

HOMILY FOR THE THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 24 October 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: 152

Reading I Dt 6:2-6

Moses spoke to the people, saying:

"Fear the LORD, your God,
and keep, throughout the days of your lives,
all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you,
and thus have long life.

Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe them,
that you may grow and prosper the more,
in keeping with the promise of the LORD, the God of your fathers,
to give you a land flowing with milk and honey.

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!

Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God,
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your strength.

Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today."

Responsorial Psalm Ps 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

R. (2) I love you, Lord, my strength.

I love you, O LORD, my strength,

O LORD, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

My God, my rock of refuge,

my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold!

Praised be the LORD, I exclaim,

and I am safe from my enemies.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

The LORD lives! And blessed be my rock!

Extolled be God my savior.

You who gave great victories to your king

and showed kindness to your anointed.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

Reading II Heb 7:23-28

Brothers and sisters:

The levitical priests were many
because they were prevented by death from remaining in office,
but Jesus, because he remains forever,
has a priesthood that does not pass away.

Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him,
since he lives forever to make intercession for them.

It was fitting that we should have such a high priest:
holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners,
higher than the heavens.

He has no need, as did the high priests,
to offer sacrifice day after day,
first for his own sins and then for those of the people;
he did that once for all when he offered himself.

For the law appoints men subject to weakness to be high priests,
but the word of the oath, which was taken after the law,
appoints a son,
who has been made perfect forever.

Alleluia Jn 14:23

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord;
and my father will love him and we will come to him.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 12:28b-34

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him,
"Which is the first of all the commandments?"

Jesus replied, "The first is this:

Hear, O Israel!

The Lord our God is Lord alone!

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul,

with all your mind,

and with all your strength.

The second is this:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher.

You are right in saying,

'He is One and there is no other than he.'

And 'to love him with all your heart,

with all your understanding,
with all your strength,
and to love your neighbor as yourself'
is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."
And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding,
he said to him,
"You are not far from the kingdom of God."
And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

People sometimes say some very odd things about the Bible. Too often, we read the Bible assuming that it is confirming what we already believe.

For example, some time ago, I gave a lecture at the University of Southern California. After my presentation, a fellow came up and tried to convince me that Jesus, when he was a teenager, left Palestine and went to India where he studied Buddhism. He preached the teachings of the Buddha when he returned to his homeland. Later, after his death, the Church distorted his teachings into what we call Christianity today. "However," my aggressive conversation partner assured me, "the real teachings of Jesus (Buddhism) can be discovered hidden behind the words of the Gospels."

This fellow even had a pamphlet that listed a bounty of passages from the New Testament "proving" that Jesus was really preaching what the Buddha taught.

Conspiracy theories like this have been with us for a long time. Given the propensity of the internet for promoting misinformation, I don't expect that such interpretations of the Bible will go away anytime soon.

More worrisome to me are people who claim that they don't like the Old Testament. The god of the Old Testament, they tell me, is angry and judgmental. This god should not be confused with the loving Father that Jesus calls "Abba" in the New Testament. In effect, there are two different deities, the true God of the New Testament and the false god of the Old Testament.

Rejecting the Old Testament as a way of embracing the New Testament has been around for a long time. In fact, it is the oldest heresy in the history of the Church. (It's called Marcionism). When you bump into someone like this, ask them if they are familiar with what the Prophet Isaiah says about God's loving-compassion.

Can a mother forget her infant,
Or be without tenderness for the child of her womb?
Even should she forget,
I will never forget you.

This passage from Isaiah is certainly an affecting image of God's love in the Old Testament. But more to the point, the image of a mother ever attentive to the child in her womb captures the central theme of the Old Testament itself: the unending fidelity and tenderness of God to each and every one of us.

I also need to mention some of my capitalist friends. They sometimes like to support their morally unacceptable views about what they claim are the "virtues" of *laissez faire* capitalism by quoting the Bible. For some reason, the Gospel of Matthew always seems to come to their mind,

"The poor you shall always have with you."

As a rule, I ask them if they can quote any other passages from the Bible. If they can't, I offer a passage from the Gospel according to Luke. Mary, in her Magnificat, proclaims the greatness of the Lord by saying,

He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but
lifted up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he
has sent away empty.

If you are looking for arguments in support of what Pope John Paul criticized as "savage capitalism," don't look to the Bible. (Don't look to the popes either).

So how should we make sense out of what we read in the Bible?

Look at the readings for today.

In today's Gospel, a scribe (a scholar of the Law of Moses) comes up to Jesus and asks him a question.

Which is the first of all the commandments?

Jesus, as we would expect of a observant Jew, answers by quoting a beloved passage from the Torah,

Jesus replied, "The first is this:
Hear, O Israel!
The Lord our God is Lord alone!
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your mind,
and with all your strength.

This passage was (and is) so well known among Jews that they have given it a name: the *Shema Yisrael* ("Hear O Israel!"). Jews love this passage so much that they inscribe it on a little piece of paper and place it in a little box which they nail on their front door. When you enter, please touch the little box and press your hand to your forehead so you can take the *Shema* to heart.

Jesus quotes the *Shema Yisrael* in answering the scribe's question, but he doesn't stop there. He goes on to quote another passage from the Torah,

The second [commandment] is this:
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
There is no other commandment greater than these."

What does this have to do with the problem of reading the Bible wisely?

Saint Augustine, writing way back in the fourth century, said that this little story in the Gospel of Mark offers us the key for understanding the entire Bible correctly. Here is what he wrote,

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.

If our reading of the Bible does not lead us to a steadfast dedicated love – a love not only of God but also of our neighbor – we have not yet understood the full depth of the meaning of what we have read.

The Word of God that is announced in the Bible summons us to be in love. When our struggle to love is challenged and strengthened by our reading of the Bible, Augustine assures us, we have begun to read our Scriptures correctly.

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?