

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 7 March 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: 29

Reading I Ex 20:1-17

In those days, God delivered all these commandments:

“I, the LORD, am your God,

who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.

You shall not have other gods besides me.

You shall not carve idols for yourselves

in the shape of anything in the sky above

or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth;

you shall not bow down before them or worship them.

For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God,

inflicting punishment for their fathers’ wickedness

on the children of those who hate me,

down to the third and fourth generation;

but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation

on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain.

For the LORD will not leave unpunished

the one who takes his name in vain.

“Remember to keep holy the sabbath day.

Six days you may labor and do all your work,

but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD, your God.

No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter,

or your male or female slave, or your beast,

or by the alien who lives with you.

In six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth,

the sea and all that is in them;

but on the seventh day he rested.

That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honor your father and your mother,

that you may have a long life in the land

which the LORD, your God, is giving you.

You shall not kill.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
You shall not covet your neighbor's wife,
nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass,
nor anything else that belongs to him."

Responsorial Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11

R. (John 6:68c) Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul;
The decree of the LORD is trustworthy,
giving wisdom to the simple.
R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
The precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the command of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eye.
R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true,
all of them just.
R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
They are more precious than gold,
than a heap of purest gold;
sweeter also than syrup
or honey from the comb.
R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.

Reading II 1 Cor 1:22-25

Brothers and sisters:
Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,
but we proclaim Christ crucified,
a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,
but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike,
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom,
and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Verse Before the Gospel Jn 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.

Gospel Jn 2:13-25

Since the Passover of the Jews was near,
Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves,
as well as the money changers seated there.
He made a whip out of cords
and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen,
and spilled the coins of the money changers
and overturned their tables,
and to those who sold doves he said,
“Take these out of here,
and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”
His disciples recalled the words of Scripture,
Zeal for your house will consume me.
At this the Jews answered and said to him,
“What sign can you show us for doing this?”
Jesus answered and said to them,
“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”
The Jews said,
“This temple has been under construction for forty-six years,
and you will raise it up in three days?”
But he was speaking about the temple of his body.
Therefore, when he was raised from the dead,
his disciples remembered that he had said this,
and they came to believe the Scripture
and the word Jesus had spoken.
While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover,
many began to believe in his name
when they saw the signs he was doing.
But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all,
and did not need anyone to testify about human nature.
He himself understood it well.

PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS

There is a beautiful Buddhist temple at the corner of Third and Central, in the Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles. The architecture pays homage to the venerable traditions of

Buddhist temples in Japan. The roof slopes gracefully into the blue sky. There is a garden in front with pine trees that have been carefully sculpted by skilled and loving hands.

Higashi Honganji was founded by immigrants from Japan and their children over a hundred years ago. Over all these years, people have gathered at Higashi to learn about the Buddha's Vow of Compassion for all sentient beings and to help one another in putting the Buddha's Vow of Compassion into practice for the benefit of all who are suffering in this difficult world. The Buddha taught that we suffer because we are blinded by our ignorance. Suffering will subside when we begin to see the world with the eyes of compassion and wisdom instead of the eyes of our crazed egos.

As a Christian, I believe that this is an excellent teaching.

Over the years, the people of Higashi Honganji Temple have given much service to the local community. Temple members have been involved in building housing for the elderly and programs for kids. The people of Higashi have given leadership in any number of community cultural projects in Little Tokyo. The temple even sponsors a *taiko* group (I hope you are familiar with Japanese drumming).

The people at Higashi are also trying to accompany the sizable homeless community that borders the temple as they try to find their way along the difficult path of substance abuse, mental illness, and, most of all, abandonment.

I can speak with authority about the people of Higashi Honganji. They have been a blessing to me for many years. Higashi and its people have taught me wonderful things about Buddhism. In their own skillful way, they have taught me wonderful things about my own Christian faith as well. For this, I am filled with gratitude.

With all this in mind, I regret to say that Higashi was vandalized on the evening of 25 February. Decorative lanterns were toppled on the front steps and then a rock was thrown through a plate-glass window.

Apparently, there was some initial speculation that a homeless person may have done the damage to the temple. I never thought this. Not for a moment did I think this. The homeless people who live in the area are quiet and keep to themselves. Moreover, the security camera shows a young man who was well-kempt and determined to do damage (he had to scale a high fence to gain entrance to the property).

Was the vandalism a hate crime? Things are beginning to look this way. LAPD is investigating.

I hope you are aware that there has been a horrific increase in incidents of intimidation, harassment and even violence against people of Asian and Pacific Island descent here in the United States since the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The temple's Rinban (Bishop) is the Rev. Noriaki Ito. Nori and I are old friends. We went together to Rome about six years ago to meet the Pope. I remember distinctly, with much feeling in my heart, the day that Nori presented Pope Francis with a gift from the people of Higashi. I was so happy to see this.

That day in Rome, Pope Francis looked at Nori and I (and, I should say, a few other friends) and said something that took me a little off guard. He said,

Questo è salutare ("this is healthy").

It is healthy for people of different faiths to come together and learn from one another. It is healthy for people who follow different religious paths to share their faith and wisdom. Most of all, it is healthy for us to become friends and to discover how we can be a blessing to one another. All this is healthy because, by becoming friends, we can begin to see how we might be a blessing to the world.

By meeting people like my friend Nori, Pope Francis has come to understand that the Gospel calls Christians to be

"passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, and building bridges"

This is because,

"implanted deep within us is the call to transcend ourselves through an encounter with others."

He wrote this in his last encyclical.

Our friends at Higashi Honganji have their own way (a Buddhist way, of course) of affirming these same values.

There are so many people these days who seem intent on burning bridges. We need to find ways of resisting this folly.

As I write these words (Saturday), Pope Francis is in Iraq greeting Ali al-Sustani, the Grand Ayatollah of the Shite Muslim people of that country that has known so much suffering. The Pope will give the Ayatollah a gift just as Nori gave Pope Francis a gift. Formal greetings and diplomatic statements will be made. Hopefully, a friendship will begin to grow.

Take it from Nori and me: friendships require a long time to grow. We must learn how to be patient. But let no one be confused: time is on our side.

The Gospel today is about the violation of a temple.

The temple in Jerusalem was the center of the universe for the Jewish people of Jesus's day. It was the great sign of God's faithful presence among his people.

It was also defiled by the commercial logic human greed and the exploitation of the poor.

As a Buddhist, Nori will be a little taken aback that Jesus

made a whip out of cords
and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen,
and spilled the coins of the money changers
and overturned their tables.

(He will be taken aback even further by the first reading!)

But this only means that Nori and I have more to discuss the next time I sit in his office at Higashi and drink a cup of his excellent *o-cha* (green tea).

For now, in regard to today's Gospel, let me say that there are many ways to violate a temple besides commercializing it. You can violate a temple by climbing the fence, toppling the lanterns and throwing a rock through the pane glass window.

Let me also say that there are multiple ways of repairing the damage done to our holy places. Nori has some ideas to share about this.

In response to the vandalism, the Rev. Noriaki Ito, the Rinban of Higashi Honganji and my wonderful friend, has said,

“We will work to repair the damage and to restore the temple. But we need to repair the damage to ourselves as well.”

Of course, holy places are not made out of wood or stone. They are made out of people.

Then Nori added words that impressed me greatly:

“As a Buddhist temple, we need to be part of the solution.”

We should be grateful to the Rinban and all the people of Higashi Honganji. Let us join them in becoming part of the solution.

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?