

HOMILY FOR NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 9 August 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: 115

Reading 1

1 KGS 19:9A, 11-13A

At the mountain of God, Horeb,
Elijah came to a cave where he took shelter.
Then the LORD said to him,
“Go outside and stand on the mountain before the LORD;
the LORD will be passing by.”
A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains
and crushing rocks before the LORD—
but the LORD was not in the wind.
After the wind there was an earthquake—
but the LORD was not in the earthquake.
After the earthquake there was fire—
but the LORD was not in the fire.
After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound.
When he heard this,
Elijah hid his face in his cloak
and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Responsorial Psalm

PS 85:9, 10, 11-12, 13-14

R. (8) **Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**
I will hear what God proclaims;
the LORD — for he proclaims peace.
Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him,
glory dwelling in our land.
R. **Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**

Kindness and truth shall meet;
justice and peace shall kiss.
Truth shall spring out of the earth,
and justice shall look down from heaven.

R. Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

The LORD himself will give his benefits;
our land shall yield its increase.
Justice shall walk before him,
and prepare the way of his steps.

R. Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

Reading 2

ROM 9:1-5

Brothers and sisters:

I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie;
my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness
that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart.
For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ
for the sake of my own people,
my kindred according to the flesh.
They are Israelites;
theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants,
the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;
theirs the patriarchs, and from them,
according to the flesh, is the Christ,
who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Alleluia

PS 130:5

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

I wait for the Lord;
my soul waits for his word.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

MT 14:22-33

After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat
and precede him to the other side,

while he dismissed the crowds.
After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.
When it was evening he was there alone.
Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore,
was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it.
During the fourth watch of the night,
he came toward them walking on the sea.
When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified.
“It is a ghost,” they said, and they cried out in fear.
At once Jesus spoke to them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”
Peter said to him in reply,
“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”
He said, “Come.”
Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus.
But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened;
and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”
Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter,
and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”
After they got into the boat, the wind died down.
Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying,
“Truly, you are the Son of God.”

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

The first time I heard a *gamalon* perform was when I was exploring the island of Bali, in the Indonesian archipelago, as a college student. I think it safe to say that I was struck dumb as the driving, percussive music began to engulf me.

What is a *gamalon*? Imagine an orchestra of instruments that resemble a xylophone or a marimba. The melodies a *gamalon* produces are quite simple (there are not many notes on the instruments). It’s the rhythms that grab you by the lapels. The rhythms are enormously complex, syncopated and nothing less than transporting.

While on Bali, I had some great conversations with local people. In regard to the complexities of life, the people of Bali have a marvelous expression that captures an important truth about us all. They say.

“We are like a water buffalo staring at a *gamalon*.”

I thought of this expression, some years ago, when I went down to our Plaza to hear a concert on the Fourth of July. The band played a rousing version of “Stars and Stripes Forever,” complete with Sousa’s piccolo descant. As I was tapping my toes, I noticed a dog curled up by its master’s feet, its head resting gently on its front paws, staring blankly and contentedly out into empty

space. Two little kids, probably about five years old, were diligently marching around the dog, enthusiastically waving their hands in the air, in time with the music.

The kids were as enchanted by the music as I was. The dog, on the other hand, was dreaming lazily of a bone it had buried in its master's back yard, oblivious to the piccolo player and Sousa's wonderful march. The children were hearing the music. That is why they were marching about giddily to the music with all their heart.

I like this Indonesian expression about water buffalos and *gamalons*. We are, in fact, like a water buffalo staring at a *gamalon*. We find ourselves thrown into the midst of this whirlwind of a world and the complexities of life far exceed our ability to understand. What Shakespeare called "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" are more than we are able to comprehend, let alone control. And so, we stare blankly at this *gamalon*-world, its enormously complexity blowing past us, un-comprehended. We spend our days fixated on buried bones while John Phillip Sousa's piccolo descant dances around our ears.

In my homilies during Easter season, I explored the idea that "Easter faith" was a matter of "learning how to see." I was commenting on a great teaching of our Church (maybe the greatest teaching): Christian faith arises within our heart when the risen Christ appears to us. The appearance of the Risen Christ to the disciples when they "recognized him in the breaking of the bread" in the Emmaus story is a great example. The life of faith, therefore, is all about "learning how to see" Christ rising from the dead right here and right now in the midst of this bewildering world.

If faith is a matter of learning how to see, faith is also a matter of learning how to hear. God's music is playing all around us, but only those who have ears to hear it are dancing like those little kids in the Plaza. The rest of us are like water buffalo staring at a *gamalon*.

You can see this teaching in the first reading as well.

Elijah is a prophet, raised up by God to proclaim his judgment on the world's princes. The princes, of course, refuse to hear what he has to say. They spurn God's word and want to hear only the lies that justify their power and prestige. Princes haven't changed very much since Elijah's time. After scoring a dramatic victory over King Ahab and his sycophants, the powerful turn against the Prophet. Elijah has to flee into the desert. He takes shelter in a cave, begging for the Lord to take him from this world. This is where the first reading begins.

In his despair, God instructs him.

"Go outside and stand on the mountain before the LORD;
the LORD will be passing by."

This phrase, "the LORD will be passing by" is a reference to a marvelous story in the Book of Exodus. Atop Mount Sinai, Moses begs to be able to see the Lord. God instructs him that "no one

can look upon my face and live.” Then God instructs Moses to hide in a crevice and bury his face in his cloak so he can survive the Lord’s “passing by.”

Moses survived the Lord’s “passing by” atop Mount Sinai. Now Elijah must do the same thing in his cave.

First, a “strong and heavy wind” wreaks havoc on the mountain.

but the LORD was not in the wind.

And after the wind, there comes an earthquake.

but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

And after the earthquake there was fire—

but the LORD was not in the fire.

The “Lord was passing by,” but not in the form of the great natural forces that hold the attention of the world.

Finally, Elijah hears “a tiny whispering sound.” And then,

Elijah hid his face in his cloak
and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.

He hides his face in his cloak just like Moses hid his face in order not to look upon the face of the Living God. Like any God-fearing Jew, Elijah knows better than to look while the Lord is “passing by.”

Elijah the Prophet encountered God, not by seeing the wind rending the mountains or the terrors of the earth’s quaking. Neither did Elijah did not see God in the fire. Instead, Elijah heard the voice of God in a “tiny whispering sound.”

We live in a world full of glitzy distractions and ostentatious demonstrations of power. There are many voices competing for our attention. The volume is turned up loud. It’s a wonder that we can hear anything at all. Let me offer some practical advice in regard to the spiritual practice of “learning how to hear” the voice of God.

First – we need to ask, how can we hear anything if we’re not listening? Put away as many distractions as possible. Putting away distractions is a first step in hearing the voice of God above the din.

Second – Always remember that God is inviting us to listen. God invites. God never coerces. Neither does God try to impress us with vulgar demonstrations of power. I am in disagreement with Christians who talk about God like he was a cowboy in a bad movie. God is not a strong man, given to braggadocio.

Third – the voice of God does not flatter us. There are people who pander to our vanity and then abandon us to our self-delusions. We end up thinking (erroneously) that we are worth nothing. God is not like this. Instead of flattery, God approaches us quietly with the invaluable gift of self-knowledge. He invites us to see ourselves as we really are, warts and all. What’s more, he does this gently and skillfully, in a way that humbles us without humiliating us. Far from flattering us, he humbles us. But he never humiliates.

Fourth – the voice of God is the “tiny whispering sound” that instills hope within us. God bestows hope with a patience and fidelity that is truly affecting – for we are often determined to live lives based on the illusion of being powerful and self-sufficient instead of lives dedicated to practicing the demanding virtue of true Christian hope. And hope, like Saint Paul says of faith, “comes from hearing.” The Lord is “passing by.” Listen for the “tiny whispering sound.”

We are, more often than we might want to believe, like a water buffalo staring at a *gamalon*. But we are also like Elijah at the mouth of his cave, hanging onto his life and trying, with all his might, to make sense out of that “tiny whispering sound.”

Don’t be afraid to listen.

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?