

HOMILY FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, 3 March 2024

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: 29

Reading I Ex 20:1-17

In those days, God delivered all these commandments:

“I, the LORD, am your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
that place of slavery.

You shall not have other gods besides me.

You shall not carve idols for yourselves
in the shape of anything in the sky above
or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth;
you shall not bow down before them or worship them.

For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God,
inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness
on the children of those who hate me,
down to the third and fourth generation;
but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation
on the children of those who love me
and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the LORD,
your God, in vain.

For the LORD will not leave unpunished
the one who takes his name in vain.

“Remember to keep holy the sabbath day.
Six days you may labor and do all your work,
but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD,
your God.

No work may be done then either by you,
or your son or daughter,
or your male or female slave, or your beast,

or by the alien who lives with you.
In six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth,
the sea and all that is in them;
but on the seventh day he rested.
That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day
and made it holy.
“Honor your father and your mother,
that you may have a long life in the land
which the LORD, your God, is giving you.
You shall not kill.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.
You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife,
nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass,
nor anything else that belongs to him.”

Responsorial: Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11

R. (John 6:68c) Lord, you have the words of everlasting
life.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul;
The decree of the LORD is trustworthy,
giving wisdom to the simple.

R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
The precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the command of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eye.

R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true,
all of them just.

R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
They are more precious than gold,

than a heap of purest gold;
sweeter also than syrup
or honey from the comb.

R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.

Reading II: 1 Cor 1:22-25

Brothers and sisters:

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,
but we proclaim Christ crucified,
a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,
but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike,
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom,
and the weakness of God is stronger than human
strength.

Verse Before the Gospel: Jn 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal
life.

Gospel: Jn 2:13-25

Since the Passover of the Jews was near,
Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep,
and doves, as well as the money changers seated there.
He made a whip out of cords
and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep
and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money changers
and overturned their tables,
and to those who sold doves he said,
“Take these out of here,
and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”
His disciples recalled the words of Scripture,
Zeal for your house will consume me.
At this the Jews answered and said to him,
“What sign can you show us for doing this?”
Jesus answered and said to them,
“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”

The Jews said,
“This temple has been under construction
for forty-six years,
and you will raise it up in three days?”
But he was speaking about the temple of his body.
Therefore, when he was raised from the dead,
his disciples remembered that he had said this,
and they came to believe the Scripture
and the word Jesus had spoken.
While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover,
many began to believe in his name
when they saw the signs he was doing.
But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he
knew them all,
and did not need anyone to testify about human nature.
He himself understood it well.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Now that I think about it, I have lots of friends who are trying
to be atheists.

Some are more successful than others.

The successful manage to stay within the walled gardens of
life, taking comfort in earthly delights and finding welcome
distractions on the screens that surround us all these days.
These people are often kind and generous. I respect these
values, but I admit to a nagging compulsion to lure them out
of their gardens and into the desert that lies beyond the
garden walls. This is because God – the real God, the
Jewish God – awaits us in the desert.

I also have friends that are less successful in being atheists.
As you might expect, they are more driven and anxious.
They can be compulsive at times. They tend to create things
and pursue goals: companies and careers, of course, but
also philosophies and political programs. These friends of
mine also like to create myths for themselves. They get
irritated when I tell them that they do this in the attempt to

shut out the Mystery of God that refuses to conform to their expectations.

I have respect for these less-than-successful-atheists as well. Many have done great things for us.

In truth, I have to include myself in this group. I don't like deserts. I prefer the comfort and certainties of walled gardens. In my own walled garden, I get to worship idols that are predictable because they have been made by my own hands.

With this in mind, perhaps you can see why the first reading has grabbed my attention and won't let go.

I, the LORD, am your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
that place of slavery.

The LORD is not some harmless philosophical abstraction. No myth can do this God justice. The LORD is the God who has led His people out of the slavery of Egypt into the difficult freedom of the desert.

Moreover, the LORD God is remarkably irritating. He is always telling us that our walled gardens are really the slavery of old Pharaoh down in Egypt. We don't want to hear this and we certainly don't want to believe what we are hearing.

And, even more irritating, this desert God is a jealous God.

You shall not have other gods besides me.
You shall not carve idols for yourselves
in the shape of anything in the sky above
or on the earth below '
or in the waters beneath the earth;
you shall not bow down before them

or worship them.
For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God,

This sounds bizarre to my friends who are trying to be
atheists.

But look at what follows:

For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God,
inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness
on the children of those who hate me,
down to the third and fourth generation;
but bestowing mercy down to
the thousandth generation
on the children of those who love me
and keep my commandments.

For my (somewhat) atheist friends, this is beyond bizarre.
This is outrageous.

In the past, I used to say to my friends who are trying to
be atheists that these words were written 4000 years ago
by people who were like the Bedouins of the desert today.

I don't do this anymore. My friends use this explanation as
an excuse to dismiss the Torah as merely a historical
curiosity.

Instead, I tell my friends that, if they want to understand
the jealousy of the God of the desert, they themselves
must set out into the desert.

God's jealousy only makes sense in the desert.

In the desert, there are no screens to distract us. In the
desert, the things we depend on for prestige have been
lost. In the desert, our ability to exercise control over our
lives has been weakened. And, in the desert, we come to
realize that our walled garden was all along just the
slavery of Egypt.

And the hardest of all to understand is this:

A discovery awaits us in the desert, In our vulnerability and fear, we harbor a strange an unexpected gratitude within our souls.

We are grateful that God is jealous.

In his jealousy, God will protect and preserve us as we make our way in the desert. God jealously guards us when we veer off the path.

God is filled with jealousy when we dream of returning to our walled gardens and our old pursuits and our comforting idols.

I, the LORD, am your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
that place of slavery.
You shall not have other gods besides me.

Watch out for this God of the desert. He is jealous over those He has chosen to be His own.

□□□□

El Dios de la Biblia es dios del desierto. No es dios del jardín. Seres humanos prefieran jardines. Vivir en el desierto es difícil. Vivir con el dios del desierto es muy difícil. Y el dios de la fe católica es un dios del desierto.

Preferimos jardines amurallados. En jardines amurallados hay verdura y agua. En los jardines amurallados de la vida, nos consolamos con todos los placeres terrenales.

¿Que quiere decir “jardines amurallados”?

A veces, un jardín amurallado es una obsesión con carera o objetivo o privilegio. Racismo o prejuicios contra los humildes de la tierra es un jardín amurallado.

Se irritan las habitantes de los jardines amurallados cuando les digo que seguimos estas obsesiones con el intento de cerrar el paso al Misterio de Dios.

La verdad es que tengo que incluirme en este grupo de personas que profieren la comodidad y las certezas de los jardines amurallados de la vida. En mi propio jardín amurallado, puedo adorar ídolos que son predecibles porque han sido hechos por mis propias manos.

Por eso, la primera lectura es bien difícil por mí.

En aquellos días, el Señor promulgó estos preceptos para su pueblo en el monte Sinaí, diciendo:

Yo soy el Señor, tu Dios, que te sacó de la tierra de Egipto y de la esclavitud.

El Señor no es una abstracción filosófica. Ningún mito puede hacerle justicia a este Dios. El Señor es el Dios que ha sacado a su pueblo de la esclavitud de Egipto a la difícil libertad del desierto.

Además, el Señor dios es notablemente irritante. Él siempre nos dice que nuestros jardines amurallados son en realidad la esclavitud del faraón en Egipto. No queremos oír esto y ciertamente no queremos creer lo que estamos escuchando.

Y, lo que es aún más irritante, este Dios del desierto es un Dios celoso.

No tendrás otros dioses fuera de mí;
no te fabricarás ídolos ni imagen alguna de lo que hay arriba, en el cielo, o abajo, en la tierra, o en el

agua, y debajo de la tierra.
No adorarás nada de eso ni le rendirás culto,
porque yo, el Señor, tu Dios, soy un Dios celoso

Y hay mas...

Yo, el Señor, tu Dios, soy un Dios celoso,
que castiga la maldad de los padres en los hijos
hasta la tercera y cuarta generación de aquellos
que me odian; pero soy misericordioso hasta la
milésima generación de aquellos que me aman y
cumplen mis mandamientos.

Vivir (o mejor - caminar) con el dios del desierto es difícil.
El es celoso de su pueblo.

También es difícil comprender el dios del desierto.

Tengo que decir algo importante: No es posible
comprender el dios del desierto dentro un jardín
amurallado.

Por comprender el dios del desierto es necesario partir
hacia el desierto. Los celos de Dios sólo tienen sentido en
el desierto.

En el desierto no hay pantallas que nos distraigan.
En el desierto, las cosas de las que dependemos para
obtener prestigio se han perdido.
En el desierto, nuestra capacidad de ejercer control sobre
nuestras vidas se ha debilitado.

Y, en el desierto, nos damos cuenta de que nuestro jardín
amurallado actualmente es la esclavitud de Egipto.

Y lo más difícil de aceptar es esto: Un descubrimiento nos
espera en el desierto.

En nuestra vulnerabilidad y miedo, albergamos una
extraña e inesperada gratitud dentro de nuestras almas.

Eso: Actualmente, estamos agradecidos de que Dios sea celoso.

En sus celos, Dios nos protegerá y preservará mientras avanzamos en el desierto. Dios nos guarda celosamente cuando nos desviamos del camino. Dios se llena de celos cuando soñamos con regresar a nuestros jardines amurallados, a nuestras antiguas ocupaciones y a nuestros ídolos reconfortantes.

Yo soy el Señor, tu Dios, que te sacó de la tierra de Egipto y de la esclavitud.

Cuidado con este Dios del desierto. Él tiene celos de aquellos que ha elegido para ser suyos.

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?