

HOMILY FOR TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
Sunday, 3 September 2023

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: 124

Reading 1 Jer 20:7-9

You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped;
you were too strong for me, and you triumphed.
All the day I am an object of laughter;
everyone mocks me.

Whenever I speak, I must cry out,
violence and outrage is my message;
the word of the LORD has brought me
derision and reproach all the day.

I say to myself, I will not mention him,
I will speak in his name no more.
But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart,
imprisoned in my bones;
I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

R. (2b) My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.
O God, you are my God whom I seek;
for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts
like the earth, parched, lifeless and without water.
R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.
Thus have I gazed toward you in the sanctuary
to see your power and your glory,
for your kindness is a greater good than life;
my lips shall glorify you.
R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.
Thus will I bless you while I live;
lifting up my hands, I will call upon your name.
As with the riches of a banquet shall my soul be satisfied,

and with exultant lips my mouth shall praise you.
R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.
You are my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy.
My soul clings fast to you;
your right hand upholds me.
R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

Reading 2 Rom 12:1-2

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.
Do not conform yourselves to this age
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,
that you may discern what is the will of God,
what is good and pleasing and perfect.

Alleluia cf. Eph 1:17-18

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
enlighten the eyes of our hearts,
that we may know what is the hope
that belongs to our call.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mt 16:21-27

Jesus began to show his disciples
that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly
from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,
and be killed and on the third day be raised.
Then Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him,
"God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you."
He turned and said to Peter,
"Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.
You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

Then Jesus said to his disciples,
"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
take up his cross, and follow me.
For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world

and forfeit his life?
Or what can one give in exchange for his life?
For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory,
and then he will repay all according to his conduct."

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Today I want you to remember a woman named Phoebe and celebrate all the good that she did for us. In truth, we don't know very much about Phoebe. We don't even refer to her as "Saint Phoebe," but today, 3 September, is her feast day.

All we know about her is contained in one little verse hidden toward the end of Paul's Letter to the Romans. Here is what Paul wrote,

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a minister* of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well.

Cenchreae was one of the ports for the city of Corinth and Paul was preaching in Corinth when he wrote his Letter to the Romans. Most scripture scholars think that Phoebe was Paul's courier: she brought the letter from Corinth to Rome. This is why he mentions her at the end of the letter.

In his letter, Paul goes out of his way to say that Phoebe is a "minister of the church." The word Saint Paul uses for this in ancient Greek is *diakonos*.

Was Phoebe a deacon? Was she ordained? There are those who are quick to say that Phoebe was not a "real" deacon. Many biblical scholars urge caution about this. They point out that the Church has always changed in order to respond to changing times. Today's Church is no different. Phoebe was a minister in her Church with weighty responsibilities. Paul trusted her and respected her. He calls her a *diakonos* without any fuss or controversy.

Saint John Chrysostom, the Patriarch of Constantinople around the year 400 AD, insisted that Phoebe was a deacon in his homilies. She was like the deacons (men and women) that were serving the Church in Constantinople. In Chrysostom's day, deacons (men and women) worked more closely with the bishops of the Church than even the priests did. They ran the show.

The local Churches in the East never lost track of the fact that women served as *diakonoi*. They even have ordination rites for deacons and deaconesses.

I am touched to think that Paul turned to Phoebe, entrusting her with his letter that has become one of the most important books in the Bible.

I also hope Phoebe was well-received in Rome. Paul introduces her as "our sister." That's nice. But he also calls her a *diakanos*. Paul wants to make clear that "our sister" is also a woman of substance who should be respected in Rome as a leader in the Church in Corinth. Perhaps Paul chose Phoebe to carry his letter because he was confident that she could explain it authoritatively to the people in Rome.

The Synod on Synodality begins on 4 October in Rome. Local Churches in different parts of the world are saying that we need to think about how to support women who are serving our communities. We also need to think about how to formally recognize this service. There are women with deep roots in our local communities with a proven record of outstanding service who should be preaching the Word and ministering sacraments.

There are women among us who should be serving their local Churches as deacons.

I thought of the Christians of Rome who welcomed Phoebe to their local Church when I prayed over the second reading. It's from the very letter that Phoebe brought to Rome.

Paul tells us,

Do not conform yourselves to this age
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,
that you may discern what is the will of God,
what is good and pleasing and perfect.

We must not be distracted by “this age,” its illusions and its obsessions. One of the distractions of “this age” is a nostalgia for the Church of the 1950s masquerading as authentic tradition. Paul calls us to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit who brings “renewal” to the Church so that we might “discern what is the will of God.”

When Saint Paul entrusted his letter to Phoebe, he was recognizing that she was a leader in the local Church, a woman of substance who would be respected by the local Church in Rome because she had a record of service in Corinth.

There are lots of women like Phoebe in the Church today. We just need to see them for who they are.

Pray to Saint Phoebe, the *diakonos*. Pray for the Synod on Synodality as we come together to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us today. Think of Phoebe as she made her way to Rome carrying Paul’s letter. The Holy Spirit was with her in her service on that journey.

Remember that we are like Phoebe: this same Holy Spirit is with us today as we make our way on the road together.

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?