

HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

Sunday, 30 May 2021

- 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: 165

Reading I Dt 4:32-34, 39-40

Moses said to the people:

"Ask now of the days of old, before your time,
ever since God created man upon the earth;

ask from one end of the sky to the other:

Did anything so great ever happen before?

Was it ever heard of?

Did a people ever hear the voice of God
speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live?

Or did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself
from the midst of another nation,

by testings, by signs and wonders, by war,

with strong hand and outstretched arm, and by great terrors,

all of which the LORD, your God,

did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

This is why you must now know,

and fix in your heart, that the LORD is God

in the heavens above and on earth below,

and that there is no other.

You must keep his statutes and commandments that I enjoin on you today,

that you and your children after you may prosper,

and that you may have long life on the land

which the LORD, your God, is giving you forever."

Responsorial Psalm 33:4-5, 6, 9, 18-19, 20, 22

R. (12b) Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.

Upright is the word of the LORD,

and all his works are trustworthy.

He loves justice and right;

of the kindness of the Lord the earth is full.

R. Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made;
by the breath of his mouth all their host.
For he spoke, and it was made;
he commanded, and it stood forth.
R. Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
See, the eyes of the LORD are upon those who fear him,
upon those who hope for his kindness,
To deliver them from death
and preserve them in spite of famine.
R. Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
Our soul waits for the LORD,
who is our help and our shield.
May your kindness, O LORD, be upon us
who have put our hope in you.
R. Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.

Reading II Rom 8:14-17

Brothers and sisters:
For those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.
For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,
but you received a Spirit of adoption,
through whom we cry, "Abba, Father!"
The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit
that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs,
heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,
if only we suffer with him
so that we may also be glorified with him.

Alleluia Rv 1:8

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
Glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit;
to God who is, who was, and who is to come.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mt 28:16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee,
to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.
When they all saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.
Then Jesus approached and said to them,
"All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Today is the Feast of the Holy Trinity.

This is a teaching about God: three Persons, in perfect Oneness. But the Holy Trinity is also a teaching about each and every one of us. This is because every single human being has been created in the image and likeness of the three Persons and their perfect Oneness.

Therefore, as is almost always the case, it is best to begin our thinking about God by turning to our concrete experience of ourselves.

Some time ago, in one of my homilies, I think I mentioned something a Buddhist friend once taught me as we walked by a mango tree in Hawai'i. My friend and I were walking together rather high up on the lush slopes of the *pali* on the windward side of Oahu. The tree was very old and fine and had grown very large. Every year, I assure you, this tree would bear an enormous crop of mangos. It was very beautiful. I loved it.

As we stood before this magnificent tree, my Buddhist friend said, "the mind is like a mango tree full of howling monkeys."

This was not Buddhist wisdom invented on the spot for my benefit. It's a saying attributed to the Buddha in one of the oldest of the *sutras*. There's a good reason why this teaching has been around a long time: it's true.

I think of monkeys howling inside my head whenever I come to a realization that I am still at war with myself. For example, every once in a while, I have to ask myself some painful questions.

How could I have said that?
What was I thinking when I did that?
Who am I that I would even consider doing such a thing?
What's up with me?

Sometimes, I just don't recognize myself. I seem to be a stranger to myself.

Perhaps you are familiar with such questions.

Shame, I think, happens when we drop our guard, and the world gets a glimpse of our mango tree of howling monkeys. The world looks at us as says: you're a mess.

Guilt, on the other hand, is different. Guilt arises when we can no longer pretend to ourselves that there are no monkeys in the mango tree of our mind. Shame is public. Guilt is private.

Shame and guilt often lead us to lie about ourselves. To escape our discomfort, we tell ourselves that we are really an alpha-male monkey in our tree of our mind who has complete control over all the other monkeys. Don't believe this. It's a lie and it causes much mischief.

But, in truth, we tell ourselves this lie in order to survive.

I think the Buddha was right about the monkeys in our mango tree. But I want to build on his insight as I reflect on the Holy Trinity.

Thomas Merton was a convert to Catholicism who became a contemplative monk (a Trappist). He wrote important books on the spiritual life. Merton once remarked that the human soul is like a great oak tree.

I like this image. Like mango trees, oak trees are very beautiful.

But I like Merton's image of the human soul even more because he went on to say, "oak trees are really rooted in the sky." Like the great oaks reaching up into the sky that grace our Valley here in Sonoma, our souls find their strength and stability by reaching up beyond themselves into the Mystery of God.

And also like the great oaks that grace our Valley, the mango tree of our mind is really rooted in the sky.

This brings me to the Holy Trinity.

Christianity teaches that God is not a rugged individual. God is a perfect Oneness of persons. The God of Christian faith is not that alpha-male monkey who dominates all the other monkeys and can brow-beat them to stop their howling. God is not a lonely monarch, made all the more lonely because of his power over others. God is more like a choir of voices, blended together to make unimaginably sonorous harmony.

I like jazz. Have you ever heard Bill Evans (piano), Miles Davis (trumpet) and John Coltrane (sax) make music together? Sometimes I think that these three people are making the music. Other times, I think it is the music that is making the three people.

Theologians, by the way, have been asking a similar question about the Trinity for the last seventeen centuries. But I want to take this in a more practical direction.

Don't be too afraid about all the monkeys in your head. Don't be overwhelmed by shame and guilt. We all have howling monkeys between our ears. Above all else, don't make the mistake of pretending to be the alpha-male in charge of the whole tree. Every human being is a person who is made up of many parts – memories, needs, desires, thoughts – that will never congeal into an autonomous individual under the dominance of some alpha-male monkey in the mango tree of our mind.

We have not been created in the image and likeness of an alpha-male. We have not been created in the image and likeness of a lonely individual. We have been created in the image and likeness of the God who is three persons opening up to one another.

This is just another way of saying that God is love.

I am just now turning seventy. I look at books in my library and see notes I scribbled in the margins when I was much younger. I smile when I read what I wrote. I read children's books to my grand nieces and nephews that were read to me as a child. Here as well, I am charmed to see the person I was as a child. From time to time, however, I find myself asking those difficult questions mentioned earlier:

How could I have said that?

What was I thinking when I did that?

Who am I that I would even consider doing such a thing?

What's up with me? Sometimes, I just don't recognize myself.

Despite my pretense, I am not a lonely monarch or an alpha-male, in complete charge of myself and my surroundings. I am constantly discovering parts of myself that I didn't know existed and parts of myself I wish didn't exist.

Most of all, I am still trying to understand the fact that the mango tree of my mind – the great oak tree that is my soul – is really rooted in the sky.

The howling of the monkeys is slowly being transformed into the beautiful, sonorous harmony that is the Mystery of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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?