

HOMILY FOR CHRISTMAS
Wednesday, 25 December 2024

Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day
Part Two: reflections on the readings
Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY
Lectionary: 14

Reading I Is 9:1-6

The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom
 a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy
 and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you as at the harvest,
 as people make merry when dividing spoils.
For the yoke that burdened them,
 the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster
 you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.
For every boot that tramped in battle,
 every cloak rolled in blood,
 will be burned as fuel for flames.
For a child is born to us, a son is given us;
 upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
 Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast
 and forever peaceful,
from David's throne, and over his kingdom,
 which he confirms and sustains
by judgment and justice,
 both now and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!

Responsorial Psalm Ps 96: 1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13.

R. (Lk 2:11) Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all you lands.
Sing to the LORD; bless his name.

R. Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Announce his salvation, day after day.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

R. Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;
let the sea and what fills it resound;
let the plains be joyful and all that is in them!
Then shall all the trees of the forest exult.

R. Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

They shall exult before the LORD, for he comes;
for he comes to rule the earth.
He shall rule the world with justice
and the peoples with his constancy.

R. Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Reading II Ti 2:11-14

Beloved:

The grace of God has appeared, saving all
and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires
and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age,
as we await the blessed hope,
the appearance of the glory of our great God
and savior Jesus Christ,
who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness
and to cleanse for himself a people as his own,
eager to do what is good.

Alleluia Lk 2:10-11

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

I proclaim to you good news of great joy:
today a Savior is born for us,
Christ the Lord.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
that the whole world should be enrolled.

This was the first enrollment,
when Quirinius was governor of Syria.
So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.

And Joseph too went up from Galilee
from the town of Nazareth
to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem,
because he was of the house and family of David,
to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed,
who was with child.

While they were there,
the time came for her to have her child,
and she gave birth to her firstborn son.
She wrapped him in swaddling clothes
and laid him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region
living in the fields
and keeping the night watch over their flock.

The angel of the Lord appeared to them
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were struck with great fear.

The angel said to them,
"Do not be afraid;
for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy
that will be for all the people.

For today in the city of David
a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.
And this will be a sign for you:
you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes
and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host
with the angel,
praising God and saying:

“Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Merry Christmas to you all.

I have a Christmas story to share with you that is very dear to me. I don't think I have ever told you this story - which surprises me, because it's such a great Christmas story.

It's a story about my friend, Hank Ueda.

Hank grew up in the Little Tokyo neighborhood of Los Angeles. As you can guess, this part of LA was settled by immigrants from Japan. Today, the neighborhood is flourishing with shops, museums, Buddhist temples and Saint Francis Xavier Catholic Church.

Hank was baptized at Saint Francis Xavier. The Japanese immigrants and Japanese-American people of this parish welcomed me as their priest when I lived in LA.

I need to say that Hank was arrested when he was a little boy. In February of 1942, when Hank was about 10 years old, everyone in Little Tokyo was arrested. Hank was an American but his parents were born in Japan. Hank and his whole family, along with everybody else in the parish and in the neighborhood were “evacuated” (this is the term Hank used) to the Manzanar internment camp.

Manzanar is in the high desert on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. The camp sits in the shadow of Mount Whitney. It's cold and windswept and very beautiful.

In camp, everyone lived in a barrack. The floorboards were bare. The bedframes were made of galvanized iron pipes. There was no drywall on the inside. You could see the tarpaper between the slats. And there was a woodburning stove to heat the barrack.

I remember arriving early one morning for the Japanese mass at Saint Francis Xavier. I remember making my way up the main aisle of the church. Probably, I was thinking

about my homily. But I was brought up short when I got to the steps leading up into the sanctuary.

There was a nativity scene set up in front of the pulpit.

I'm sure you have your own ideas about what a nativity scene is supposed to look like. It looks like a barn. There's hay and animals and stalls for the animals. Of course, there should also be a manger - a trough for the animals to feed in.

But that Sunday morning, looking at the creche, there was no barn and no manger either. Instead, there was a facsimile of the barracks out at Manzanar - like a doll house, only with tarpaper and exposed slats and bare boards on the floor and a woodburning stove. Everything was perfect, down to the smallest detail. There were army drab-green blankets on the beds and a miniature woodburning stove.

After mass, I was told that Hank Ueda made this creche. Hank had reached back into a memory of his time in "camp" during the Second World War, when he was only a little boy.

According to Saint Luke, the Christ Child was born in a barn, not a palace. Joseph brought his betrothed to his birthplace, to Bethlehem, to register for the emperor's census. Then, Saint Luke tells us,

While they were there,
the time came for her to have her child,
and she gave birth to her firstborn son.
She wrapped him in swaddling clothes
and laid him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.

Two thousand years ago, the Christ Child was born in a barn, not a palace. There was no room for him in the inn. And when the people of Saint Francis Xavier parish in Little Tokyo were under arrest and far from home in the high desert, during the terrible days of the Second World War, the Christ Child was born in camp - in a barracks with tarpaper for insulation and a wood burning stove for heat.

I hope you all have a Merry Christmas. I hope you all will be with your loved ones today to celebrate the birth of the Messiah.

But I also have to say that life can be difficult at times. The world can drive our hearts to desolate places that are far from home. When this happens, think of Hank and the creche he built for us at Saint Francis Xavier.

The Christ Child was not born in a palace. He was born in a barn. In fact, every Christmas, the Christ Child seeks out places that are distant and desolate and wind swept. He longs to be born among people who are far from home - people for whom there is no place in the inn. Places like Bethlehem and Manzanar.

Merry Christmas to you all.

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 homily 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?