

HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 4 February 2024

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: 74

Reading 1 Jb 7:1-4, 6-7

Job spoke, saying:

Is not man's life on earth a drudgery?

Are not his days those of hirelings?

He is a slave who longs for the shade,
a hireling who waits for his wages.

So I have been assigned months of misery,
and troubled nights have been allotted to me.

If in bed I say, "When shall I arise?"

then the night drags on;

I am filled with restlessness until the dawn.

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle;
they come to an end without hope.

Remember that my life is like the wind;

I shall not see happiness again.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

R. (cf. 3a) **Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.**

Praise the LORD, for he is good;

sing praise to our God, for he is gracious;

it is fitting to praise him.

The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem;

the dispersed of Israel he gathers.

R. **Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.**

He heals the brokenhearted

and binds up their wounds.

He tells the number of the stars;

he calls each by name.

R. Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.

Great is our Lord and mighty in power;

to his wisdom there is no limit.

The LORD sustains the lowly;

the wicked he casts to the ground.

R. Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.

Reading 2 1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23

Brothers and sisters:

If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast,

for an obligation has been imposed on me,

and woe to me if I do not preach it!

If I do so willingly, I have a recompense,

but if unwillingly,

then I have been entrusted with a stewardship.

What then is my recompense?

That, when I preach,

I offer the gospel free of charge

so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

Although I am free in regard to all,

I have made myself a slave to all

so as to win over as many as possible.

To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak.

I have become all things to all, to save at least some.

All this I do for the sake of the gospel,

so that I too may have a share in it.

Alleluia Mt 8:17

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Christ took away our infirmities

and bore our diseases.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 1:29-39

On leaving the synagogue

Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew

with James and John.
Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever.
They immediately told him about her.
He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up.
Then the fever left her and she waited on them.

When it was evening, after sunset,
they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons.
The whole town was gathered at the door.
He cured many who were sick with various diseases,
and he drove out many demons,
not permitting them to speak because they knew him.

Rising very early before dawn, he left
and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.
Simon and those who were with him pursued him
and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you."
He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages
that I may preach there also.
For this purpose have I come."
So he went into their synagogues,
preaching and driving out demons
throughout the whole of Galilee.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

So many Americans are unhappy today. The Gospel offers us insights into why this is the case and how the grace of God is leading us out of this unhappiness.

Today, a lot of American are unhappy because they are confused about what it means to be free. There is a long tradition, here in the USA, of believing that to be free means to just be left alone. I will be free when I am autonomous and able to do what I want to do. Freedom is in-dependence.

Certainly, there is a truth in this view of freedom.
Landing in jail means that you have lost your freedom.

Having to obey traffic laws is a constraint on our freedom as well.

The Church, however, challenges us with a considerably more demanding and spiritually profound understanding of freedom. The Church's understanding of freedom is certainly more ancient than this American notion of freedom.

All this can be seen in today's Gospel.

In Mark's Gospel, Simon Peter's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. Jesus heals her by taking her by the hand and helping her up out of bed.

Then, Mark tells us, with his gift for telling a simple story, something of enormous importance:

the fever left her and she waited on them.

Jesus heals a woman of her fever. He sets her free from the illness that afflicts her. But Jesus is not just releasing her from the confinement of her sickbed. He is freeing her for service to her household and her guests.

Let me say this again, more carefully: Jesus sets the woman free *from* what is confining her to her sick bed. But more profoundly, Jesus is setting the woman free *for* service to her household and her guests.

the fever left her AND she waited on them.

For Mark, the great sign that we are healed of what afflicts our soul, the sign that we have been set free from that which confines us, is that we are eager to serve.

In Christian tradition, freedom is not simply a matter of being free from constraints. It is not merely independence. Freedom is not just *freedom from*. In light of the Gospel, freedom is always *freedom for*.

Freedom for what?

Well, as Mark shows us, freedom is freedom for service to our family and the guests who come into our household. We are free when we are set free for service to our wider community as well.

Ayn Rand, a novelist whose thought has become dreadfully influential in our country, infamously said,

If a civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject.

Are we are like wolves preying on one another? Is loyalty only for dogs? Must we say that the more we compete and the more we can climb over one another in getting to the top, the better the world will be?

Ayn Rand is suffering from a fever. She is a woman lying in bed, lost in a fever dream. She is like Simon Peter's mother-in-law – but before Jesus has entered Simon Peter's house and approached her bed.

Freedom is not just *freedom from*. In fact, becoming obsessed with *freedom from* makes us unhappy. God calls us to freedom – to be sure, but the freedom God calls us to is always a *freedom for* others and for the well-being of the world.

We must practice this in our lives if we are ever to be happy. We must teach this to our children if they are ever to hope in the future. And when we do this, together, we will be less lonely and finally come to understand what it means to be free.

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?