed wire. She was not paid. Stefcha was a slave. As the Krupp family, the Siemens family and the other German industrialists understood very well, slave labor was great for business.

After the war, Stefcha was repatriated as Stalin and the KGB were setting up shop in Poland. Eventually things got so bad for her family that Stefcha left her husband and children (who were all grown-up) behind and came Chicago. That is where I met her. She was part of a coterie of Polish women who came to Chicago in the hope earning money to send home by caring for elderly Americans.

Calling on her one day, I noticed that the mail had been delivered, so I scooped it into my hands and gave it to her. There was a letter from Poland which she opened right away. The letter was written in a steady hand, full of Polish consonants and strange accent marks. Stefcha's eyes welled-up and, whimpering something in Polish, went upstairs to her room. This was before 1989. Life was terrible back home.

I might be giving you the wrong impression about dear Stefcha. Stefcha was one of the most joyful human beings I have ever known. She had very little formal education (but she could read). She didn't speak much English (but she was a genius at communicating with people). Most of all, Stefcha was *really* smart. I guess she would have had to be smart if she was going to survive the hand she had been dealt.

Most important of all, she was full of tenderness – that peculiar, ironic tenderness, without even a hint of bitterness, that maybe only former slaves can really understand.

I thought of Stefcha when I did my *lectio divina* with this week's readings. (See below for instructions regarding the "sacred reading" of the Bible.) Stefcha came to mind as I read the second reading, ever so slowly, trying to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying in the words of Saint Paul as he wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome. (By the way, Paul was a prisoner of the Roman Imperial authorities when he wrote these lines. Not exactly a slave, but close to it. He was being transported to Rome for trial).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!

Who would have thought that a young Polish slave, huddled in the cold and darkness of a factory during the Second World War, would someday come to Chicago and be such a good friend to “Ojczy Jimmy”? (She always addressed me with deference.)

*For who has known the mind of the Lord  
or who has been his counselor?  
Or who has given the Lord anything  
that he may be repaid?*

Here is a good question for us all: How are we to give the Lord anything so that “he may be repaid”? Before you start coming up with answers to this question, stop and think a little. We can’t begin to think about repaying the Lord until we feel grateful to him.

No one beats Stefcha when it comes to gratitude.

When I think of what she endured, during the War and after, I wonder why there is so much fear and pusillanimity within so many of us today. Why isn’t there more gratitude?

Stefcha is truly an impressive human being. In her life, she has endured injustices and sorrows that would have undone me. Even still, she is repaying the Lord for his many blessings with a life full of tenderness and compassion toward others. She is one of those Great Souls that has learned to be gentle through suffering.

Let me be clear: Stefcha is not an optimist. Optimism and joyfulness are not at all the same thing. Optimism is something we cook-up for ourselves. Joyfulness is a grace that comes from God. It is rooted in the gratitude that can only come from God. Stefcha is neither an optimist nor a pessimist. She is a woman of a deep and abiding faith in the steadfast love of God that, somehow, is still visibly at work in this troubled world.

*For who has known the mind of the Lord  
or who has been his counselor?  
Or who has given the Lord anything  
that he may be repaid?*

Remember: Saint Paul was a prisoner when he wrote these words and would soon be sentenced to death by a Roman judge. As I read Paul’s words, I thought of Stefcha, who is a slave no longer.

Stefcha has been set free by the grace of God.

### **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?