

HOMILY FOR THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 29 August 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: 125

Reading I Dt 4:1-2, 6-8

Moses said to the people:

“Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees
which I am teaching you to observe,
that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land
which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.
In your observance of the commandments of the LORD, your God,
which I enjoin upon you,
you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it.
Observe them carefully,
for thus will you give evidence
of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations,
who will hear of all these statutes and say,
‘This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.’
For what great nation is there
that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us
whenever we call upon him?
Or what great nation has statutes and decrees
that are as just as this whole law
which I am setting before you today?”

Responsorial Psalm Ps 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5

R. (1a) The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.
Whoever walks blamelessly and does justice;
 who thinks the truth in his heart
 and slanders not with his tongue.

R. The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.
Who harms not his fellow man,
 nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;
by whom the reprobate is despised,

while he honors those who fear the LORD.

R. The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.
Who lends not his money at usury
and accepts no bribe against the innocent.
Whoever does these things
shall never be disturbed.

R. The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Reading II Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Dearest brothers and sisters:

All good giving and every perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights,
with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change.
He willed to give us birth by the word of truth
that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.
Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you
and is able to save your souls.
Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.
Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their affliction
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Alleluia Jas 1:18

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth
that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem
gathered around Jesus,
they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals
with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands.
—For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews,
do not eat without carefully washing their hands,
keeping the tradition of the elders.
And on coming from the marketplace
they do not eat without purifying themselves.
And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed,
the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. —

So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him,
“Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders
but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?”

He responded,

“Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written:

*This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines human precepts.*

You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.”

He summoned the crowd again and said to them,

“Hear me, all of you, and understand.

Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person;
but the things that come out from within are what defile.

“From within people, from their hearts,
come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder,
adultery, greed, malice, deceit,
licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.
All these evils come from within and they defile.”

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

You might already be aware that there are people who are angry with Pope Francis.

Some people are especially angry with him because he is reaching out to our loved ones who have gone through the sorrow of a divorce and have remarried. The rules of the Catholic Church are clear: a person who is divorced and remarried should not come to the Eucharist. The Pope, however, thinks we, as a community of faith, can be of better service to those whose marriages have not succeeded. Some are not happy with this.

The controversy over the Pope’s pastoral advice needs to be placed in its proper context. Pope Francis is saying wonderful and encouraging things about families and the spiritual beauty of marriage. In the hope of being of service to families that are thriving and families that are not, Pope Francis called together the Synod of Bishops.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) decided that bishops representing different parts of the world should meet periodically in Rome to discuss the challenges facing the Church in its service to the world. This meeting of called a Synod.

In 2014, Pope Francis called almost three-hundred bishops from over forty countries together to discuss the needs of families. Then he sent the bishops home and told them to share their concerns and questions with people in their dioceses. The bishops were to listen to what the people back home were saying about the challenges families are facing. Then, in 2015, the Pope called the bishops back to Rome to report on what the people had to say about their families.

This was an extraordinary move. The first meeting was to discover what the bishops were thinking. But this was just to prime the pump. The second meeting was for the bishops to reflect on what they had heard while they were listening to their people.

Part of the discussion in Rome focused on how we can accompany families who are struggling with divorce.

The practice of the Catholic Church has been that a person who has divorced and then remarried cannot receive Holy Communion. Amid great controversy, some of the bishops at the Synod questioned the pastoral suitability of this policy. Eventually, the Synod produced a final report for the Pope. Pope Francis reflected and prayed on the report for about a year. Then he wrote his own reflection and offered it to the Church.

His reflection is called *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love). Google it. Pope Francis has beautiful things to say about married people, our families and our vocation to be in love. In one of the chapters of *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope has important things to say about those whose marriages have not worked out.

In regard to people who are divorced and remarried, Francis says the Church must find a way to speak to “real people and their real struggles.” This calls for “new pastoral methods.” As a community of faith, we need to engage in a “special discernment” about the pastoral care of those who are “separated, divorced or abandoned.” Our loved ones who have struggled with troubled marriages must always feel welcome in the Church. Contrary to what some may think, “they are not excommunicated.”

The Church, the Pope reminds us, is like “a field hospital” caring for those who have been wounded. And so, as a community, we must “accompany with attention and care” those who are suffering, including those who have suffered a divorce.

What does this mean concretely?

First, the church must uphold the ideal of Christian marriage as a life-long commitment of fidelity and love.

Second, bishops must make sure that marriage tribunals, which make decisions about annulments, must be efficient and free of charge.

But in addition, the Pope says the following:

I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the church.

There is a formal, legal procedure for securing an annulment in the hope of remarrying in the Church. But in addition, in *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope says that those who have divorced and remarried must be able to turn to their priests and lay leaders with the aim of entering into a process of “accompaniment and discernment” about how they can continue to contribute to the life of the Church.

The aim of this process is to lead those who are suffering “to an awareness of their situation before God” and of their full membership, as baptized persons, in the life of the church. This includes sharing in the Eucharist.

What he says to priests and our lay leaders in *Amoris Laetitia* is demanding. Condemnation is not “the logic of the Gospel.” Pastors cannot simply apply moral regulations to cases as if they were “stones to throw at people’s lives.” Thinking in terms of “black and white” can “close off the way of grace and of growth.”

The Pope also has advice for people who are seeking guidance about their place in the Church. Discernment in the interior forum requires “humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it”.

Then, Pope Francis says something truly remarkable:

I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.

That some marriages are not successful is a painful truth. In fact, marriages can get really messy. Pope Francis is telling us that the Church must never put itself on a pedestal in the hope of keeping its boots clean. The church must get off its pedestal and accompany those who are trying to find their way in a muddy street without sidewalks. We have much to learn from those who have gone through a divorce.

In the Catholic Church, there are lots of rules and regulations having to do with getting married and getting an annulment. We can learn wonderful things about religious laws from the Jews, our “older brothers and sisters in the faith.” The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses gives the Law to the people.

Moses said to the people:
“Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees
which I am teaching you to observe,
that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land
which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

The Lord God has given the Law to the people so that they might thrive in the Promised Land they are about to enter.

Over the years, more than one rabbi has told me that the Law of Moses places an infinite demand on the people. No one can live up to the infinite requirements of the Law.

But here we see the religious genius of the Jewish people. The infinite demand of the Law is where we encounter the infinite mercy of God.

This is a difficult spiritual practice that reveals much about the Jewish people and the drama of their faith – a faith that we have come to share as well.

The teaching of the Church about marriage confronts us with a high ideal, and this high ideal is captured in the Church's rules and regulations about marriage and divorce. We must all strive to realize this ideal. But when we fail in this difficult task, the Church must be a sign that the Lord has not abandoned us.

None of us live up to the infinite demand the love of God places upon us, whether it be in regard to marriage or social justice or anything else. And yet, in our failure to fulfill the infinite demand of God's love, we are being invited to come into the presence of the God of infinite mercy.

This is the Mystery we are to discern at work within our families. And once we discern it, the Church must be ready to accompany families as they make their way along streets that are sometimes muddy with the pain of divorce.

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?