

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF PENTECOST

Sunday, 23 May 2021

- 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

Reading I Gn 11:1-9

The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words.

While the people were migrating in the east,
they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

They said to one another,

“Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.”

They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city

and a tower with its top in the sky,

and so make a name for ourselves;

otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.”

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower
that the people had built.

Then the LORD said: “If now, while they are one people,

all speaking the same language,

they have started to do this,

nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do.

Let us then go down there and confuse their language,

so that one will not understand what another says.”

Thus the LORD scattered them from there all over the earth,

and they stopped building the city.

That is why it was called Babel,

because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world.

It was from that place that he scattered them all over the earth.

Responsorial Psalm 104:1-2, 24, 35, 27-28, 29, 30

R. (cf. 30) Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD, my God, you are great indeed!

You are clothed with majesty and glory,

robed in light as with a cloak.

R. Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

or:

R. Alleluia.

How manifold are your works, O LORD!

In wisdom you have wrought them all
the earth is full of your creatures;

 bless the LORD, O my soul! Alleluia.

R. Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Creatures all look to you
 to give them food in due time.

When you give it to them, they gather it;
 when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

R. Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

or:

R. Alleluia.

If you take away their breath, they perish
 and return to their dust.

When you send forth your spirit, they are created,
 and you renew the face of the earth.

R. Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II Acts 2:1-11

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled,
they were all in one place together.

And suddenly there came from the sky
a noise like a strong driving wind,
and it filled the entire house in which they were.

Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire,
which parted and came to rest on each one of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in different tongues,
as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem.

At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd,
but they were confused

because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

They were astounded, and in amazement they asked,

“Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans?

Then how does each of us hear them in his native language?

We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites,
inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene,
as well as travelers from Rome,
both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs,
yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues
of the mighty acts of God.”

Alleluia

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Jn 7:37-39

On the last and greatest day of the feast,
Jesus stood up and exclaimed,
“Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink.

As Scripture says:

Rivers of living water will flow from within him who believes in me.”

He said this in reference to the Spirit
that those who came to believe in him were to receive.
There was, of course, no Spirit yet,
because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and I want to tell you about Sister Rose.

I have never met Sister Rose. She works in a community health-clinic in Myanmar, in the northern part of that troubled country. Sister is a nurse.

Myanmar has had a difficult time. The military toppled the democratically elected government (again) last February, and there has been civil unrest ever since. Lots of kids have taken to the streets in protest. As of last week, 796 people have been killed.

On 8 March, a little over a month after the military take-over of the government, Sister Rose heard a commotion outside her hospital. Soldiers were in a tense confrontation with students who were demonstrating in the street.

For reasons Sister Rose can't explain very well in her limited English, she went out into the street and knelt in front of the soldiers, begging them not to shoot the students. The soldiers didn't shoot.

A friend of mine sent me this picture.



Look closely. There is more going on in this photograph than you might think at first. I want to offer some ideas about what you are seeing in this picture. This will lead us, eventually, to Pentecost.

In order to get to Pentecost, I need to start with the Tower of Babel.

The story of the Tower of Babel, along with the story of Noah and his Ark, is one of the great myths in the book of Genesis. (I don't have to explain that myths are true, do I? Myths are true, but not literally true).

The myth of Tower of Babel begins,

The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words.
While the people were migrating in the east,
they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

In the beginning, all human beings "spoke the same language, using the same words." What would it be like to live in a world where people were able to communicate plainly, speaking the same language and using the same words to say what they are trying to say?

The story also informs us that “the people were migrating in the east.” This needs a little comment. When Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden, they wandered off into the desolation “east of Eden.” We have been making ourselves miserable “migrating in the east” ever since.

Then, the people said to one another,

“Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.”
They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar.
Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city
and a tower with its top in the sky,
and so make a name for ourselves;
otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.”

This seems innocent enough. Then, I think about the pharmaceutical company that lied about how addictive its opioids were and the bankers who accumulated enormous wealth as they brought on the financial crisis of 2008. These people certainly made “a name for themselves” as they built their towers “with its top in the sky.” All human beings can be wicked. When human beings get highly organized as they build their towers, they can be very wicked indeed.

The story itself offers confirmation of this:

Then the LORD said: “If now, while they are one people,
all speaking the same language,
they have started to do this,
nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do.”

Remember, this is going on “east of Eden,” where there seems to be nothing to stop us from doing whatever we presume to do.

What the Lord does next reveals a great deal about the lives we all lead today. (Of course, this is exactly what myths are supposed to do.) The Lord says,

Let us then go down there and confuse their language,
so that one will not understand what another says.”
Thus the LORD scattered them from there all over the earth,
and they stopped building the city.
That is why it was called Babel,
because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world.
It was from that place that he scattered them all over the earth.

This is the ancient curse of Babel: we have been scattered over the earth with such a confusion of languages that we can no longer understand one another.

The curse of Babel goes deeper, however. I think of the Tower of Babel when I talk to parents who just can't find the right words to communicate with their kids. A father once told me how, when his daughter was a tyke, she would sit in his lap for hours and they would talk about everything. Now that she is older, he said, "its like we speak different languages."

There is a reason that the Church gives us the story of the Tower of Babel on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost is the overcoming of the ancient curse of Babel.

In the land of Shinar, we "used bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar" to build "a tower with its top in the sky" in the hope of making a name for ourselves. Then we were scattered across the earth and plunged into a confusion of languages. Now we go through life unable to understand one another. At Pentecost, in contrast, a "noise like a strong driving wind" descends from the sky filling the house where the disciples were. And then,

there appeared to them tongues as of fire,
which parted and came to rest on each one of them.
And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in different tongues,
as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

The disciples go out into the streets of Jerusalem where they found "Jews from every nation under heaven." A large crowd gathers and,

each one heard them speaking in his own language.
They were astounded, and in amazement they asked,
"Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans?
Then how does each of us hear them in his native language?
We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites,
inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene,
as well as travelers from Rome,
both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs,
yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues
of the mighty acts of God."

Pentecost reverses the ancient curse of Babel. We are no longer condemned to the loneliness of eternally misunderstanding one another. There is a beautiful verse in one of the Psalms: "heart calls out onto heart" (*cor ad cor loquitur*). Even though our attempts to communicate be faltering, trust and intimacy between human beings is possible. Tongues of fire have settled over us.

This brings me back to Sister Rose. Here is the picture again:



I said above that there is more going on here than you might think. Now, let me explain what I mean.

Sister Rose was born and raised in Myanmar. She speaks Burmese, like most people in Myanmar. Unlike most people in Myanmar, however, she is not a Buddhist. Sister Rose, of course, is a baptized Christian, a Catholic nun. Last March, she heard a commotion outside her hospital. Soldiers were confronting a group of students. She walked out into the street, knelt before the soldiers, extended her arms and pleaded for the lives of the people the soldiers had been ordered to shoot.

I think this picture of Sister Rose and the soldiers captures what happened when the disciples went out on to the streets of Jerusalem at Pentecost, so long ago. People, who speak different languages, were able to understand one another.

Sister Rose, of course, is a Christian. Some might think that the soldiers are Christians as well. Two of them are kneeling with Sister Rose with their hands folded together as if they were saying a Hail Mary. I don't think this is the case. I think the soldiers are Buddhists.

Why do I say this?

From Sri Lanka to Japan, with Myanmar in between, Buddhists put their hands together as a sign of respect for the person in front of them. In Japan, this is called *gasshō*. (I don't know

what Buddhists call it in Myanmar). The soldiers are pious Buddhists showing respect for a Catholic nun.

But look especially at the soldier on the left side of the photograph. He is holding his hands a little higher, closer to his forehead. Some Buddhists do the *gasshō* this way so as to say,

“If I have gained any wisdom in my life, I give this wisdom to you.”

As Christians, I hope you will join me in a deep sense of wonderment and respect for this Buddhist gesture. Putting one’s hands together and dedicating what little wisdom you have to the one standing before you is nothing if not affecting. Without using any words at all, these two soldiers are communicating to Sister Rose that is profoundly human. What Sister Rose has done is impressive. How the soldiers have responded to her is equally worthy of our attention. “Heart calls out onto heart.”

I have told people that this is a picture of Buddhist-Christian dialogue at the deepest level. But I also want to say that every dialogue between human beings, no matter how simple or how fraught, is a Pentecost.

In the first Pentecost, people of different languages were able to understand one another. This is happening in the photograph as well. I don’t mean English, Swahili, Russian or Arabic. The soldiers and Sister Rose all speak Burmese. The different languages in question are Buddhism and Christianity.

Sister Rose has extended her arms, like Christ crucified, to embrace the suffering of the soldiers as they struggle with their orders to confront the students. She is speaking the language of Christian faith. The soldiers respond to Sister Rose with a Buddhist gesture that is an eloquent expression of humility.

“If we have gained any wisdom in our lives, Sister, we give it all to you.”

The soldiers are speaking the language of Buddhism. And everybody, somehow, is understanding one another in their own tongue.

We are still in the land of Shinar, east of Eden. We are still building towers in the hope of making a name for ourselves. But do not forget that the Spirit has been poured out over the face of the earth. Tongues of fire hover over our heads and burn within our hearts. Don’t be afraid to spread wide your arms to embrace suffering or, in an eloquent gesture of humility, to place your palms together. People are yearning to hear the Good News and the Holy Spirit is brooding over the whole world just waiting for you to speak up.

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?