

HOMILY FOR TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 4 October 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

Lectionary: 139

Reading 1 IS 5:1-7

Let me now sing of my friend,
my friend's song concerning his vineyard.

My friend had a vineyard

on a fertile hillside;

he spaded it, cleared it of stones,

and planted the choicest vines;

within it he built a watchtower,

and hewed out a wine press.

Then he looked for the crop of grapes,

but what it yielded was wild grapes.

Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,

judge between me and my vineyard:

What more was there to do for my vineyard

that I had not done?

Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes,

did it bring forth wild grapes?

Now, I will let you know

what I mean to do with my vineyard:

take away its hedge, give it to grazing,

break through its wall, let it be trampled!

Yes, I will make it a ruin:

it shall not be pruned or hoed,

but overgrown with thorns and briars;

I will command the clouds

not to send rain upon it.

The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,

and the people of Judah are his cherished plant;

he looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed!

for justice, but hark, the outcry!

Responsorial Psalm PS 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20

R. (Is 5:7a) **The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.**

A vine from Egypt you transplanted;
you drove away the nations and planted it.
It put forth its foliage to the Sea,
its shoots as far as the River.

R. **The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.**

Why have you broken down its walls,
so that every passer-by plucks its fruit,
The boar from the forest lays it waste,
and the beasts of the field feed upon it?

R. **The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.**

Once again, O LORD of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see;
take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand has planted
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

R. **The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.**

Then we will no more withdraw from you;
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.
O LORD, God of hosts, restore us;
if your face shine upon us, then we shall be saved.

R. **The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.**

Reading 2 PHIL 4:6-9

Brothers and sisters:

Have no anxiety at all, but in everything,
by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,
make your requests known to God.

Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters,
whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious,
if there is any excellence
and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.

Keep on doing what you have learned and received
and heard and seen in me.

Then the God of peace will be with you.

Alleluia JN 15:16

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

I have chosen you from the world, says the Lord,
to go and bear fruit that will remain.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel MT 21:33-43

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people:

"Hear another parable.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard,
put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower.

Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey.

When vintage time drew near,

he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce.

But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat,
another they killed, and a third they stoned.

Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones,
but they treated them in the same way.

Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking,

'They will respect my son.'

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another,

'This is the heir.

Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.'

They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?"

They answered him,

"He will put those wretched men to a wretched death

and lease his vineyard to other tenants

who will give him the produce at the proper times."

Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures:

The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

by the Lord has this been done,

and it is wonderful in our eyes?

Therefore, I say to you,

the kingdom of God will be taken away from you

and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Perhaps, the most famous sermon ever preached about us Americans was given aboard a ship moored off what is today Cape Cod. The ship was called the *Arbella*, and the preacher was John Winthrop, a Puritan who had sailed across the cold Atlantic with his religious community in the

hope of establishing a new settlement of Christians about forty miles to the north of Plymouth, on the Charles River. Winthrop would soon become a governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The year was 1630 and the settlement he founded on the Charles is now called Boston.

In his sermon, he told his flock that they should think of themselves as a “city on a hill.” He was quoting Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in Mathew’s Gospel.

If this is the most famous sermon ever preached about us, then I think we must say that it is also one of the most misunderstood as well. America is a “city on a hill.” American politicians love quoting this part of Winthrop’s sermon. Often they misquote Winthrop by calling the United States a “shining city on a hill.” The word “shining” is not in Winthrop’s sermon for a good reason: it is not in Mathew’s Gospel. Winthrop knew his Bible.

But our politicians not only sometimes put words in Winthrop’s mouth. They also sometimes forget to read the fine print as well. Winthrop told his people that they should think of themselves as

“a city on a hill and that the eyes of all people are upon us.”

In saying this, Winthrop was not predicting that the Puritans would be admired by all. He was reminding his community that they would be judged by the world and, for that matter, judged by God, based on their fidelity to the moral demands that Christian faith places on us.

"So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world".

As you would expect of a Puritan, Winthrop was emphasizing the responsibilities that our Covenant with God lays upon the Church. Being chosen by God does not make us a “shining city on a hill.” Our Covenant with the Maker of Heaven and of Earth places upon us an abiding responsibility to create a society that is pleasing in the eyes of God.

Winthrop could have cited today’s readings in support of his call to moral responsibility. The readings are all about what it means to enter into a Covenant with God.

The first reading is from the Isaiah. The prophet offers us a parable.

Let me now sing of my friend,
my friend's song concerning his vineyard.
My friend had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside;
he spaded it, cleared it of stones,
and planted the choicest vines;
within it he built a watchtower,

and hewed out a wine press.
Then he looked for the crop of grapes,
but what it yielded was wild grapes.

The prophet was writing in the years before Jerusalem fell to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian strong man, and the destruction of the Temple. Isaiah was saying something that was not only unbelievable to his fellow Jews, he was saying something that was politically unpopular: the wickedness of the people could cause God to withdraw from his Covenant.

Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard:
What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I had not done?
Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes,
did it bring forth wild grapes?
Now, I will let you know
what I mean to do with my vineyard:
take away its hedge, give it to grazing,
break through its wall, let it be trampled!
Yes, I will make it a ruin:
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
but overgrown with thorns and briars;
I will command the clouds
not to send rain upon it.

In case there is any doubt about what he's talking about, the Prophet spells it out:

The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his cherished plant;
he looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed!
for justice, but hark, the outcry!

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us another parable about a vineyard. (Did he have Isaiah's parable in mind?) In Jesus's parable, the grapes are fine. It's the tenants running the vineyard while the owner is away that are the problem. But the basic point is the same: fidelity to the Covenant requires moral responsibility on our part. Like the final verses in the selection from Isaiah, Jesus also spells out the meaning of his parable:

Therefore, I say to you,
the kingdom of God will be taken away from you
and given to a people that will produce its fruit.

The Covenant with God makes us a “chosen people” and a “city on a hill.” But being “chosen” doesn’t make us a “shining” city on a hill. Our being chosen confers on us a moral responsibility to promote justice and practice compassion that places our behavior under God’s judgment.

So what are we to do? What are the responsibilities we have toward one another? Winthrop has a great deal to say about this in his sermon aboard the *Arbella*.

He starts his sermon by reminding his community about why there are “some rich and some poor,” why some are “high and eminent,” while others are “mean and in subjection.” I suppose that, if Winthrop were preaching to us here in Sonoma today, he might also ask, “why does the wild fire pass by one home and leave it unscathed while the neighbor’s home is burnt to the ground and left in ashes that the wind scatters?” or “why has the Covid pandemic left some of us without a job and others untouched?”

Winthrop’s answer is challenging. Some are rich and some are poor in order that God might show “the glory of his wisdom” in the work of the Holy Spirit. Here again, don’t be misled. The Spirit of God

“Restrains... the wicked ... so that the rich and mighty should not eat up the poor, nor the poor and despised rise up against and shake off their yoke.”

Some are rich and some are needy. Some lose their homes in the wildfires and others do not. This is all so that we might learn from the Holy Spirit

“that every man might have need of others, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection.”

And then, John Winthrop goes out of his way to be clear about the folly of associating success and prosperity with God’s favor.

“no man is made more honorable than another or more wealthy etc., out of any particular and singular respect to himself, but for the glory of his Creator and the common good of the creature, Man.”

As I am writing this homily, I have just heard that the winds are beginning to blow from the southwest to the northeast here in Sonoma County. This is great news for our friends and family in Kenwood and Glen Ellen and bad news for Calistoga and Angwin. The shift in wind direction does not mean that God has answered the prayers of Kenwood and turned his back on Calistoga. The Holy Spirit is teaching us that we are all in this fire-fight together, that we have been given to one another for safe-keeping and service and that God’s Covenant binds us together and summons us to moral responsibility in caring for those whose lives have been touched by the inferno in the Mayacamas.

Winthrop spoke a great truth about us Americans when he preached to his community aboard the *Arbella* in 1630. We Americans are “a city on a hill.” But after saying this, he went on to say,

“The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”

The wildfires, the pandemic, even the dismal state of our political life today – these all need to be understood rightly. The Lord has not abandoned us. Quite the contrary. The Good News is that the Holy Spirit is reminding us Americans of our Covenant with God – a Covenant that binds us together into one community. The Holy Spirit is instructing us about our responsibility to care for one another during this difficult season. Winthrop was right about us Americans: we are a “city on a hill.” The time has come for us to shine.

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?