

HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION

Sunday, 24 May 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

The Ascension of the Lord

Lectionary: 58

Reading 1 [ACTS 1:1-11](#)

In the first book, Theophilus,
I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught
until the day he was taken up,
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit
to the apostles whom he had chosen.
He presented himself alive to them
by many proofs after he had suffered,
appearing to them during forty days
and speaking about the kingdom of God.
While meeting with them,
he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,
but to wait for “the promise of the Father
about which you have heard me speak;
for John baptized with water,
but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

When they had gathered together they asked him,
“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”
He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons
that the Father has established by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”
When he had said this, as they were looking on,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.
While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going,
suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them.

They said, "Men of Galilee,
why are you standing there looking at the sky?
This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven
will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."

Responsorial Psalm [PS 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9](#)

R. (6) **God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

All you peoples, clap your hands,
shout to God with cries of gladness,
For the LORD, the Most High, the awesome,
is the great king over all the earth.

R. **God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy;
the LORD, amid trumpet blasts.
Sing praise to God, sing praise;
sing praise to our king, sing praise.

R. **God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

For king of all the earth is God;
sing hymns of praise.
God reigns over the nations,
God sits upon his holy throne.

R. **God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Reading 2 [EPH 1:17-23](#)

Brothers and sisters:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation
resulting in knowledge of him.

May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened,
that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call,
what are the riches of glory

in his inheritance among the holy ones,
and what is the surpassing greatness of his power
for us who believe,
in accord with the exercise of his great might,
which he worked in Christ,
raising him from the dead
and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,
far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,
and every name that is named
not only in this age but also in the one to come.
And he put all things beneath his feet
and gave him as head over all things to the church,
which is his body,
the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Alleluia [MT 28:19A, 20B](#)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Go and teach all nations, says the Lord;
I am with you always, until the end of the world.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel [MT 28:16-20](#)

The eleven disciples went to Galilee,
to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.
When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.
Then Jesus approached and said to them,
“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Years ago, I knew a woman in Los Angeles. We used to chat after mass. She had come to California from a country in Central America. She came with her older sister and not much else. She didn't have much else.

How did the two young women get here? Mostly, they walked. The sisters would look for Catholic Churches and ask the priests for tacos. Why did they come to Los Angeles? The older sister insisted on coming. Her younger sister, the one I used to talk to after mass, had just been assaulted for a second time. It was time to go.

My friend told me that when she and her sister began their journey, they weren't even sure in what direction they were to walk. Her older sister told her, "God will show us the way." Her sister was right.

Today is the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. After forty days of appearances to his disciples, the Risen Lord ascended into heaven to be "seated at the right hand of the Father, whence he shall come again to judge the living and the dead."

In the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, we learn,

When he had said this, as they were looking on,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.

In this time of pandemic, I think it is useful for us to remember that, by ascending into heaven, the Risen Christ is showing us the way.

This is what I wish to reflect on today.

When the old sister said to her younger sister, "God will show us the way," she used a word in Spanish that is beautiful and evocative. The word she used for "the way" was not *calle*. *Calle* can be translated as "the way," but only in the prosaic sense of a "street" or "road." Years ago, when it was time to go, the older sister told her younger sibling that God would show them the *camino*. *Camino* is a word invested with poetic meaning and rich with religious resonances.

Some of you many have made the ancient Medieval pilgrimage to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela, in the Northwest of Spain. The pilgrim's path that leads across the top of Spain to the tomb of the Apostle James is not a *calle*. It is very much a *camino*. Those who are on a *calle* are on an errand. Those who walk a *camino* are on a pilgrimage.

And when we are on a pilgrimage, whether it be to Santiago de Compostela or Los Angeles, be assured that "God will show us the way."

The Old Testament is stuffed with arresting images for imagining God. In the Book of Daniel, God is called the "the Ancient of Days." In the Psalms, he is extolled as "the Shepherd of Israel" and "the One Who Opens the Eyes of the Blind."

The God of the Bible is also hailed as "the Shield of Abraham."

This refers to the fact that God called out to Abraham, commanding him to “go out into the desert for a land that I will show you.” Abraham is the first Jew and the father of faith because he was obedient to the command of God to set out on the great pilgrimage that is the story of our salvation. In the obedience of faith, Abraham stepped out into the desert, trusting that God would make the desert into a *camino*. The children of Abraham remember the God of the desert as Abraham’s Shield because this is the God who shows us the way.

There is an especially arresting image of God to be found in the poetry of the Prophet Isaiah. The God of Abraham is the faithful one,

“who opens a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters.” (Is 43:16).

The Prophet is referring to the great narrative of the Exodus, when God brought his people out of the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of the desert. When Isaiah writes that God opened “a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,” Isaiah is referring to the parting of the waters of the Red Sea as the Hebrew people were being pursued by Pharaoh’s army. This is a magnificent way to name the God of the Exodus and to testify to the truth that “God will show us the way.”

In my Spanish Bible, the word for “the way,” in this passage from Isaiah, of course, is *camino*. In his everlasting fidelity, God shows us the *camino*. The *camino* that leads to Santiago de Compostela in the North of Spain is the same *camino* that God showed to the Jewish people in their journey out of slavery into the desert. Whenever God shows us the way, our lives are being transformed into a pilgrimage.

The Jewish people spent forty years in the desert, with God showing his people the way. When they came to a place called Miribah and Massah, the people began to complain to Moses, saying that God had shown them the way into the desert only to trick them. After showing us the way, God has abandoned us to our thirst. I think we must recognize that, for the children of Abraham (this includes ourselves, of course), the claim that God has “shown us the way only to abandon us in the desert” is the basis of every sin ever committed. Hidden within every sin, no matter how mortal or how venial, there is the same abiding fear and faithlessness that God has shown us the way only to abandon us in the desert.

When I recall the faltering of faith at Miribah and Massah, I think of Vincent van Gogh and I am filled with emotions that are deep and ambiguous, tender and fearful at the same time. One of van Gogh’s last paintings, perhaps his very last painting, is entitled, “Wheatfield with Crows.” (I want to learn more about this from Teresa Martinelli, Saint Leo’s resident art historian, someday). This painting is a profound expression of our human condition.



After sweeping across the picture from the left, the road simply comes to an end in the middle of the pulsating field of wheat, a disturbance of crows fluttering about. I suppose that, at the end of his life, van Gogh felt that he had been led out into the desert only to be abandoned, like the Hebrew people at Miribah and Massah. If we truly want to believe that “the Lord will show us the way,” we must open our hearts in compassion and solidarity, but also with fear and trembling, toward all those who are on the *camino*, including those who feel that they have been abandoned in the middle of the journey.

By ascending into heaven, the Risen Lord is showing us the way. But let us be clear about this. Abraham’s very first step out into the desert leads, eventually, to the slavery of Egypt, thirst in the desert, the despair at Miribah and Massah and – eventually – to the cross and the grave of Jesus, our crucified savior. Christian faith is a costly discipleship. Christ shows us the way. And the way he shows us leads us to the darkness of the tomb – I mean our own tomb. The Good News is that Christ has chosen our tomb to serve as his own tomb.

And the great truth of our faith is just this: even in the darkness of the tomb, Christ will show us the way. In fact, this is why Christ has died. By his cross, he has entered into our tomb to make it his own and there, in the darkness, he awaits us. He is there already in order to show us the way. The *camino*, the great pilgrimage that is the story of our salvation, leads us beyond our tomb. It leads to the Heavenly Banquet that is the Kingdom of God. And Christ awaits us in order to show us the way.

This is the meaning of Christ’s Ascension, forty days after Easter.

When he had said this, as they were looking on,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.

So the Good News is this: Be not afraid to step out into the desert with Abraham. Be not afraid to step down into the dark tomb of our Lord and Savior. Be not be afraid to set out on the road from Central America to Los Angeles. Do not even be afraid to reach out in human tenderness to our brother Vincent, as he walks out into his wheat field. Vincent van Gogh is beloved and precious in the eyes of the God of the *camino*.

As my friend's older sister said, "The Lord will show us the way."

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?