

HOMILY FOR THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 25 October 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: 148

Reading 1 EX 22:20-26

Thus says the LORD:

"You shall not molest or oppress an alien,
for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.

You shall not wrong any widow or orphan.

If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me,

I will surely hear their cry.

My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword;

then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

"If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people,
you shall not act like an extortioner toward him

by demanding interest from him.

If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge,

you shall return it to him before sunset;

for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body.

What else has he to sleep in?

If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate."

Responsorial Psalm PS 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

R. (2) **I love you, Lord, my strength.**

I love you, O LORD, my strength,

O LORD, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.

R. **I love you, Lord, my strength.**

My God, my rock of refuge,

my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold!

Praised be the LORD, I exclaim,

and I am safe from my enemies.

R. **I love you, Lord, my strength.**

The LORD lives and blessed be my rock!

Extolled be God my savior.

You who gave great victories to your king

and showed kindness to your anointed.
R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

Reading 2 1 THES 1:5C-10

Brothers and sisters:

You know what sort of people we were among you for your sake.
And you became imitators of us and of the Lord,
receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit,
so that you became a model for all the believers
in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth
not only in Macedonia and in Achaia,
but in every place your faith in God has gone forth,
so that we have no need to say anything.

For they themselves openly declare about us
what sort of reception we had among you,
and how you turned to God from idols
to serve the living and true God
and to await his Son from heaven,
whom he raised from the dead,
Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.

Alleluia JN 14:23

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord,
and my Father will love him and we will come to him.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel MT 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees,
they gathered together, and one of them,
a scholar of the law tested him by asking,
"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

He said to him,

"You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your mind.

This is the greatest and the first commandment.

The second is like it:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Let me tell you about Marie, a woman I knew, years ago, when I was a student in Chicago.

The first thing I must tell you about Marie is that she is useless. The second thing I want to say about Marie is that “Marie” is not her real name. The third thing I should say about Marie is that she is holy and beloved in the eyes of God.

I think this last statement (holy and beloved in the eyes of God) places a tremendous responsibility on us all. This is what I want to talk about in this homily.

Marie is useless. At least she is useless from the point of view I usually take when I deal with the world. Marie can't do anything that you might want to hire her to do. She can't clean my house or mow my lawn – she doesn't have a car. She can't do retail or wait tables because she can't stand on her feet for very long. Marie suffers from severe diabetes.

She can't even go shopping for me. You see, Marie can't read or write. She's illiterate (something that is actually hard for someone like me to imagine). I found this out when I asked her to write me a shopping list so I could go to the store for her.

In truth, Marie has a few emotional problems as well. She's certainly not violent. She is not even grouchy, let alone mean. I guess we could say that she's “depressed.” (I know, this is the catch-all diagnosis, but it fits just about everybody who gets overwhelmed by this world every once in a while).

There are multiple reasons that explain why Marie is useless. I don't know why some people have diabetes and other don't, but I presume doctors have studied this. Marie eats more junk food than she should. But junk food is cheap, and you don't have to prepare it.

On the other hand, I do in fact know why she is illiterate. Marie is an African American woman and grew up in Mississippi back in the days of Jim Crow. She went through public schools that were “separate but equal” and then moved north to Chicago hoping to get away from sharecropping. Somewhere along the line, she never learned how to read.

And yes, she has a few kids. Like everybody else, Marie gets lonely.

When I knew her, she lived in an apartment on the South Side of Chicago. I gave her some blankets once, during the winter, when the furnace in her building went out.

Yes, Marie is pretty useless. She doesn't have any “marketable skills” (as my college students used to say). She is unable to compete in this very competitive world. I also must admit that, most of the time, I think of this competitive world we inhabit in terms of utility.

By “utility” I mean that the first question I usually want answered is, “what can you do for me?” For more than thirty years, I worked at a university where we all worked hard to equip wonderful, smart, talented (and lucky) college students with “marketable skills” so they could compete. But I must admit, for all her gentleness, Marie would not even do well as a janitor at my university.

Why are today’s readings are so challenging? Our Scriptures demand that we look on Marie not in terms of marketable skills and utility. We are called to look on this woman they way God looks on her.

The first reading is taken from the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament. It is part of the Torah, the Law of Moses, that has shaped the Jewish people and their sense of justice centuries after century. This is the “Law” that they were using to trick Jesus in the Gospel for today.

In this reading, Moses is spelling out for the people what the God of the Exodus demands.

Thus says the LORD:

"You shall not molest or oppress an alien,
for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.

Of course, the Hebrews weren’t just aliens in Egypt. They were slaves. At this point in the Book of Exodus, the Lord God has led the people out of the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of the desert. And, in the desert, the Lord places demands on the people: you will not treat the stranger in your land the way the Egyptians treated you.

And there is more:

You shall not wrong any widow or orphan.

The Lord forbids us to exploit a woman who has no man to protect her. Neither shall you turn your back on an orphan in her poverty. Widows and orphans, back in those days, were pretty useless in the eyes of those who were well established.

And then, the God of the Exodus says something remarkable to the people, something we must pay close attention to.

If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me,
I will surely hear their cry.

This teaching is all over the Old Testament. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of the Torah, Moses warns the people that their God is a God of “justice.”

He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow,

and He loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing.
So you also must love the foreigner, since you yourselves were foreigners in the
land of Egypt. (Dt. 10:18).

The Law of Moses confronts people like me, who have a surplus of marketable skills, with
a demand to promote justice in this insanely competitive world. The reading continues,

If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people,
you shall not act like an extortioner toward him
by demanding interest from him.
If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge,
you shall return it to him before sunset;
for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body.
What else has he to sleep in?

Then, once again, the question of whose prayer reaches heaven comes up again.

If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate."

The Lord hears the cry of the poor of this world who are being extorted.

Jesus came to fulfill this Law of Moses, not to replace it. This means that, if we are to be
people of faith, we cannot live lives that are slavishly given over to competing with our
"marketable skills." We cannot look blindly on our neighbors solely in terms of their ability
to produce and compete in the marketplace. We cannot insist on a society where the first
question is always, "what can you do for me?"

The Church teaches that the human person – every human person, no matter how sinful –
is created in the image of God and enjoys a God-given dignity that must not be violated.
The Lord hears the cry of the widow, the orphan and the alien because the Lord does not
look on what he has created the way we have come to look at it.

Pope Francis promulgated a new encyclical on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi (4 October).
It's called *Fratelli Tutti* ("Brothers and Sisters All). I encourage you all to read it. The Pope's
encyclical is deeply endowed with the vision of God's love for the widow, the orphan and
the alien that we see in the first reading today.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes about two kinds of love.

First, there is the love that arises out of our many virtues and our acts of charity in
response to those who touch our hearts. This love is "elicited" by those around us.

But there is another kind of love as well. This love is not "elicited." It does not originate in
our virtues. It is not even prompted by the suffering that afflicts our neighbors. This love is

“commanded” of us whether we are in the mood or not. It is commanded of us whether we think our love has been earned or not. It is commanded of us whether we think our love will be wasted or not.

This second form of love – that love that God commands of us – is hard to understand in a world that worships marketable skills and places its faith in competition. For Christians (and Jews of course) there is a love that is commanded of us that brings “business as usual” to a halt. Only in obedience to this command to love does God’s justice arise in this world.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope calls the love that God commands of us the “spiritual heart of politics.” It is a “preferential love shown to those in greatest need.” In fact, the love that is commanded of us is nothing less than God’s preferential love that hears the cry of the widow, the orphan and the alien, in accordance with the Law of Moses.

And most importantly, this preferential love for those who cannot compete opens our eyes so that we can begin to look on this world the way God looks on it. Pope Francis writes,

Only a gaze transformed by charity can enable the dignity of others to be recognized and, as a consequence, the poor to be acknowledged and valued in their dignity, respected in their identity and culture, and thus truly integrated into society. That gaze is at the heart of the authentic spirit of politics. It sees paths open up that are different from those of a soulless pragmatism.

I take “soulless pragmatism” to mean what I meant by “utility” up above.

In the Gospel today, Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment in the entire Law of Moses. He answers without hesitation and cuts through all the inhumane preoccupation with legal technicalities that blind us to what God’s commands us to do.

The greatest commandment?

You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your mind.
This is the greatest and the first commandment.

And how are we to fulfill this greatest of all the commandments?

The second is like it:
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

I believe that Jesus had Marie in mind when he taught us that love is the fulfillment of the Law. Like the widow, the orphan and the alien, Marie is useless in the eyes of the world. But the God who commands us to love hears her when she cries out to him.

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?