

HOMILY FOR PENTECOST SUNDAY

Sunday, 31 May 2020

- 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

Pentecost Sunday At the Vigil Mass

Lectionary: 62

Reading 1 [GN 11:1-9](#)

The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words.

While the people were migrating in the east,
they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

They said to one another,

“Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.”

They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city

and a tower with its top in the sky,

and so make a name for ourselves;

otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.”

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower
that the people had built.

Then the LORD said: “If now, while they are one people,

all speaking the same language,

they have started to do this,

nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do.

Let us then go down there and confuse their language,

so that one will not understand what another says.”

Thus the LORD scattered them from there all over the earth,

and they stopped building the city.

That is why it was called Babel,

because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world.

It was from that place that he scattered them all over the earth.

Lectionary: 63

Reading 1 [ACTS 2:1-11](#)

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled,
they were all in one place together.
And suddenly there came from the sky
a noise like a strong driving wind,
and it filled the entire house in which they were.
Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire,
which parted and came to rest on each one of them.
And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in different tongues,
as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.
Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem.
At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd,
but they were confused
because each one heard them speaking in his own language.
They were astounded, and in amazement they asked,
“Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans?
Then how does each of us hear them in his native language?
We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites,
inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene,
as well as travelers from Rome,
both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs,
yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues
of the mighty acts of God.”

Responsorial Psalm [PS 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34](#)

R. (cf. 30) **Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD, my God, you are great indeed!

How manifold are your works, O Lord!

the earth is full of your creatures;

R. **Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD be glad in his works!
Pleasing to him be my theme;
I will be glad in the LORD.

R. **Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

If you take away their breath, they perish
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.

R. **Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Reading 2 [1 COR 12:3B-7, 12-13](#)

Brothers and sisters:

No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.
There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit;
there are different forms of service but the same Lord;
there are different workings but the same God
who produces all of them in everyone.
To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit
is given for some benefit.
As a body is one though it has many parts,
and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body,
so also Christ.
For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,
whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons,
and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

Sequence

Veni, Sancte Spiritus
Come, Holy Spirit, come!
And from your celestial home
Shed a ray of light divine!
Come, Father of the poor!
Come, source of all our store!
Come, within our bosoms shine.
You, of comforters the best;
You, the soul's most welcome guest;
Sweet refreshment here below;

In our labor, rest most sweet;
Grateful coolness in the heat;
Solace in the midst of woe.
O most blessed Light divine,
Shine within these hearts of yours,
And our inmost being fill!
Where you are not, we have naught,
Nothing good in deed or thought,
Nothing free from taint of ill.
Heal our wounds, our strength renew;
On our dryness pour your dew;
Wash the stains of guilt away:
Bend the stubborn heart and will;
Melt the frozen, warm the chill;
Guide the steps that go astray.
On the faithful, who adore
And confess you, evermore
In your sevenfold gift descend;
Give them virtue's sure reward;
Give them your salvation, Lord;
Give them joys that never end. Amen.
Alleluia.

Alleluia

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel [JN 20:19-23](#)

On the evening of that first day of the week,
when the doors were locked, where the disciples were,
for fear of the Jews,
Jesus came and stood in their midst
and said to them, "Peace be with you."
When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you.
As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit.
Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
and whose sins you retain are retained."

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Happy Pentecost Sunday.

I have to say that I have cheated a little in providing you with the readings for Pentecost. But, in truth, the Church provides us with a bevy of readings to choose from. The first reading I have selected, the story of the Tower of Babel, is taken from the readings for the vigil mass (Saturday evening). The second reading, the story of the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire, is taken from the mass during the day (Sunday).

I want to give you both readings because the point I want to make about the Feast of Pentecost is that the descent of the Spirit in tongues of fire is the reversal of the calamity that befell the human race as punishment for the Tower of Babel.

The story of the Tower of Babel is a gem. It is the last of a series of beautifully told myths that form the first part of the Book of Genesis. Genesis begins with the first creation account (there are two creation myths). Then there is the story of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the Garden, the violence of Cain against Able, and the Great Flood. These are all myths – so don't ruin the story and miss the point by taking them literally.

This advice goes for the last of the myths in Genesis as well – the Tower of Babel.

Like most myths, the story of the Tower gives insight into why things are the way they are. In this case, the story explains why we speak so many different languages and, more importantly, why we have such difficulty understanding one another.

Once upon a time... in a valley in the land of Shinar...

The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words.

And the people said to one another,

“Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.”
They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

Then they said,

“Come, let us build ourselves a city
and a tower with its top in the sky,
and so make a name for ourselves;
otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.”

So far, this sounds innocent enough to me. But I am a city-boy at heart. I strongly suspect that this story was first told by a nomad out in the desert who has seen how nasty city folk can be toward their country cousins.

The story continues,

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower
that the people had built.
Then the LORD said: "If now, while they are one people,
all speaking the same language,
they have started to do this,
nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do.

Now ask yourself: can you imagine a bunch of people, coming together to start a city and even building a tower, and then thinking of "doing whatever they presume to do"? I have a friend who works on Wall Street (in a tower, as a matter of fact). He watched people do "whatever they presume to do" up until 2008 when things began to fall apart. Banks stopped talking to one another. Everybody scattered, running for the exits.

But now I am a little ahead of our story in Genesis.

So God said,

"Let us then go down there and confuse their language,
so that one will not understand what another says."
Thus the LORD scattered them from there all over the earth,
and they stopped building the city.
That is why it was called Babel...

The curse of Babel is the confusion of tongues into the multitude of languages, such that we no longer can understand what another says.

Since the story of the Tower of Babel is a myth, I recommend that we understand it allegorically and in the widest possible terms. At the literal level, the story tells us why there are so many languages in the world. But more profoundly, the Tower of Babel is about our inability to understand even what people who speak our native tongue are trying to say.

Let me offer an example.

When I was still a young priest, a man, filled with concern and remorse about his teenage son, came to me. Or rather, perhaps I should say that he was concerned about himself in relation to his teenage son. "Father, every time I try to talk to my son, I open my mouth and the right words just don't come out." I tried to be of some comfort to this good man by telling him that teenage sons come to me all the time to admit that, when they try to talk with their father, the right words seem to fail them as well.

Let us then go down there and confuse their language,
so that one will not understand what another says.”

I’m sure that we all have stories to tell about how the right words just won’t come out of our mouth.

Let me offer another, darker example.

Last week, I watched on television a police officer with his knee on the neck of another human being in Minneapolis. People gathered and pleaded for the police officer to stop. The police officer did not respond to their pleas. There were curses as well. It seemed as if they were speaking different languages. Babble: “one will not understand what another says.”

Pentecost, I said above, is the reversal of the curse that has fallen on us at Babel in the land of Shinar.

After the ascension of the Risen Lord, the disciples were gathered “all in one place together.”

And suddenly there came from the sky
a noise like a strong driving wind,
and it filled the entire house in which they were.
Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire,
which parted and came to rest on each one of them.
And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in different tongues,
as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

And then, the story gets better.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem.
At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd,
but they were confused
because each one heard them speaking in his own language.
They were astounded, and in amazement they asked,
“Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans?
Then how does each of us hear them in his native language?”

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the undoing of the curse of Babel. The people who had been “scattered... from all over the earth” were able to hear the Good News, each and every one in his and her own language. Pentecost undoes what was done to us at Babel.

About a year ago, my niece spent some months in the great city of Kolkata, the capital of the state of West Bengal, in India. She was doing an internship with a company developing sustainable manufacturing. There are twenty-two official languages in India (and here they are:

Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu). Father Jojo grew up speaking Malayalam, but it's Bengali that is important for my niece.

During her time in Kolkata, she lived in a dormitory run by the Sisters of Charity, founded by (Saint) Mother Teresa of Kolkata. My niece sent me an email from Kolkata and told me a wonderful story.

After work, when the temperature and humidity had become oppressive, my niece would grab a bottle of water and walk back to her dormitory. The dormitory had a gate and a gatekeeper. The man at the gate was known simply as "Paul" (I doubt if this was his actual name). He was under five feet tall and spoke almost no English. I suppose I should tell you that my niece speaks even less Bengali. Every morning, Paul would greet my niece with a bright smile and a gentile bow. And on her return, in the heat and humidity of the day, Paul would smile and bow once again to my niece.

This was a kind of ritual. Paul would smile and bow. My niece would smile back and then hold up her water bottle. I imagine the bottle to be dripping with condensation in the heat and the humidity. Paul would act surprised and then bring out an old cup. My niece would give Paul her bottle of water. Then, Paul would carefully pour all the water into his cup, save for a few ounces. Then he would smile with gratitude and return the bottle, with its ounce or two of water, to my smiling niece.

I call this a ritual. This is because my niece knows that her gatekeeper knows that my niece knows that there is a refrigerator full of cold bottled water upstairs in the dormitory waiting for her. There is no need for Paul to leave any water in my niece's bottle. The city is very hot and Paul is thirsty. But he will not take all of my niece's water, even though there is plenty of water upstairs. Leaving a little water in her bottle is a way of acknowledging my niece's dignity as a human being and expressing his gratitude to her for her kindness without speaking any English. Taking the almost empty bottle of water back from Paul is my niece's way of acknowledging the dignity and understated goodness of this gentle and dutiful man. For my niece, you see, doesn't speak any Bengali.

In the story of Babel and its tower, we are told that,

the LORD scattered them from there all over the earth,
and they stopped building the city.
That is why it was called Babel.

But in their little daily ritual, Paul and my niece were beginning to build the city again. They were not building Babel, of course. They were building the city of Kolkata in a more humane place to live and, more profoundly, we should say that they were building the "New and Eternal Jerusalem." Paul does not speak English and my niece speaks no Bengali. But the Good News is

that Pentecost is undoing the ancient, mythological curse of Babel and the confusion of tongues. It is as if tongues of fire had descended on Paul and my niece, even in the heat and humidity of Kolkata and that

each one heard them speaking in his own language.

This is just like the first Pentecost – for this little ritual is what we mean by “Spirit.”

This is what we need to tell the world. This is what we need to proclaim to fathers and their teenage sons. This is the Good News that needs to be proclaimed in Minneapolis and in the other burning cities in our country as the sun begins to set this very day.

And the people who had gathered in Jerusalem said,

“We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites,
inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene,
as well as travelers from Rome,
both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs,
yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues
of the mighty acts of God.”

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?