

HOMILY FOR THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME Sunday,
14 August 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: 126

Reading 1 Sir 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

My child, conduct your affairs with humility,
and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts.
Humble yourself the more, the greater you are,
and you will find favor with God.
What is too sublime for you, seek not,
into things beyond your strength search not.
The mind of a sage appreciates proverbs,
and an attentive ear is the joy of the wise.
Water quenches a flaming fire,
and alms atone for sins.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 68:4-5, 6-7, 10-11

R. (cf. 11b) God, in your goodness, you have made a home for the poor. The just
rejoice and exult before God;
they are glad and rejoice.

Sing to God, chant praise to his name;
whose name is the LORD.

R. God, in your goodness, you have made a home for the poor. The
father of orphans and the defender of widows
is God in his holy dwelling.

God gives a home to the forsaken;
he leads forth prisoners to prosperity.

R. God, in your goodness, you have made a home for the poor. A bountiful
rain you showered down, O God, upon your inheritance; you restored the
land when it languished;
your flock settled in it;
in your goodness, O God, you provided it for the needy. R. God, in
your goodness, you have made a home for the poor.

Reading 2 Heb 12:18-19, 22-24a

Brothers and sisters:

You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast and a voice speaking words such that those who heard begged that no message be further addressed to them. No, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.

Alleluia Mt 11:29ab

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Take my yoke upon you, says the Lord,
and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart. R.
Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 14:1, 7-14

On a sabbath Jesus went to dine
at the home of one of the leading Pharisees,
and the people there were observing him carefully.

He told a parable to those who had been invited,
noticing how they were choosing the places of honor at the table.
"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor.
A more distinguished guest than you may have been invited by him, and the host who invited both of you may approach you and say, 'Give your place to this man,'
and then you would proceed with embarrassment to take the lowest place.
Rather, when you are invited,
go and take the lowest place
so that when the host comes to you he may say,
'My friend, move up to a higher position.'
Then you will enjoy the esteem of your companions at the table. For every one who exalts himself will be humbled,
but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Then he said to the host who invited him,

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"When you hold a lunch or a dinner,
do not invite your friends or your brothers
or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors,
in case they may invite you back and you have repayment.
Rather, when you hold a banquet,
invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind;
blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For
you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Some years ago, I told you about a woman I knew when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. I think I called her "Belle." (There is no need for you to know her real name). I was living with a community of Jesuits in a house near the University and Belle cooked dinner for us.

Most people would say that Belle is pretty useless. Those who say this about Belle have a point. Belle doesn't have a lot of what we call "marketable skills." For one thing, Belle can't read. She can't write either. Belle's parents were share-cropper's outside of Tupelo, back in the day when the Supreme Court agreed with the State of Mississippi that, when it comes to education, schools can be "separate, but equal." Belle, I should tell you, is an African American, so the separate-but-equal school she went to didn't teach her how to read and write.

Belle is sick too. She has diabetes and wasn't getting proper medical treatment for it, at least when I knew her. This was long before the Affordable Care Act and she had no health insurance. No one could say that Belle was lazy. Complications from the diabetes, however, made it difficult for Belle to hold down a job.

So, we hired her to cook for us.

I liked Belle. She was cordial and unassuming. She was a woman who was just trying to survive, cooking nutritious meals for a bunch of graduate students with way too much book-smarts.

One winter, another Jesuit came to spend a few months with us. He taught at Cambridge (or was it Oxford?). He was paleographer. This means that he deciphered ancient texts and translated them into

languages modern people can understand. This guy knew how to read cuneiform – the language of the ancient Sumerians. Cuneiform

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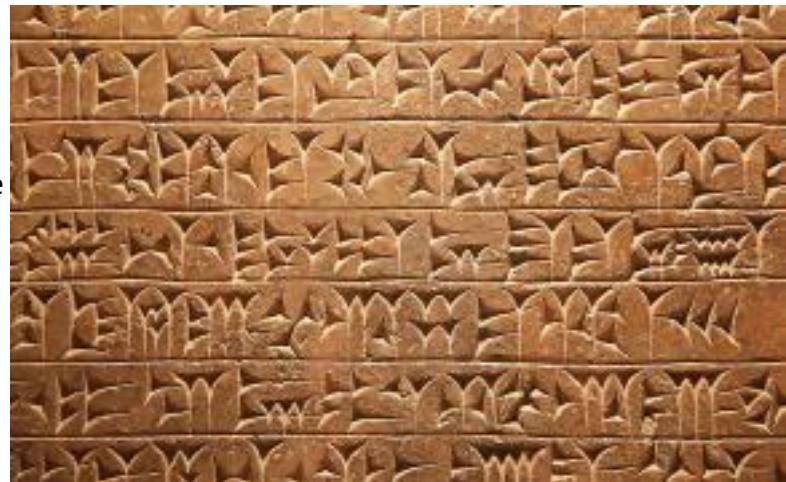
may very well be the first writing system ever invented (I don't know when they started to write things down in China). Some of the oldest stories human beings have ever told are written in this script, like the Gilgamesh Epic and Sumerian creation story, the Enuma Elish.

Here is what cuneiform looks like:

I have no idea how anyone can read this script, but our visitor from Cambridge was one of the people who was figuring out how to do it.

He was working at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. (By the way, the character "Indiana Jones" was based on a professor who used to work at the Oriental Institute).

This Jesuit was brilliant and very bookish, as you might guess. He was also soft spoken and somewhat introverted. I think this makes sense too for someone who can read cuneiform. But I found him friendly and liked him a lot. He was a good table companion and I had lots of questions about what was going on in the Ancient Middle East two thousand years before the time of Moses.



"In truth," he told me one evening with a little chuckle, "you won't find a lot of gossip in the cuneiform tablets over at the Oriental Institute."

I guess there is no harm in asking.

One day, as I was walking home after hearing a lecture at the University, I walked past the Oriental Institute and thought of our visitor from Cambridge and his ancient tablets. What's Gilgamesh up to these days? When I got home, I hung up my coat and went back into the kitchen for a cup of tea to help me warm up.

My friend, the paleographer was there in the kitchen with Belle. Belle was cooking dinner and he was sitting in the corner reading the recipe

for that evening's meal to her. (Remember, Belle doesn't read). The two were telling stories to one another and laughing.

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The paleographer from Cambridge and the share-cropper's daughter from the fields outside of Tupelo were having a great time.

I want to say two things about this memory I have of Belle and the paleographer.

First, I hope that my memory serves as a reminder to us that every human being has been created in the image and likeness of God. This means that we have all been blessed with an innate dignity that can never be erased and must always be honored. This dignity is a gift from God. It is not dependent on our level of education, the sharpness of our mind or the quickness of our wit. Our dignity is not measured by how much money we have in the bank or by how many people report to us at the office. Our dignity is not measured by our ability to read and write. Neither is it based on how well we cook for those who can read and write. The dignity of every single human being is a gift from God waiting to be discovered and affirmed.

The second thing I want to say about my memory of Belle and the paleographer is just this: We draw near to the dignity of others, and, for that matter, we draw near to our own dignity, by being humble.

That is exactly what was going on in the kitchen when I got home so many years ago: in a simple act of humility, two very different souls were drawing near to one another.

We live in a world that is obsessed with status and competition. Everyone, it seems, is obsessed with getting seated in a place of honor at banquets. In this obsession, we miss a good deal of the loveliness of life that is unfolding right before us.

So, let me conclude with the good advice we find in the first reading for today's mass:

My child, conduct your affairs with humility,
and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts.
Humble yourself the more, the greater you are,
and you will find favor with God.
What is too sublime for you, seek not,

into things beyond your strength search not.

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The mind of a sage appreciates proverbs,
and an attentive ear is the joy of the wise.
Water quenches a flaming fire,
and alms atone for sins.

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?

