

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 27 March 2022

- 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: 33

Reading I Jos 5:9a, 10-12

The LORD said to Joshua,

“Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.”

While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains
of Jericho,

they celebrated the Passover

on the evening of the fourteenth of the month.

On the day after the Passover,

they ate of the produce of the land

in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain.

On that same day after the Passover,

on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna
ceased.

No longer was there manna for the Israelites,

who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7.

R. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the LORD at all times;

his praise shall be ever in my mouth.

Let my soul glory in the LORD;

the lowly will hear me and be glad.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Glorify the LORD with me,

let us together extol his name.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me

and delivered me from all my fears.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy,

and your faces may not blush with shame.
When the poor one called out, the LORD heard,
and from all his distress he saved him.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II 2 Cor 5:17-21

Brothers and sisters:

Whoever is in Christ is a new creation:

the old things have passed away;

behold, new things have come.

And all this is from God,

who has reconciled us to himself through Christ

and given us the ministry of reconciliation,

namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,

not counting their trespasses against them

and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors for Christ,

as if God were appealing through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ,

be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin,

so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Verse before the Gospel Lk 15:18

I will get up and go to my Father and shall say to him:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Gospel Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near

to listen to Jesus,

but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying,

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So to them Jesus addressed this parable:

“A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father,

‘Father give me the share of your estate

that should come to me.’

So the father divided the property between them.

After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings

and set off to a distant country

where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.

When he had freely spent everything,

a severe famine struck that country,

and he found himself in dire need.

So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens
who sent him to his farm to tend the swine.
And he longed to eat his fill of the pods
on which the swine fed,
but nobody gave him any.
Coming to his senses he thought,
'How many of my father's hired workers
have more than enough food to eat,
but here am I, dying from hunger.
I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him,
"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.
I no longer deserve to be called your son;
treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."
So he got up and went back to his father.
While he was still a long way off,
his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion.
He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.
His son said to him,
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you;
I no longer deserve to be called your son.'
But his father ordered his servants,
'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
Then let us celebrate with a feast,
because this son of mine was dead,
and has come to life again;
he was lost, and has been found.'
Then the celebration began.

Now the older son had been out in the field
and, on his way back, as he neared the house,
he heard the sound of music and dancing.
He called one of the servants
and asked what this might mean.
The servant said to him,
'Your brother has returned
and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf
because he has him back safe and sound.'
He became angry,
and when he refused to enter the house,
his father came out and pleaded with him.
He said to his father in reply,
'Look, all these years I served you

and not once did I disobey your orders;
yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on
with my friends.
But when your son returns
who swallowed up your property with prostitutes,
for him you slaughter the fattened calf.'
He said to him,
'My son, you are here with me always;
everything I have is yours.
But now we must celebrate and rejoice,
because your brother was dead and has come to life again;
he was lost and has been found.'"

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

After his arrest in 1964, Nelson Mandela was taken to a bleak, windswept island, far off the coast of Cape Town. He was imprisoned for his attempts to end *apartheid* in his country. This is well known.

Less well known is that, in 1994, Nelson Mandela invited several of his jailers to attend his inauguration as the democratically elected President of the Republic of South Africa. The new president knew these men well. He had been in custody for twenty-seven years.

Mandela even hired one of his former jailers, Rory Steyn, an Afrikaner police officer, to lead his security detail. "And who was I?," Steyn asked, "I was just a dispensable white cop." The new president could have given this job to someone who had fought against *apartheid* with him, but Steyn and his prisoner had become friends.

On the day of his release from prison, Mandela is reported to have said,

As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.

We are in the season of Lent - which lasts forty days. Jesus spent forty days in the desert. The Jewish people sojourned in the wilderness for forty years. The number

forty keeps popping up in the Bible – it just means “a long time.”

Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in a prison. That’s a long time in the wilderness.

I think we should take President Mandela’s words to heart as we make our way through Lent toward Holy Week. As Mandela said, we can keep ourselves in prison if we put our minds to it. We can imprison our souls in the wilderness if we cling to our bitterness and hatred.

In the Gospel according to Mark, we learn that, after Jesus’s baptism,

At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.

Jesus is “driven” out into his desert and then tempted by the Devil to leave the wilderness early, before his forty days of trial were completed.

As a way to reflect on our souls during our forty days of Lent, I suggest that we look at today’s Gospel, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, in light of Jesus’s time in the wilderness.

This famous parable ends with the older brother – the brother who is dutiful – standing out in what I imagine to be the dark on a cold night. His father has slaughtered “the fatted calf” for a banquet to celebrate the younger brother’s return.

The older brother is angry and refuses to enter the house. So the father comes out of the house to plead with his older son. The older brother will have nothing of it.

“Look, all these years I served you
and not once did I disobey your orders;
yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on
with my friends.
But when your son returns

who swallowed up your property with prostitutes,
for him you slaughter the fattened calf.”

I think it very important to take note of the fact that the parable ends with this family conflict unresolved. Jesus does not tell us if the older brother decides to join the party or not.

When it comes to storytelling, Jesus knows what he’s doing. The lack of resolution in this story is quite deliberate. The story ends with the old brother left out in the darkness and cold with anger pulsing through his veins and the smell of BBQ beef wafting into his nostrils.

I think Jesus is quite aware that we are all a little like this indignant older brother, seething with anger out in the darkness and cold. Remember how Luke sets up the story:

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke does not think of us as Jesus’s beloved tax collectors and the sinners. We are the Pharisees and the scribes. Jesus’s parable, with its unresolved ending, is aimed right at us. Neither are we the younger brother in the story. We are certainly not the father, whose love for his younger son is extravagant to the point of being prodigal.

We are the older brother, standing out in the cold and the darkness. Most wonderful of all, we are in the cold and darkness not just stewing about our useless younger brother, but also smelling the BBQ beef.

Jesus was “driven” into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and tempted to leave the wilderness early by the Devil. In Jesus’s parable, the older brother, who has played by all the rules, is in a wilderness as well - the lonely wilderness of his stubborn refuse to forgive. The more he refuses to forgive, the longer will be his sojourn in this wilderness *of his own choosing*.

The older brother needs to talk with Nelson Mandela, and so do we.

As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.

Jesus was tempted by the Devil to leave the wilderness early. Now, ironically, it is God who has come into our wilderness to tempt us. We have not been driven into this wilderness. We are imprisoning ourselves. The fatted calf has been killed. The banquet has begun. The time has come to walk out the door toward the gate that leads to freedom.

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?