

HOMILY FOR TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 6 September 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: 127

Reading 1 EZ 33:7-9

Thus says the LORD:

You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel;
when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me.

If I tell the wicked, "O wicked one, you shall surely die,"

and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way,

the wicked shall die for his guilt,

but I will hold you responsible for his death.

But if you warn the wicked,

trying to turn him from his way,

and he refuses to turn from his way,

he shall die for his guilt,

but you shall save yourself.

Responsorial Psalm PS 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

R. (8) If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;

let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us joyfully sing psalms to him.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us bow down in worship;

let us kneel before the LORD who made us.

For he is our God,

and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice:

"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,

as in the day of Massah in the desert,

Where your fathers tempted me;

they tested me though they had seen my works.”
R. **If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.**

Reading 2 ROM 13:8-10

Brothers and sisters:

Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another;
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery;
you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,”
and whatever other commandment there may be,
are summed up in this saying, namely,
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
Love does no evil to the neighbor;
hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Alleluia 2 COR 5:19

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ
and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel MT 18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples:

“If your brother sins against you,
go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.
If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.
If he does not listen,
take one or two others along with you,
so that ‘every fact may be established
on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’
If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.
If he refuses to listen even to the church,
then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.
Amen, I say to you,
whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
Again, amen, I say to you,
if two of you agree on earth
about anything for which they are to pray,
it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.
For where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them.”

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Last week, I drew attention to the fact that the Gospel reading was speaking directly to our needs in the United States today. The same is true this week. Last week, I focused on the fact that the promised messiah will not be the “strong man” that intoxicates us so very much these days. Instead, the messiah will be the “suffering servant” of us all. If we are to be disciples of this messiah, we must “take up our cross and follow.”

This week, Jesus is talking to his disciples about how we should address conflicts in our community. What could be more timely for us Americans?

In his instructions to his disciples, Jesus is clear about how we are to argue with one another. He expects us to hang on to each other’s lapels and talk it out when we have a disagreement.

If your brother sins against you,
go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.
If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.

Jesus has a “plan B” as well. If a private conversation with your opponent doesn’t work, Jesus instructs us to double-down on our commitment to dialogue.

If he does not listen,
take one or two others along with you,
so that ‘every fact may be established
on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’

Jesus does not tell us to “go to the edge of the village and shake the dust off your sandals,” like he says in other places in the Gospels. (In Jesus’s day, this was a very rude gesture. I’ll let you guess what the equivalent gesture would be today!) Instead, he tells us to make our disagreement more public. He clearly believes that, in this world, there are facts that can be established, and that facing facts should require us to change our minds.

Moreover, Jesus is quoting the Torah when he says, ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ Please note, in the Torah, there is no guarantee that these “two or three witnesses” will agree with your side of the argument. You might very well lose your argument – a bitter pill to swallow – but this is the price we pay in order to live in a community of open discussion, facts and argument.

Jesus has a “plan C” as well.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.
If he refuses to listen even to the church,
then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

I think we need to be careful about this last instruction. What does it mean to treat someone like a “Gentile or a tax collector.” Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus meets a tax collector, a fellow named Zaccheaus. The Romans had a franchise system for collecting taxes. An entrepreneur, usually a wealthy man, would give the Roman authorities a lump sum of money and then, in return, the Romans would give the entrepreneur the legal right to collect an equal amount of money, plus a percentage, from the common people and pocket the dough. This made life easy for the Romans (they got their money up-front), profitable for the entrepreneurs (they made their money back plus a percentage) and rife with violence and corruption for everybody else (only the tax collectors were keeping the books). Jews hated tax collectors. And when Jesus meets Zaccheaus, the tax collector, how does he treat him? Jesus invites himself to Zaccheaus’s house for dinner... for dialogue of course.

Jesus’s teaching is certainly a challenge for a society as conflicted as ours. Americans are increasingly taking the “my way or the highway” approach and losing the (spiritual) art of learning how to change one’s mind wisely. The faith Jesus has in dialogue is a challenge to us all. People of Christian faith need to take up this challenge and bring it to our fellow citizens.

Here are some ideas that I hope will spur your own reflection.

First, the Church should promote the work of dialogue by setting a good example. Setting out on the path that Jesus is showing us begins with listening to one another. Deacons, priests and bishops need to listen to the laity. The local churches of the North need to listen to the churches of South America, Asia and Africa, places where the Church is thriving. All the local churches need to listen to the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Church also needs to listen to families, which Pope Francis recognizes, eloquently, as “a privileged place of God’s revelation” within the world. (I really like this idea). How is the Church to be of service to the family – different kinds of families in different parts of the world? We can begin to answer this question by listening to families.

Third, we also need to listen to the secular people, even people who hold us in contempt. The Church has an enormous treasury of wisdom to offer the secular world. However, it is also true that the Church has important lessons to learn from the secular world. This point goes to the heart of Pope John XXIII’s vision for the Second Vatican Council.

Fourth, we need to be fearless in our commitment to listening and learning so we can better proclaim the Good News. Certainly, the Church has an enormous treasury of wisdom to offer the world. But this spiritual heritage is not something we possess and dole-out begrudgingly to a world that is not to be trusted. Rather our faith is a gift given to us from above that we are to pass on faithfully in humble service to all and for the benefit of all.

Fifth, we need to recognize that the dialogue that Jesus is calling for in today’s Gospel is a kind of “exodus” – this is the word Pope Francis used when he spoke to the American Bishops during his visit to the United States in 2015. Like the ancient Hebrew people in the Bible, authentic dialogue

requires us to let go of what is familiar and set off into a desert that we do not fully understand. Without this departure from what is familiar, we will never be able to understand what motivates our dialogue partners. Without this exodus from the familiar, we will never come to see that our adversary is a person whose value cannot be measured simply by the opinions he or she might be espousing.

Above, I spoke of “holding on to our opponent’s lapels” when we argue. Why does Jesus place so much emphasis on dialogue? This takes us to the last part of his teaching on the importance of dialogue today. Jesus says to us,

Again, amen, I say to you,
if two of you agree on earth
about anything for which they are to pray,
it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.
For where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them.”

On the surface, Jesus seems to be addressing the Church, not the world. After all, not everyone prays. Not everyone believes in Jesus’s “heavenly Father.” And not everyone gathers together with others in the name of Jesus. But I believe that this teaching is for all people. God is with us, no matter who we are, when we come together in trust and open our hearts to one another.

If Jesus’s teaching is true, then the Church must proclaim this Good News in such a way that people of all faiths or no faith at all can come to see that our dialogues with those who disagree with us are never in vain if they are rooted in humility and good will.

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?