

HOMILY FOR THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
Sunday, 7 August 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: 117

Reading 1 Wis 18:6-9

The night of the passover was known beforehand to our fathers,
that, with sure knowledge of the oaths in which they put their faith,
they might have courage.

Your people awaited the salvation of the just
and the destruction of their foes.

For when you punished our adversaries,
in this you glorified us whom you had summoned.

For in secret the holy children of the good were offering sacrifice
and putting into effect with one accord the divine institution.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 33:1, 12, 18-19, 20-22

R. (12b) Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
Exult, you just, in the LORD;
praise from the upright is fitting.

Blessed the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he has chosen for his own inheritance.

R. Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
See, the eyes of the LORD are upon those who fear him,
upon those who hope for his kindness,

To deliver them from death
and preserve them in spite of famine.

R. Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
Our soul waits for the LORD,
who is our help and our shield.

May your kindness, O LORD, be upon us
who have put our hope in you.

R. Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.

Reading 2 Heb 11:1-2, 8-19

Brothers and sisters:

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for

and evidence of things not seen.
Because of it the ancients were well attested.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place
that he was to receive as an inheritance;

he went out, not knowing where he was to go.

By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country,
dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise;
for he was looking forward to the city with foundations,
whose architect and maker is God.

By faith he received power to generate,
even though he was past the normal age

—and Sarah herself was sterile—

for he thought that the one who had made the promise was
trustworthy.

So it was that there came forth from one man,
himself as good as dead,
descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky
and as countless as the sands on the seashore.

All these died in faith.

They did not receive what had been promised
but saw it and greeted it from afar

and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth,
for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland.

If they had been thinking of the land from which they had come,
they would have had opportunity to return.

But now they desire a better homeland, a heavenly one.

Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God,
for he has prepared a city for them.

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac,
and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son,
of whom it was said,

“Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name.”

He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead,
and he received Isaac back as a symbol.

Alleluia Mt 24:42a, 44

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Stay awake and be ready!

For you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Lk 12:32-48

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Do not be afraid any longer, little flock,
for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.

Sell your belongings and give alms.

Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out,
an inexhaustible treasure in heaven
that no thief can reach nor moth destroy.

For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.

“Gird your loins and light your lamps
and be like servants who await their master’s return from a wedding,
ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks.

Blessed are those servants
whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival.

Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself,
have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them.

And should he come in the second or third watch
and find them prepared in this way,
blessed are those servants.

Be sure of this:

if the master of the house had known the hour
when the thief was coming,
he would not have let his house be broken into.

You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect,
the Son of Man will come.”

Then Peter said,

“Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?”

And the Lord replied,

“Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward
whom the master will put in charge of his servants
to distribute the food allowance at the proper time?

Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so.

Truly, I say to you, the master will put the servant
in charge of all his property.

But if that servant says to himself,

‘My master is delayed in coming,’

and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants,
to eat and drink and get drunk,

then that servant’s master will come

on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour
and will punish the servant severely

and assign him a place with the unfaithful.
That servant who knew his master's will
but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will
shall be beaten severely;
and the servant who was ignorant of his master's will
but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating
shall be beaten only lightly.
Much will be required of the person entrusted with much,
and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more."

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Something important has begun to happen. It has been happening over the last several years. It's certainly happening here in the United States, but it's happening in other parts of the world as well. People of Christian faith need to sit up and pay attention to what is going on because it is important.

I say this because I think Christians are well-placed to understand what is happening. At least they should be. Jews should get what's going on as well.

What is going on is this: people are beginning to lose their faith in progress.

Trusting that things will inevitably get better is getting harder to do these days. Belief in progress is one of the great myths of the Modern Age, and, over the last several years, it has begun to lose its power to enchant us. I see this when I talk to people, young and not-so-young, here in the USA and in Europe. Of course, we are seeing this in the fanaticism that rules over Russia as well.

I am not sure why this has begun to happen. But it clearly is happening. There are plenty of people trying to explain why the world is such a mess today. If I may say so, the decline in our faith in progress gets to the heart of the matter. Many people are no longer confident that our future will turn out the way we once expected. Or, perhaps I should say, we are no longer confident that the future will end up the way we think it should.

About 500 years ago, human beings in Europe, and subsequently in North America and other parts of the world, began to believe that, armed with the power of science and technology, and by organizing ourselves into separate nations and competing

corporations and by extracting natural resources from the earth, we will inevitably get bigger, richer, more dominant, and (unbelievably) more secure.

When I say that belief in progress is a myth, I don't mean to denigrate the achievements of science or ignore the benefits of technology. I'm sure that the computational power of my next cell phone will be far greater than the phone I have right now. I also expect researchers to find cures for many diseases in the future. Probably my next car will be a zero-emission vehicle.

But there seem to be fewer and fewer people who are confident that the future is going to be a better place to live - and fewer still that believe that a better future is "baked in" (this is what I mean by "inevitable progress").

People of Christian faith should wake up and pay attention. We need to do this if the Church to be a sacrament of hope for the world. The Risen Christ demands this of us.

Christians, of course, have not been immune to the enchantments of progress. We have drunk the Kool-Aid too. The time has come for us to renew ourselves in the great vision of faith in the God of Abraham - the God who is the Lord of history, not the guarantor of progress.

The second reading for today's mass, from the Letter to the Hebrews, was written for an early community of Christians who needed to be reminded about Abraham and the demands of faith.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go.

By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise; for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God.

This passage is referring to the call of Abraham in the Book of Genesis. We are told that, the Lord spoke to Abraham, calling him to

Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you.

Abraham doesn't know what God looks like or what God's name is. Is he a war god? Is he a fertility god? Is this a god that lives atop a mountain peak or lurks in a riverbed?

Abraham knows only that this is the God who first commands and then promises:

Command: "come out into the desert"

Promise: "to a land I will show you"

By stepping out into the desert, Abraham is stepping out into his future, and, for that matter, our future. This is the beginning of the history of salvation. Our journey of faith begins with Abraham's obedient step into the desert, trusting only in God's promise.

The God of the desert does not guarantee inevitable progress. He does not promise that there will be no difficulties along the way. He certainly does not tell Abraham that every day will bring him a step closer to the Promised Land. Abraham has begun to do what Søren Kierkegaard called "the hardest thing." He has begun to live the life of faith.

Abraham's faith is not a matter of confidence in inevitable progress. This is a modern illusion that has already begun to betray us. Abraham's faith is the difficult life of obedience to God's command and trust in God's promise.

No one should be surprised that we have turned away from the life of faith - the "hardest thing" - in favor of the certainties of progress. The obedience of faith requires us to live courageously in the midst of all of life's ambiguities. This is difficult.

And herein lies a great danger. The decline of our faith in progress is leading many people to embrace fanaticism in various forms. We see this on the political Right and the political Left. We see it in the return of imperial myths in various parts of the world. We see it in ourselves.

For this reason, the Church needs to renew its commitment to the faith of Abraham and Abraham's God. For Christians, this means learning again how to "wait in joyful hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God," as we pray at mass. Christ does not guarantee us inevitable progress. Christ calls us to face the unpredictable difficulties of life with the faith of Abraham.

Living with the obedience of faith has never been easy. I fear that faith is becoming all the more difficult now that fanaticism is taking the place of our illusions about progress.

In addition, we must recognize that, as people of faith, we have no privileged vision about how to solve the world's problems. The Letter to the Hebrews offers an insight into this truth:

[Abraham] went out, not knowing where he was to go.

The Church must not pretend to dictate to the world "where it must go" in the absence of progress. Christ has promised us the Kingdom. He has not given us a blueprint for a better political system. But we can help people resist the frightening certainties of fanaticism. We can show the world that fanaticism is really a sign of despair. We can accompany those who are being marginalized by the fanatics among us. We can work for justice with those who have been excluded. We can certainly insist that our economy serve the common good.

And we can also know this: it is God Himself who is calling us into the desert. I mean the desert that we are beginning to see all around us now that the myth of progress has begun to collapse. We must see this time of trouble as an opportunity to serve the world and to preach the Good News that God's is faithful to the promise he made to Abraham and to his children forever.

Most of all, we must never forget what Jesus says in today's Gospel:

Do not be afraid any longer, little flock,
for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.

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?

