

HOMILY FOR THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME  
Sunday, 4 SEPTEMBER 2022

- 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: 129

Reading 1 Wis 9:13-18b

Who can know God's counsel,  
or who can conceive what the LORD intends?  
For the deliberations of mortals are timid,  
and unsure are our plans.  
For the corruptible body burdens the soul  
and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.  
And scarce do we guess the things on earth,  
and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty;  
but when things are in heaven, who can search them out?  
Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given wisdom  
and sent your holy spirit from on high?  
And thus were the paths of those on earth made straight.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14 and 17

R. (1) In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.  
You turn man back to dust,  
saying, "Return, O children of men."  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are as yesterday, now that it is past,  
or as a watch of the night.  
R. In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.  
You make an end of them in their sleep;  
the next morning they are like the changing grass,  
Which at dawn springs up anew,  
but by evening wilts and fades.  
R. In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.  
Teach us to number our days aright,  
that we may gain wisdom of heart.  
Return, O LORD! How long?  
Have pity on your servants!  
R. In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.

Fill us at daybreak with your kindness,  
that we may shout for joy and gladness all our days.  
And may the gracious care of the LORD our God be ours;  
prosper the work of our hands for us!  
Prosper the work of our hands!  
R. In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.

Reading 2 Phmn 9-10, 12-17

I, Paul, an old man,  
and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus,  
urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus,  
whose father I have become in my imprisonment;  
I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.  
I should have liked to retain him for myself,  
so that he might serve me on your behalf  
in my imprisonment for the gospel,  
but I did not want to do anything without your consent,  
so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary.  
Perhaps this is why he was away from you for a while,  
that you might have him back forever,  
no longer as a slave  
but more than a slave, a brother,  
beloved especially to me, but even more so to you,  
as a man and in the Lord.  
So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me.

Alleluia Ps 119:135

R. Alleluia, alleluia.  
Let your face shine upon your servant;  
and teach me your laws.  
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 14:25-33

Great crowds were traveling with Jesus,  
and he turned and addressed them,  
"If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother,  
wife and children, brothers and sisters,  
and even his own life,  
he cannot be my disciple.  
Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me  
cannot be my disciple.  
Which of you wishing to construct a tower  
does not first sit down and calculate the cost  
to see if there is enough for its completion?"

Otherwise, after laying the foundation  
and finding himself unable to finish the work  
the onlookers should laugh at him and say,  
'This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.'  
Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down  
and decide whether with ten thousand troops  
he can successfully oppose another king  
advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops?  
But if not, while he is still far away,  
he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms.  
In the same way,  
anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions  
cannot be my disciple."

## PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

I want to tell you a little about Anthony Poola.

Anthony was born in an isolated village in India and baptized as an infant. His parents were Catholics. In fact, his father was a catechist. However, I must also say that, in the eyes of far too many people in India, Anthony is a Dalit, born of Dalit parents and will always be a Dalit.

A Dalit is an "untouchable," the lowest level of the caste system in India. (Discrimination based on caste has been illegal for some time in India).

Last week, in Rome, Pope Francis made Anthony Poola a cardinal. As a priest in India, Anthony has worked tirelessly to build schools for the poorest of the poor in rural villages. He was made the Archbishop of Hyderabad in 2020. Now Anthony is a cardinal.

This means that a Dalit will be voting on who will be our next pope. For that matter, it also means that our next pope could be a Dalit.

Giving a red hat to a Dalit (making a Dalit a cardinal) has ruffled some feathers in India. There are religious extremists (and populist politicians) who don't like this at all. In addition, we must also admit that caste discrimination persists even among Catholics in India to some extent.

In making Anthony a cardinal, Pope Francis is once again envisioning the future of the Church and then, based on his vision, taking one concrete step forward in realizing that future. Should we be at all surprised that this makes some people uncomfortable? Christian faith is disruptive.

Take the second reading for example. The Letter to Philemon is the shortest book of the entire Bible (only 335 words in Greek). Philemon was a well-to-do Christian and leader in his local Christian community. He was also the owner of Onesimus, an enslaved man.

Slavery was the backbone of the highly stratified society of the Roman Empire. I think it safe to say that people like Philemon couldn't imagine how society could function without slaves.

Onesimus has run away from Philemon, his owner, and gone to Paul, who is in jail.

That Onesimus went to Paul after running away is significant. As a fugitive slave, Onesimus should have headed for the hills. Instead, he has sought out Paul. Maybe Onesimus had seen Paul baptize his owner. It is all the more remarkable when you think that Paul is in jail, awaiting transport to Rome for trial. The fugitive slave was talking to Paul right under the noses of the Roman authorities who would have arrested him on the spot if they knew he was a runaway.

Even more significant is the fact that Paul has baptized Onesimus and is sending him back to Philemon with a letter instructing him to take Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a member of his own household.

Paul's letter to Philemon is a masterpiece of arm-twisting. After expressing his fatherly fondness for the fugitive slave, Paul writes,

I should have liked to retain him for myself,  
so that he might serve me on your behalf  
in my imprisonment for the gospel,

This is ambiguous. Does Paul want "to retain" Onesimus as a slave on loan from Philemon to wait on him in prison? Actually, Paul has something quite different in mind.

Paul writes,

I did not want to do anything without your consent,  
so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary.  
Perhaps this is why he was away from you for a while,  
that you might have him back forever,  
no longer as a slave  
but more than a slave, a brother,  
beloved especially to me, but even more so to you,  
as a man and in the Lord.

Paul has baptized Onesimus, Philemon's property, without Philemon's permission, and now is asking (or instructing?) Philemon to take Onesimus back into his household as a family member. Paul is hiding an iron fist inside a silk glove.

So if you regard me as a partner,  
welcome him as you would me.

Just underneath all the charming prose, Paul is demanding a great deal of Philemon. As the owner of Onesimus, Philemon has the legal right to punish the runaway slave severely. Paul, however, does not simply think that Philemon should legally free Onesimus and send him on his way. Paul is asking that Onesimus be taken into Philemon's household as part of the family.

Christian faith is disruptive.

Faith requires us to change the way we relate to others in fundamental ways. This includes even practices as vital to the proper functioning of an empire as slavery. Paul is saying that we can no longer think in terms of slaves and their masters. We must now think in terms of the old life and the New Life that comes to us through baptism.

What do you think happened when Onesimus returned to Philemon with Paul's letter? We can presume that Philemon did not tear up the letter and throw it into a fire. He must have welcomed Onesimus into his household. Apparently, Philemon and Onesimus became widely known to the local churches, so much so that Paul's letter began to be read at mass. This is why it was eventually included in the New Testament.

Now, in Rome, Pope Francis has made a Dalit a cardinal and is sending him back to India to serve his local church. No doubt this will be disruptive – but Christian faith is disruptive.

Let your faith disrupt your life. Faith is supposed to be disruptive. And when it does, remember Philemon and Onesimus and how their baptism changed everything for them forever.

### 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?

