

HOMILY FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, 29 November 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: 2

Reading 1 [IS 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7](#)

You, LORD, are our father,
our redeemer you are named forever.
Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways,
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?
Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your heritage.
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
such as they had not heard of from of old.
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.
Would that you might meet us doing right,
that we were mindful of you in our ways!
Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;
all of us have become like unclean people,
all our good deeds are like polluted rags;
we have all withered like leaves,
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is none who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to cling to you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, O LORD, you are our father;
we are the clay and you the potter:
we are all the work of your hands.

Responsorial Psalm [PS 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19](#)

R. (4) **Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.**

O shepherd of Israel, hearken,
from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Rouse your power,
and come to save us.

R. **Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.**

Once again, O LORD of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see;
take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand has planted
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

R. **Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.**

May your help be with the man of your right hand,
with the son of man whom you yourself made strong.
Then we will no more withdraw from you;
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

R. **Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.**

Reading II [1 COR 1:3-9](#)

Brothers and sisters:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always on your account
for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus,
that in him you were enriched in every way,
with all discourse and all knowledge,
as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you,
so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He will keep you firm to the end,
irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God is faithful,
and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Alleluia [PS 85:8](#)

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Show us Lord, your love;
and grant us your salvation.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel [MK 13:33-37](#)

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Be watchful! Be alert!

You do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man traveling abroad.

He leaves home and places his servants in charge,
each with his own work,

and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.

Watch, therefore;

you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming,

whether in the evening, or at midnight,

or at cockcrow, or in the morning.

May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.

What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

There has been a good deal of interest over the last several years in the idea of an “apocalypse.”

College kids are fond of what they call “zombie apocalypses” – dystopian visions of our near future. There is a television show called “The Walking Dead” that fits this bill. (I am not recommending it).

Moreover, since the world has more-or-less shut down due to the SARS COV-2 virus, the civil unrest in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the ordeal of the recent presidential election, there should be no surprise that apocalyptic visions of the world’s near future have traction with lots of people these days. Several years ago, while giving a lecture at Oxford University, I even heard someone say that the legal recognition of same-sex marriages was a “sign” that the end of the world was very near.

There has always been a certain level of background noise about the end of the world. This goes all the way back to ancient times and I have no doubt that it will continue long after my time of service in this world is over.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and in keeping with ancient liturgical tradition, the Church draws our attention to the “end times” as a way to prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of the Messiah at Christmas. The first coming of the Messiah will be fulfilled by the Messiah’s second coming.

With this in mind, I want to lay out some of the basic teachings of our faith about the “end times” and what it means to “live in joyful hope for the coming of the Kingdom.”

Let me make four points.

First, we believe that, just as history has a beginning, so also it will come to a definitive end.

I hope this comes as a relief to you.

This teaching means that our lives have been folded into something much bigger than we can imagine. Our “prayers, works, joys and sufferings” (remember the Morning Offering?) all point to something beyond us that will be revealed in the future.

It also means that nothing in this world is forever. I hope that this comes as a relief to you as well. The Church has seen empires rise and fall. We have seen nations come and go. Let them come... and let them go. Do not become too attached to the things of this world that pass away. In the end, the only thing you can take with you is your faith in God’s promise to bring Eternal Life out of certain death.

Second, there will be a judgment.

This is not a popular theme in sermons these days. I certainly don’t dwell on this aspect of the Kingdom of God very much. But Jesus did. In fact, Jesus is in a long line of Hebrew prophets who speak of God’s judgment.

Do you remember the Gospel reading for last Sunday, the feast of Christ the King? Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. And at the Last Judgment, the goats will ask,

Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison,
and not minister to your needs?

I don’t preach on the Last Judgment very much because I struggle to imagine it. I have a long, rather detailed list of who belong with the sheep and who belong with the goats. The problem is that I am not at all confident that my list is the same as the list that Christ will be looking at when he comes in his glory to judge the living and the dead.

Moreover, to complicate matters, the Bible insist that, in God, “justice and mercy will kiss.” So far, this embrace hasn’t happened within my heart. Perhaps you are one of the lucky ones who no longer yearn for this grace. For the time being, I’m sticking to my list. There will be a judgment. But if I am going to stick to my list, I also must admit that, on the Last Day, I will stand in need of redemption by the Good Shepherd as well.

Third, the Church assures us that, in regard to the coming of the Kingdom, nobody knows the day or the hour.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus assures us,

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.

But we don't have to go to Matthew. In today's Gospel (from Mark), Jesus says pretty much the same thing.

Watch, therefore;
you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming,
whether in the evening, or at midnight,
or at cockcrow, or in the morning.
May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.
What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

If Jesus doesn't pretend to know the day or the hour, why are there so many people making predictions about what's going to happen "next Thursday at 2 am" or on "the 15th of next month"? Why are there so many people talking about the hidden meaning of the "fall of the Soviet Union" or the "foundation of the State of Israel" or the "bombing of the Twin Towers" as if we should all be looking anxiously at our watches and wondering when the trumpet is going to sound?

I have saved the most important point for last.

Regarding the end times, Christian faith teaches that the Lord will not abandon his people.

I don't want to suggest for a moment that trusting in the fidelity of God is easy. In fact, it is difficult. Kierkegaard said that it is the most difficult thing of all. Christian faith is difficult because "living in joyful hope for the coming of God's Kingdom" is difficult. It is always far easier to place our faith in something that will, in the end, betray us by passing away.

But recognizing the difficulty of faith makes the words of the Prophet Isaiah in the first reading all the more poignant.

Isaiah actually begins with a kind of complaint.

You, LORD, are our father,
our redeemer you are named forever.
Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways,
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?

Then he says something really profound – something that requires our sustained reflection. Isaiah longs for the end of the world.

Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your heritage.
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
such as they had not heard of from of old.

Isaiah has gone past the many distractions of this merry-go-round world in order to offer a prayer to the Lord of History that is radically human. He has reached into his soul and discovered there a deep yearning for an end – God’s end – to the world.

And Isaiah offers this radically human prayer to the mysterious God who has created this world out of love and will someday bring this world to an end out of love.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus urges us to be watchful for his Second Coming. And Isaiah, in effect, urges us to “wait in joyful hope” for Christmas, the Messiah’s First Coming:

No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for 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?