

HOMILY FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 30 January 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: 72

Reading I Jer 1:4-5, 17-19

The word of the LORD came to me, saying:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you.

But do you gird your loins;

stand up and tell them all that I command you.

Be not crushed on their account,

as though I would leave you crushed before them;

for it is I this day who have made you a fortified city,

a pillar of iron, a wall of brass,

against the whole land:

against Judah's kings and princes,

against its priests and people.

They will fight against you but not prevail over you,

for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 71:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 15-17

R. (cf. 15ab) I will sing of your salvation.

In you, O LORD, I take refuge;

let me never be put to shame.

In your justice rescue me, and deliver me;

incline your ear to me, and save me.

R. I will sing of your salvation.

Be my rock of refuge,

a stronghold to give me safety,

for you are my rock and my fortress.

O my God, rescue me from the hand of the wicked.

R. I will sing of your salvation.

For you are my hope, O Lord;

my trust, O God, from my youth.

On you I depend from birth;
 from my mother's womb you are my strength.
R. I will sing of your salvation.
My mouth shall declare your justice,
 day by day your salvation.
O God, you have taught me from my youth,
 and till the present I proclaim your wondrous deeds.
R. I will sing of your salvation.

1 Cor 12:31–13:13

Brothers and sisters:
Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts.
But I shall show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in human and angelic tongues,
but do not have love,
I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.
And if I have the gift of prophecy,
and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge;
if I have all faith so as to move mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.
If I give away everything I own,
and if I hand my body over so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind.
It is not jealous, it is not pompous,
It is not inflated, it is not rude,
it does not seek its own interests,
it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury,
it does not rejoice over wrongdoing
but rejoices with the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.
If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing;
if tongues, they will cease;
if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing.
For we know partially and we prophesy partially,
but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.
When I was a child, I used to talk as a child,
think as a child, reason as a child;
when I became a man, I put aside childish things.

At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror,
but then face to face.
At present I know partially;
then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.
So faith, hope, love remain, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.

Alleluia Lk 4:18

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
The Lord sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 4:21-30

Jesus began speaking in the synagogue, saying:
"Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."
And all spoke highly of him
and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his
mouth.
They also asked, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?"
He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb,
'Physician, cure yourself,' and say,
'Do here in your native place
the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'"
And he said, "Amen, I say to you,
no prophet is accepted in his own native place.
Indeed, I tell you,
there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah
when the sky was closed for three and a half years
and a severe famine spread over the entire land.
It was to none of these that Elijah was sent,
but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon.
Again, there were many lepers in Israel
during the time of Elisha the prophet;
yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."
When the people in the synagogue heard this,
they were all filled with fury.
They rose up, drove him out of the town,
and led him to the brow of the hill
on which their town had been built,
to hurl him down headlong.
But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went away.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Over the years, I have spent many profitable hours with Buddhist friends asking them about what they call “the practice of compassion.” My Buddhist friends believe that cultivating wisdom leads to acts of compassion. And they believe that the reverse is true as well: practicing compassion leads to wisdom.

This is an impressive teaching. It is also a teaching useful for Christians who want to reflect on their own faith and the practice of love.

Remember, in Christian tradition, love is not just a warm feeling in the heart. Christian faith takes us far beyond the feelings that fill our hearts. In Christian tradition, love is something commanded of us. Far more than something we feel, love is something we must do.

If compassion is a spiritual practice for Buddhists, then love is certainly a spiritual practice for Christians.

A clever fellow once tried to discredit Jesus by catching him up in a technicality about the Law of Moses.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

And, without hesitation, Jesus quoted the Torah,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Love is not just a feeling. Love is what is commanded of us, regardless of what our feelings might be.

We should not take this command to love lightly. More than once, my Buddhist friends have remarked that the Gospel’s command to love is a “hard practice.”

I agree.

The love that is commanded of us can be difficult to do. Each of us needs to reflect on how we are to live up to this command - the "hard practice" of love.

In the second reading for today, Saint Paul gives us a splendid teaching about putting into practice the commandment to love.

In his letter to his friends in Corinth, Paul reflects on "spiritual gifts." He talks about speaking in "human and angelic tongues" and the gift of "prophecy" that allow us to "comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge." He also talks about a "faith great enough to move mountains." These are all "spiritual gifts."

But without love, these spiritual gifts amount to nothing.

Then, Paul offers some very well-known words about love. When you reflect on these words, I recommend that you keep in mind that Paul is not describing what love is like. He is telling us how love is to be practiced.

Love is patient, love is kind.
It is not jealous, it is not pompous,
It is not inflated, it is not rude,
it does not seek its own interests,
it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury,
it does not rejoice over wrongdoing
but rejoices with the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.

The practice of love requires us to cultivate patience and act with kindness. Love requires us to avoid jealousy and pomp. We must turn away from our self-righteous egos and reign in our rudeness. We are to be dogged and clever in figuring out how to do these things, for this is what is commanded of us. This is how love is practiced.

My Buddhist friends have said that Christian faith, with its command to love, is a "hard practice." We should understand what our friends mean when they say this. In making this observation, they are saying that, in the life of Christian faith, we should expect to fail in our obedience to the command to love many times. But this is exactly what

Buddhists mean by the word “practice.” When you fail at your practice, whether it be the practice of love or of compassion, then the time has come to practice some more.

When you don’t feel love in your heart, and especially when you have failed to be loving, then just give it another go. Love is a practice. The goal of Christian faith is not to feel the cozy warmth of love. Love is not primarily a feeling for Christians. The point of Christian faith is not even to succeed in loving. The Lord will give us success when he sees fit. Our aim must be to do what has been commanded and when we fail, to do it again until we have the grace to get it right.

I suspect that this helps us to understand what Paul says toward the end of his famous reflection on love.

Love never fails.

People fail, but ultimately, love does not. All our spiritual gifts will, in the end, be “bought to nothing.” But, through the power of the Holy Spirit, love will not fail.

So faith, hope, love remain, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.

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?