

HOMILY FOR THE TWENTY-SIX SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 26 September 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

Lectionary: 137

Reading I Nm 11:25-29

The LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses.

Taking some of the spirit that was on Moses,

the LORD bestowed it on the seventy elders;

and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied.

Now two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad,

were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp.

They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent;

yet the spirit came to rest on them also,

and they prophesied in the camp.

So, when a young man quickly told Moses,

"Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp, "

Joshua, son of Nun, who from his youth had been Moses' aide, said,

"Moses, my lord, stop them."

But Moses answered him,

"Are you jealous for my sake?"

Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets!

Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!"

Responsorial Psalm Ps 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14

R. (9a) The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The law of the LORD is perfect,

refreshing the soul;

the decree of the LORD is trustworthy,

giving wisdom to the simple.

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The fear of the LORD is pure,

enduring forever;

the ordinances of the LORD are true,

all of them just.

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

Though your servant is careful of them,

very diligent in keeping them,
Yet who can detect failings?
Cleanse me from my unknown faults!
R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.
From wanton sin especially, restrain your servant;
let it not rule over me.
Then shall I be blameless and innocent
of serious sin.
R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

Reading II Jas 5:1-6

Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries.
Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten,
your gold and silver have corroded,
and that corrosion will be a testimony against you;
it will devour your flesh like a fire.
You have stored up treasure for the last days.
Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers
who harvested your fields are crying aloud;
and the cries of the harvesters
have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.
You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure;
you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.
You have condemned;
you have murdered the righteous one;
he offers you no resistance.

Alleluia Cf. Jn 17:17b, 17a

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
Your word, O Lord, is truth;
consecrate us in the truth.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

At that time, John said to Jesus,
"Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name,
and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us."
Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him.
There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name
who can at the same time speak ill of me.
For whoever is not against us is for us.
Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink
because you belong to Christ,
amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Several years back, I remember receiving an email from one of my colleagues. We worked together in the theology department of Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles. The email was marked, "urgent." It came into my in-box early on a Saturday morning.

"Jim – where do they offer mass in English in Paris?"

I smiled in amusement when I read my friend's email. Why would Amir – that's my friend's name – need to find an English-language mass in Paris? For one thing, Amir lives in Los Angeles, not Paris. But in addition, Amir is a devout Muslim – born in Pakistan, raised in Canada and working in a Catholic university in Los Angeles.

Amir is also the faculty-mentor to my university's women's basketball team. In addition to his devotion to his Muslim faith, he is also devoted to our women hoopsters. The team was in the French capital for some sort of tournament. It was Saturday afternoon in France and Amir wanted to be sure that the Catholic women on the team got to mass that Sunday.

I would expect nothing less from Amir. I say this about my friend because I know him to be a devout Muslim.

"Do beautiful things for God –
this is what Muslims are called to do."

This is what Amir teaches his students about Islam. And, as a devout Muslim, Amir was practicing what he teaches in his effort to find a mass in English in the City of Lights.

The mission-statement of our university is clear as to what our work is about:

- The encouragement of learning
- The education of the whole person
- The service of faith and the promotion of justice

I wish all my colleagues were as committed to the mission as Amir.

I have to be clear about a point that is really important: Amir is not committed to these Catholic educational values *despite* his Muslim faith. Amir is an invaluable asset to my university *because* of his Muslim faith.

We both contribute to the mission of the university. The beauty of it is that we contribute in different ways. Muslims contribute to the university's mission in a way that I cannot. I can say this about my Jewish colleagues as well.

I am happy to think that our students can see that Amir and I are friends. I am committed to the mission of the university as a practicing Catholic. He is committed to the mission as a practicing Muslim. As a Christian and as a Muslim, we don't just tolerate one another. We hold one another in esteem. This is what I want my students to see.

In the Gospel for today, John says to Jesus,

"Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us."

Jesus's response is certainly pragmatic.

"Do not prevent him... For whoever is not against us is for us."

In effect, Jesus seems to be saying,

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

But I wonder if there is something more challenging going on here. I think there is a deeper meaning.

Jesus is teaching us that the Church, for all its beauty, is not the main event in the drama of our redemption. The Church is simply a witness to what God is bringing about in this world. The Church, therefore, should not be in the business of proclaiming itself. Our job is to proclaim the Good News of the approaching Kingdom of God.

Saint Ambrose of Milan (d. 387 AD) taught that the Church was like the Mystery of the moon (*mysterium lunae*). The moon, for all its beauty, does not shine by its own light. It reflects the light of the sun. This teaching was much discussed at the Second Vatican Council and remains important for us today.

There are some, in the Catholic Church, who think of the Church as an island of light surrounded by a sea of darkness. This view of the Church leads easily to thinking that the Church shines by its own light. This is a mistake. The Church is a witness to a light that does not originate in itself. We would do well to be faithful to the Gospel by being humble about the Church.

I think this is what Jesus meant when he spoke to John. John wanted to “protect the brand” (as my business friends would say). Someone from outside the community was muscling in on John’s monopoly on the Good News. And Jesus says,

"Do not prevent him...
For whoever is not against us is for us."

As people of faith and members of the global Church community, we need to recognize that the Good News is being proclaimed by people that are not part of the Church in any visible way. These good souls – Muslims, like my friend Amir, but also Jews, Buddhists, and atheists too – are not Christians. But don’t think for a moment that they are against us.

The university’s women’s basketball team made it to mass that Sunday in Paris. Amir made sure of that.

Amir, my Muslim friend, is not against us. Quite the contrary, he is very much for us.

By the way, if you’re ever in Paris and looking for a mass in English, take the Metro to the *Arc de Triumph* and come out on the north side of the station. L’Eglise de Saint Joseph is on the Rue Hoche a short walk away.

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?