

HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3 April 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: 36

Reading I Is 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD,

who opens a way in the sea

and a path in the mighty waters,

who leads out chariots and horsemen,

a powerful army,

till they lie prostrate together, never to rise,

snuffed out and quenched like a wick.

Remember not the events of the past,

the things of long ago consider not;

see, I am doing something new!

Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

In the desert I make a way,

in the wasteland, rivers.

Wild beasts honor me,

jackals and ostriches,

for I put water in the desert

and rivers in the wasteland

for my chosen people to drink,

the people whom I formed for myself,

that they might announce my praise.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.

R. (3) The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,
we were like men dreaming.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad indeed.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with
joy.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the torrents in the southern desert.
Those that sow in tears
shall reap rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with
joy.
Although they go forth weeping,
carrying the seed to be sown,
They shall come back rejoicing,
carrying their sheaves.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with
joy.

Reading II Phil 3:8-14

Brothers and sisters:

I consider everything as a loss
because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus
my Lord.

For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things
and I consider them so much rubbish,
that I may gain Christ and be found in him,
not having any righteousness of my own based on the law
but that which comes through faith in Christ,
the righteousness from God,
depending on faith to know him and the power
of his resurrection
and the sharing of his sufferings by being
conformed to his death,
if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

It is not that I have already taken hold of it
or have already attained perfect maturity,
but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it,
since I have indeed been taken possession of

by Christ Jesus.
Brothers and sisters, I for my part
do not consider myself to have taken possession.
Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind
but straining forward to what lies ahead,
I continue my pursuit toward the goal,
the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.

Verse before the Gospel JI 2:12-13

Even now, says the Lord,
return to me with your whole heart;
for I am gracious and merciful.

Gospel Jn 8:1-11

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area,
and all the people started coming to him,
and he sat down and taught them.
Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman
who had been caught in adultery
and made her stand in the middle.
They said to him,
"Teacher, this woman was caught
in the very act of committing adultery.
Now in the law, Moses commanded us
to stone such women.
So what do you say?"
They said this to test him,
so that they could have some charge to bring against him.
Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground
with his finger.
But when they continued asking him,
he straightened up and said to them,
"Let the one among you who is without sin
be the first to throw a stone at her."
Again he bent down and wrote on the ground.
And in response, they went away one by one,
beginning with the elders.
So he was left alone with the woman before him.
Then Jesus straightened up and said to her,
"Woman, where are they?
Has no one condemned you?"
She replied, "No one, sir."

Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Recently, friends asked me what the Church should be doing about Mr. Putin and his war.

In this homily, I want to answer my friends' question in a way that speaks more directly to all of us here at Saint Leo's.

At Saint Leo's and all around the world, the Church needs to be a sign that the Lord is doing something new. This is a hard teaching to put into practice.

Let me try to explain.

The first reading is a poem taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. It was written during the Babylonian Exile. The Kingdom of Israel was no more. The Temple in Jerusalem, the great sign of God's fidelity to His people, lay in ruins.

This is a poem written for a people in despair.

Despair is not the same as grief. Grief arises when we lament the loss of something dear to us in the present. Grief is what we bring to the altar when we bury a loved one. Despair is something different. Despair arises when the future we thought was inevitable is taken from us. We fall into despair when what we thought was inevitable turns out to be an illusion.

We should not be surprised to learn that despair and humiliation often ride into town on the same horse. They can be a deadly pair.

There is a great deal of despair in the world today. Certainly Mr. Putin is in despair. He used to think that Russia's future was inevitable. Communism would vanquish the West, along with its chaotic freedoms, its enormous factories, and its powerful banks. Marxism was "scientific." The success of the Soviet Union was assured.

History, of course, has a way of bruising our certainties. What we thought was inevitable, turns out to be shaky. And yet we are happy to drink the poisoned Kool-aid of inevitability because it tastes so sweet.

Before the time of the Exile in Babylon, the people were full of certainty about what was inevitable. God has made a Covenant with us. God is on our side. In Jerusalem, the Temple was the great sign of what was inevitable about the future.

The Prophets stood before the Temple and preached a politically unpopular message: we are taking God's fidelity to the Covenant for granted. We are neglecting what the Covenant commands of us. We do not give justice to the widow, the orphan and the stranger in our land.

The great Prophets of Israel saw that the costly faith demanded by the God of Abraham had been cast aside for easy certainties about a future that was inevitable. God is in His Temple and can be taken for granted. Justice for the widow, the orphan and the stranger? This can wait for another day.

Then came the Babylonians and the Exile and the destruction of the Temple and the great despair over a lost future.

Now we can look at the first reading.

It is a poignant poem written for a people whose certainty about what was supposed to be inevitable has led to despair.

The poem begins,

Thus says the LORD,
who opens a way in the sea
and a path in the mighty waters,
who leads out chariots and horsemen,
a powerful army,

till they lie prostrate together, never to rise,
snuffed out and quenched like a wick.

These words were written during the Exile, but they are about the Exodus, the beginning of the Jewish story, hundreds of years earlier.

The Lord "opens a way in the sea." This is the Red Sea. You know the story: the people, fleeing the slavery of Egypt, were trapped by Pharaoh's army and the Lord parts the waters of the Red Sea. The Hebrew people pass through the "path in the mighty waters," into the freedom of the desert.

Pharaoh's army, the "chariots and horsemen," charge into the Red Sea only to be drowned. The fire of their violence is "snuffed out and quenched like a wick."

Then the poet writes words that we should inscribe on our hearts:

Remember not the events of the past,
the things of long ago consider not;
see, I am doing something new!

The Lord is speaking to a people in despair and saying that they should not dwell on the foolishness, the infidelity and sinfulness of their past. The people were deluded about their "inevitable future" and injustices of this inevitable future has led to humiliation and despair. But, look:

"I am doing something new!"

The Exodus, God intervention to free his people from slavery in fidelity to his Covenant, is not inevitable. It is "something new."

I suggest that we interpret this poem in light of what Mr. Putin is doing in Ukraine.

The poet understands that, in our Exile, we are tempted to dwell on the folly of our past sins. But I think despair leads to another temptation as well. In our despair and

humiliation, we are tempted to trade our illusions about what is inevitable for new illusions about a glorious past and our perpetual innocence. Instead of despairing of our sinfulness, we construct an illusory past in which we are victims, not deluded sinners.

This leads to a politics of resentment and vengeance, aggrievement and self-righteousness. It leads to a politics that refuses to recognize that God could do something new.

Mr. Putin, who has lost his inevitable future, now, in his despair, wants to make Russia great again by incorporating the people of Ukraine into the purity of Holy Mother Russia. But, if his inevitable future was an illusion, sadly, so is the glory of his imaginary past.

My aim in this homily is not to condemn Mr. Putin. I will leave that to others. Rather, I want to hold up Mr. Putin as an example of a truth about human beings that is proclaimed again and again in our scriptures.

When the future we thought was inevitable is taken from us, we are tempted to invent a pristine past for ourselves. We seek to assure ourselves of our innocence and virtue by making a scapegoat of our neighbor. Looking on oneself as a victim is far easier than living the demanding life that faith in God requires.

Mr. Putin is certainly not the only public figure who understands the political uses of this insight. Mr. Putin is simply what good Pope John XXIII called a "sign of the times."

We need to sit up a pay attention to what is happening all around us, not just in Russia.

Things are not turning out the way we thought was inevitable. This is true in many parts of the world today. We can become like Mr. Putin. We can escape our despair over a lost future by retreating into a world where we are perennially innocent victims. We can deal with our despair by trying to make ourselves great again.

Or we can come together as the Church, instructed by the wisdom of the Prophets of Israel, bearing witness to the difficult truth that, even in our despair, God is doing something new.

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?