

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 7 February 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: 74

Reading I **Jb 7:1-4, 6-7**

Job spoke, saying:

Is not man's life on earth a drudgery?

Are not his days those of hirelings?

He is a slave who longs for the shade,

a hireling who waits for his wages.

So I have been assigned months of misery,

and troubled nights have been allotted to me.

If in bed I say, "When shall I arise?"

then the night drags on;

I am filled with restlessness until the dawn.

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle;

they come to an end without hope.

Remember that my life is like the wind;

I shall not see happiness again.

Responsorial Psalm **Ps 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6**

R. (cf. 3a) Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Praise the LORD, for he is good;

sing praise to our God, for he is gracious;

it is fitting to praise him.

The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem;

the dispersed of Israel he gathers.

R. Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.

or:

R. Alleluia.

He heals the brokenhearted

and binds up their wounds.

He tells the number of the stars;

he calls each by name.

R. Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Great is our Lord and mighty in power;

to his wisdom there is no limit.

The LORD sustains the lowly;

the wicked he casts to the ground.

R. Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II 1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23

Brothers and sisters:

If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast,

for an obligation has been imposed on me,

and woe to me if I do not preach it!

If I do so willingly, I have a recompense,

but if unwillingly, then I have been entrusted with a stewardship.

What then is my recompense?

That, when I preach,

I offer the gospel free of charge

so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

Although I am free in regard to all,

I have made myself a slave to all

so as to win over as many as possible.

To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak.

I have become all things to all, to save at least some.

All this I do for the sake of the gospel,

so that I too may have a share in it.

Alleluia Mt 8:17

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Christ took away our infirmities

and bore our diseases.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 1:29-39

On leaving the synagogue

Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John.

Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever.

They immediately told him about her.

He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up.

Then the fever left her and she waited on them.

When it was evening, after sunset,
they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons.
The whole town was gathered at the door.
He cured many who were sick with various diseases,
and he drove out many demons,
not permitting them to speak because they knew him.
Rising very early before dawn, he left
and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.
Simon and those who were with him pursued him
and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you."
He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages
that I may preach there also.
For this purpose have I come."
So he went into their synagogues,
preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS

I have a friend who used to work for the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. She has devoted years of service to people doing time in county jails and surviving in homeless shelters. She has accompanied refugees and sheltered women fleeing domestic abuse. She has dealt with alcoholics in recovery and families down on their luck.

My friend is also a very capable administrator. She knows how to balance a budget and, if the budget isn't balanced, she knows how to raise money to get it to balance. She has quite a skillset: she can run a board meeting and then drive an elderly person, whose memory isn't what it used to be, to a doctor's appointment.

My friend, I also want to say, spends a considerable amount of time each day in prayer, *lectio divina* (see below, Part Three) and reflection. For all her worldly smarts and skills, my friend is a contemplative through and through.

With all the things she has to get done on an average day, how does she have time to spend a whole hour in prayer every day? I can guess what she would say in response to this question:

If I didn't have my hour of prayer, I wouldn't be able to get anything done at all.

Today, I want to talk about an important matter for our practice of Christian faith. Through our Baptism, we have all been called to become "contemplatives in action."

First, let me talk about "action." Through our Baptism, we have been set apart for service. I think this great teaching has been overlooked by all our fussing about "washing away the stain of Original Sin." Being set free from the snares of sin is what service actually is.

But in our Baptism, we also become “contemplatives.” In Baptism we have been touched by a grace that begins the process of opening up our souls into the transcendent Mystery of God. The God who touches us in Baptism is a Presence that patiently awaits us, hidden in every corner of the world, no matter how forlorn or God-forsaken it might seem to those without this grace.

Through Baptism, we have been called to become “contemplatives in action.”

My friend at Saint Vincent de Paul will tell you that being a contemplative in action is sometimes easier said than done.

Do you remember my Buddhist friend who told me that the mind is like a mango tree filled with chattering monkeys? (Those of you reading this in Hawaii will know how big a mango tree can grow). In my mango tree, it seems that, very day, the monkeys get louder and more numerous. With all the racket going on between our ears, who has the time to abide in the solitude of our souls in order to await the angel of God sent to touch the waters of the pool of Siloam? (See John 9).

But my friend from SVdP will also tell us that action and contemplation should not be at odds, in competition with one another. They need to be a blessing to one another. They should be like old friends receiving one another after a long sojourn apart.

As a practical matter, this means that we should be suspicious if our contemplative life - our prayers in solitude and our reflecting on the scriptures, our devotions and our participation in the sacraments – don’t overflow the heart in the form of service to the community. A contemplative life that does not bear fruit in action rooted in the Gospel is in danger of falling into an unhealthy spiritual narcissism. This leads to a terrible irony: the very practices we embrace to connect us with God end up trapping us within the loneliness of our own ego.

Similarly, we should be suspicious if our service to the community does not plant within our heart a yearning for solitude and the interior life. Sometimes our service to our fellow human beings does not flow gracefully out of love and gratitude to the Lord, but rather compulsively out of some form of lovelessness – sometimes guilt, sometimes anger, sometimes resentment. This inevitably leads to burnout. At the very least, service that is not rooted in love and gratitude will be joyless. When this happens, our service is compelled, not redeemed. It has become self-serving in a self-destructive way. This is a sign that human calculation is crowding out God’s liberating grace.

Again, let me say that, in a healthy spiritual practice, contemplation and action are like best friends welcoming one another after an absence. The one gives life to the other and would be incomplete without the other. Our contemplative life offers shelter to our active life, nurturing our service and strengthening its foundation in God’s love and justice. Our active life provides a concrete and tangible foundation for a contemplative life that is anchored in the world of actual human flesh and blood – the real world of human beings, their joys and their suffering.

I hope these reflections on Christian spirituality help to open-up the Gospel reading for today.

The reading is a continuation of the reading we had last week from Mark and presents us with a kind of snapshot of a “day in the life of Jesus.”

Last week, we saw that Jesus preached in the synagogue in Capernaum and cast out a demon from a man suffering from spirit-possession. Then, in today’s reading, Jesus leaves the synagogue and enters the house of two of his disciples to heal a woman with a fever.

Jesus is certainly a busy man, but his day was far from over.

When it was evening, after sunset,
they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons.
The whole town was gathered at the door.
He cured many who were sick with various diseases,
and he drove out many demons,
not permitting them to speak because they knew him.

But then, Mark shows us that this man of action is also a contemplative.

Rising very early before dawn, he left
and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.

Jesus enjoyed a deep and abiding intimacy with the Father. And Mark is showing us that he had a craving for solitude.

But now comes the best part. Mark is always full of practical insights into the spiritual dynamics of the human soul. Jesus’s contemplative retreat into that “deserted place” would not last long.

Simon and those who were with him pursued him
and on finding him said, “Everyone is looking for you.”

I can hear the weariness in Jesus’s voice when he tells them,

“Let us go on to the nearby villages
that I may preach there also.
For this purpose have I come.”

I love this part of Mark’s account. Jesus is like me (and like most of you, I’ll bet): keeping contemplation and action in harmony was a challenge for him too.

I have one last thing to tell you about my friend who works for the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

Some people look at her and think that she is a social worker.

To be sure, she certainly does the work of a social worker. But to say she is a social worker is to miss something very important about my friend.

She is a contemplative in action.

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?