

HOMILY FOR THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 29 August 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: 128

Reading I Is 35:4-7a

Thus says the LORD:

Say to those whose hearts are frightened:

Be strong, fear not!

Here is your God,

he comes with vindication;

with divine recompense

he comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,

the ears of the deaf be cleared;

then will the lame leap like a stag,

then the tongue of the mute will sing.

Streams will burst forth in the desert,

and rivers in the steppe.

The burning sands will become pools,

and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

R. (1b) Praise the Lord, my soul!

or:

R. Alleluia.

The God of Jacob keeps faith forever,

secures justice for the oppressed,

gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets captives free.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

or:

R. Alleluia.

The LORD gives sight to the blind;

the LORD raises up those who were bowed down.

The LORD loves the just;

the LORD protects strangers.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

or:

R. Alleluia.

The fatherless and the widow the LORD sustains,
but the way of the wicked he thwarts.

The LORD shall reign forever;
your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II Jas 2:1-5

My brothers and sisters, show no partiality
as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.
For if a man with gold rings and fine clothes
comes into your assembly,
and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in,
and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes
and say, "Sit here, please, "
while you say to the poor one, "Stand there, " or "Sit at my feet, "
have you not made distinctions among yourselves
and become judges with evil designs?
Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.
Did not God choose those who are poor in the world
to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom
that he promised to those who love him?

Alleluia Cf. Mt 4:23

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom
and cured every disease among the people.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 7:31-37

Again Jesus left the district of Tyre
and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee,
into the district of the Decapolis.
And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment
and begged him to lay his hand on him.
He took him off by himself away from the crowd.
He put his finger into the man's ears
and, spitting, touched his tongue;
then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him,
"Ephphatha!" — that is, "Be opened!" —

And immediately the man's ears were opened,
his speech impediment was removed,
and he spoke plainly.
He ordered them not to tell anyone.
But the more he ordered them not to,
the more they proclaimed it.
They were exceedingly astonished and they said,
"He has done all things well.
He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

While waiting in a doctor's office, a while ago, I picked up a well-known business magazine and read an article about how a corporation was using AI (artificial intelligence) to make its business more efficient.

Internationally, the company does 90 million separate transactions a week with its customers. Seventeen million people use the company's app. The company's customers generate an enormous amount of data about when and where they like to buy the company's products. According to this article, these data help the company "to improve the customer experience."

The article in the magazine could have said more about exactly how this algorithm improves customer experience. For example, the algorithm schedules the company's part-time employees based on the data it collects. Apparently, this part of the algorithm is called, "just in time scheduling."

Based on the algorithm, the company calls part-time workers to work a shift when, and only when, they are needed. The algorithm can predict when the stores will need the part-time workers based the past behavior of its customers, the location of customer cellphones, the local weather and even when the basketball game is in the last ten seconds of the fourth quarter.

The author of the article was enthusiastic about how this algorithm is improving "customer experience" as well as the bottom line of the company. But this article, appearing as it did in a prominent business magazine, seems to be looking at the company's algorithm from the point of view of its customers, its senior management and its stockholders.

What does this algorithm look like from the point of view of its part-time employees?

"Just in time scheduling" requires some workers to be on call 40 hours a week for their *part-time* job. This means they can't take another part-time job if they ever hope to work a shift for the company. This also means that these workers may not be able to go back to

school in the hope of getting a full-time job. Arranging for childcare and schools is a problem as well. The worker can't predict her schedule very far into the future because her working hours are irregular. Sometimes these workers need to move in with their parents so that there is someone to care for the kids. The algorithm sometimes dictates how much sleep a child gets on a particular night.

It seems that the perspective from which we look at this algorithm is all important. There is more than one option available to us in this regard. Looking at it in terms of efficiency and "improving customer experience" can make us deaf to the cries of the part-time workers.

This brings us to the Gospel today. Mark tells a story about a man who has his hearing restored. Jesus is in Decapolis, the north of Palestine, far from Jerusalem.

And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him.

The man cannot speak correctly because he cannot hear correctly. So, Jesus takes the man off by himself, away from the crowd, and says,

"Ephphatha!" — that is, "Be opened!" —

In having his hearing restored, the man's ability to speak correctly is restored as well.

I think this story is about us.

In Psalm 34, we learn, that

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

At times, I think we are unable to speak the truth about the injustices of the world because we do not hear those who have been wounded by those injustices. If you can't hear right, you won't be able to speak right. And it's the Lord who opens our ears to hear the cry of the poor. He stands before us and says,

"Ephphatha!"

This is what the great saints have always told us: Saint Francis and Saint Vincent de Paul; Saint Martin de Porres and Mother Teresa as well. The Lord gave them the grace to hear the cries of the poor, and they began to speak correctly about what God is bringing about in the world.

Catholics (and many other Christians) speak of "the preferential option for the poor."

This must be understood carefully.

This “preferential option” is not an adversarial slogan. The Church’s teaching cannot be equated with the class struggle which Marxist thinkers call for. The purpose of this preferential option is not to pit the poor against the rich. The purpose of the preferential option is to open up our ears to the cry of people who are being marginalized by the cruelty of what Pope John Paul II called “savage capitalism.” A “preference” for the poor means that we recognize that the Risen Christ sees the world through the eyes of those who are marginalized.

We are to adopt a preferential option in order to remind ourselves that our wealth, and the security that comes from that wealth, can create a bubble in which we become blind to the injustices of the world and deaf to the cry of those who are being wounded by these injustices.

In keeping with Mark’s story about the deaf man, embracing the preferential option for the poor is a sign that the Lord is touching our ears so that we might hear the cry of the poor and speak rightly about the Lord’s demand for justice.

I have a friend who is a business consultant. I can recommend him to you without reservation. Sometime ago, he told me that he encourages his clients (mostly corporate executives, I presume) to think of themselves and their employees as if they were “building a cathedral together.”

I love this image.

Building a cathedral is doing something beautiful for God. This might be a little too “churchy” for the business community. But certainly, we can say that a company is a community of people working to contribute to the common good of society and to human flourishing. This flourishing includes customers and shareholders, of course. It includes the company’s employees. It must also include the company’s part-time employees.

Building cathedrals takes time. Learning to hear the cry of the poor takes time as well. When it comes to building cathedrals and hearing the cry of the poor, I recommend we keep the poetry of the Prophet Isaiah in mind. In the first reading, he assures us that the day is coming when the Lord will come to open our ears. Like the deaf man in Mark’s Gospel, we will hear once again and begin to speak clearly.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing.

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?