

HOMILY FOR DAILY MASS

Thursday, 26 March 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

Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Lectionary: 247

Reading 1 [EX 32:7-14](#)

The LORD said to Moses,

“Go down at once to your people
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt,
for they have become depraved.

They have soon turned aside from the way I pointed out to them,
making for themselves a molten calf and worshipping it,
sacrificing to it and crying out,

‘This is your God, O Israel,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt!’

The LORD said to Moses,

“I see how stiff-necked this people is.

Let me alone, then,
that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them.

Then I will make of you a great nation.”

But Moses implored the LORD, his God, saying,

“Why, O LORD, should your wrath blaze up against your own people,
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt
with such great power and with so strong a hand?

Why should the Egyptians say,

‘With evil intent he brought them out,
that he might kill them in the mountains
and exterminate them from the face of the earth’?

Let your blazing wrath die down;
relent in punishing your people.

Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel,
and how you swore to them by your own self, saying,
'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky;
and all this land that I promised,
I will give your descendants as their perpetual heritage.'"
So the LORD relented in the punishment
he had threatened to inflict on his people.

Responsorial Psalm[106:19-20, 21-22, 23](#)

(4a) **Remember us, O Lord, as you favor your people.**

Our fathers made a calf in Horeb
and adored a molten image;
They exchanged their glory
for the image of a grass-eating bullock.

R. **Remember us, O Lord, as you favor your people.**

They forgot the God who had saved them,
who had done great deeds in Egypt,
Wondrous deeds in the land of Ham,
terrible things at the Red Sea.

R. **Remember us, O Lord, as you favor your people.**

Then he spoke of exterminating them,
but Moses, his chosen one,
Withstood him in the breach
to turn back his destructive wrath.

R. **Remember us, O Lord, as you favor your people.**

Verse Before The Gospel[JN 3:16](#)

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

Gospel [JN 5:31-47](#)

Jesus said to the Jews:

"If I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is not true.
But there is another who testifies on my behalf,
and I know that the testimony he gives on my behalf is true.
You sent emissaries to John, and he testified to the truth.
I do not accept human testimony,

but I say this so that you may be saved.
He was a burning and shining lamp,
and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light.
But I have testimony greater than John's.
The works that the Father gave me to accomplish,
these works that I perform testify on my behalf
that the Father has sent me.
Moreover, the Father who sent me has testified on my behalf.
But you have never heard his voice nor seen his form,
and you do not have his word remaining in you,
because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent.
You search the Scriptures,
because you think you have eternal life through them;
even they testify on my behalf.
But you do not want to come to me to have life.

"I do not accept human praise;
moreover, I know that you do not have the love of God in you.
I came in the name of my Father,
but you do not accept me;
yet if another comes in his own name,
you will accept him.
How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another
and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God?
Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father:
the one who will accuse you is Moses,
in whom you have placed your hope.
For if you had believed Moses,
you would have believed me,
because he wrote about me.
But if you do not believe his writings,
how will you believe my words?"

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

"Only an Egyptian would worship a cat." These memorable words were written over two-thousand years ago by Herodotus, the "father of history." I laughed out loud when I read these words in Herodotus' *Histories* as a college student and I am smiling at myself right now as I write this homily to think that, after fifty years, Herodotus' words are coming to mind.

As a matter of historical fact, ancient Egyptians did worship cats. (They worshiped other things as well, like the sun). But I think that Herodotus is on to something about human beings in general, not just Egyptians. Human beings are capable of worshiping all kinds of things. I think G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) got it right. Chesterton said that people who stop believing in God are

likely to believe in just about anything. You can look back into history to find support for Chesterton's assertion, but you don't have to. You can find plenty of evidence that people are likely to believe in just about anything once they stop believing in God by looking at what people are doing right now as we struggle with the corona virus pandemic.

I spoke recently with a fellow (who lives nowhere near Sonoma County) about his response to his state's call to "shelter-in-place." He told me that he was "not afraid of this virus thing." Rather, he was afraid of "stupid people." To deal with his fear, he went to Cosco and bought a twenty-five-pound sack of rice and an extra case of shells for his shotgun.

Only an Egyptian would worship a cat. Only an American would worship his shotgun.

In the first reading for today's mass, the Church gives us a portion from the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Jewish Torah. This reading is about worshiping an idol – the golden calf – and if you know anything about the Desert God of the Jewish people, he really doesn't like idolatry. This includes not only golden calves and cats. Idolatry includes shotguns.

The story in the Book of Exodus is terrific: the Jewish people have been enslaved in Egypt and God has raised up Moses to confront the Pharaoh and tell him "let my people go." Pharaoh, predictably, is "stiff-necked" and doesn't want to lose his cheap labor. So, God sends down the ten plagues on the Egyptians.

The plagues are nothing if not dramatic: God tells Moses to strike the water of the Nile with his staff and it turns to blood. All the fish all die. Then God inundates the entire country with frogs. Then lice overwhelm the country. Then flies. Then a pest afflicts all the livestock. Then God directs Moses to take some soot from a fire. He throws it into the air and all the people and all the animals are afflicted with boils. Then the Lord sends a horrific hailstorm that destroys the crops. Then comes a blinding swarm of locusts (not good for the crops either). Then darkness descends on Egypt for three days. Finally, there is the last and most grizzly plague: the death of the first-born son - from the Pharaoh himself down to the lowest Egyptian and even the livestock.

It's a great story. Someone should pitch it as an idea for a movie.

(By the way, in the Christmas story, King Herod kills all the newborn boys in Bethlehem as Joseph, Mary and the Christ-child flee Bethlehem for the safety of Egypt. This is a bitter and sarcastic parody of the tenth plague in the Exodus story. We call this the Feast of the Holy Innocents and it comes right after Christmas.)

After the last plague, Moses leads the people out of the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of the desert, and the story gets even more dramatic. The Hebrews make their way to the edge of the Red Sea, pursued by the Pharaoh, his army and his chariots. As the Egyptians are closing in, Moses raises his staff and the waters of the Red Sea part. The people pass through dry-shod. When the people have reached the opposite side, Pharaoh and his army set off into the breach.

From the opposite side, Moses puts down his staff, the waters close in on the Egyptians and a new life begins for these former slaves out in the desert.

This is where the first reading begins. After leading the people to the base of Mt. Sinai, Moses ascends the mountain to converse with God. God gives him the tablets of the Covenant. The first commandment of the Covenant, by the way, is “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me.” But while this is going on atop Mount Sinai, the people pile all their gold into a crucible, heat it up and make a golden calf to worship. Why worship the God of the desert, who has just set you free from Pharaoh in a very dramatic way, when you can worship a chunk of metal that you have created out of your earrings with your own hands?

Why indeed...

We like our golden calves and our shotguns. I guess we like our cats too. (If I had to choose among the three, I guess I'd go with the cats. I find cats to be the most mysterious).

With the story of the golden calf, once again, our ancient scriptures are holding a mirror up to us so we can see ourselves. Take a good, long, hard look. Like the Hebrew people of old, we have been led out into a desert. I am referring to what has happened to us all with the coming of the corona virus. Covid-19 is God's way of calling us to come out with him into the desert so that we might be with him.

Yes, I'm saying that Covid-19 is a desert. In saying this, I don't mean that God has visited this plague on us as a curse or as a punishment for our sins. I mean that Spirit is driving us out into this viral desert like the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert. (This is the Gospel story we shared on the first Sunday of Lent). After forty days in that desert Jesus was hungry and the devil appeared to Jesus to tempt him. In effect, the devil said to Jesus, “feeling a little hungry? I will show you how to get out of this desert, if you only bow down and worship me.”

Idols promise us sure-fired ways of escaping the desert. In contrast, the living God – the God of Abraham, the God of the Exodus and the God of Jesus – invites us to come out with him into the desert. Worshiping this Desert God is difficult. Living with this Desert God is difficult. I don't like deserts. Like the Hebrew people of old, once we get out in the desert we long for the “fleshpots” of Egypt. Why suffer the freedom of the desert when we can return to the familiar slavery of Egypt. Worshiping the God of the desert requires us to place our faith in a Mystery that we cannot control and that we have not forged out of the gold in our earrings.

Worshiping the God of the desert means that we must put aside our shotguns and everything else that won't save us. I assure you that God has not sent us the corona virus to punish us for our sins. However, this time of trial is a desert all the same. And the Bible teaches us great two great truths about ourselves and about our God. First, in the desert we will be tempted to worship idols of our own creation. Second, only in the desert will we arrive at the foot of Mount Sinai in order to stand in the presence of the Living God and worship the God of the Desert as he has commanded us.

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?