

HOMILY FOR DAILY MASS

Tuesday, 24 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

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Lectionary: 245

Reading 1 [EZ 47:1-9, 12](#)

The angel brought me, Ezekiel,
back to the entrance of the temple of the LORD,
and I saw water flowing out
from beneath the threshold of the temple toward the east,
for the façade of the temple was toward the east;
the water flowed down from the right side of the temple,
south of the altar.

He led me outside by the north gate,
and around to the outer gate facing the east,
where I saw water trickling from the right side.

Then when he had walked off to the east
with a measuring cord in his hand,
he measured off a thousand cubits
and had me wade through the water,
which was ankle-deep.

He measured off another thousand
and once more had me wade through the water,
which was now knee-deep.

Again he measured off a thousand and had me wade;
the water was up to my waist.

Once more he measured off a thousand,
but there was now a river through which I could not wade;
for the water had risen so high it had become a river
that could not be crossed except by swimming.

He asked me, "Have you seen this, son of man?"

Then he brought me to the bank of the river, where he had me sit.

Along the bank of the river I saw very many trees on both sides.

He said to me,

“This water flows into the eastern district down upon the Arabah,
and empties into the sea, the salt waters, which it makes fresh.
Wherever the river flows,
every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live,
and there shall be abundant fish,
for wherever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh.
Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow;
their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail.
Every month they shall bear fresh fruit,
for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary.
Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine.”

Responsorial Psalm [46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9](#)

R. (8) The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

God is our refuge and our strength,
an ever-present help in distress.

Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken
and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea.

R. The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

There is a stream whose runlets gladden the city of God,
the holy dwelling of the Most High.

God is in its midst; it shall not be disturbed;
God will help it at the break of dawn.

R. The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

The LORD of hosts is with us;
our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

Come! behold the deeds of the LORD,
the astounding things he has wrought on earth.

R. The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

Verse Before The Gospel [PS 51:12A, 14A](#)

A clean heart create for me, O God;
give me back the joy of your salvation.

Gospel [JN 5:1-16](#)

There was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep Gate

a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes.
In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled.
One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.
When Jesus saw him lying there
and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him,
“Do you want to be well?”
The sick man answered him,
“Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool
when the water is stirred up;
while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.”
Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your mat, and walk.”
Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked.

Now that day was a sabbath.
So the Jews said to the man who was cured,
“It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.”
He answered them, “The man who made me well told me,
‘Take up your mat and walk.’”
They asked him,
“Who is the man who told you, ‘Take it up and walk’?”
The man who was healed did not know who it was,
for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there.
After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him,
“Look, you are well; do not sin any more,
so that nothing worse may happen to you.”
The man went and told the Jews
that Jesus was the one who had made him well.
Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus
because he did this on a sabbath.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

In Jerusalem, just to the north of the Temple area, there was a water cistern,

“a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes.”

Bethesda is a curious and ambiguous word. In Hebrew it can mean either “mercy” or “disgrace.” This is revealing. In Jesus’s day, the sick were brought to this pool. The belief was that every once in a while, an angel would descend from heaven and touch the water of the pool, making it tremble a little. Then, the “ill, blind, lame, and crippled” were bathed in the water in the hope that they would be healed of their infirmity.

John tells us about an encounter between a “man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years” laying by the pool of Bethesda longing to be healed. Jesus sees the man and says,

“Do you want to be well?”
The sick man answered him,
“Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool
when the water is stirred up;
while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.”

Jesus responds to the man by saying,

“Rise, take up your mat, and walk.”

And the man was healed. But this is hardly the point of John’s story. John immediately tells us that the healing took place on the sabbath, a day loaded down with legal technicalities for both the man who had been healed, and, as well shall see, for the one who had healed him.

So the Jews said to the man who was cured,
“It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.”

Then they asked him,

“Who is the man who told you, ‘Take it up and walk’?”
...
The man went and told the Jews
that Jesus was the one who had made him well.
Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus
because he did this on a sabbath.

The temptation to reduce the faith to mere legalities (do this... don’t do that) is hardly limited to Jewish people. In fact, the struggle between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law goes to the heart of Judaism. There is a strain of legalism in the Catholic Church as well. Pope Francis thinks that an unhealthy preoccupation with legal technicalities in the Church can make us stupid.

Actually, the Apostle Paul had the same concern. “Why are you people in Galatia so foolish?” he asks in his letter to the Christian community he had started in this Greek city. Paul had heard that the Galatians had taken the Good News of the Gospel and reduced it to a jumble of laws and regulations. As you might expect, once you fashion the Good News into a cattle-prod, it’s only a matter of time before the people of God start to look like a bunch of cows that need herding. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that Christ died for our sins out of love and that there is nothing we can do to earn this love. Our salvation can’t be earned. Our salvation is a gift. Why, then, do we think we can save people by forcing them to comply with our legal strictures?

Riffing on Paul's letter to the Galatians during his regular morning mass at Santa Marta (his residence within the Vatican), Pope Francis once said that the Holy Spirit is the "great gift" that helps us to avoid the stupidity of reducing the life of faith to merely a matter of complying with a set of strict rules. "May the Lord give us this grace," the Pope said, "to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, so that we will not become stupid, bewitched men and women who sadden the Holy Spirit."

I like how Pope Francis cautions us about becoming "bewitched" by our obsession with legal technicalities. Reducing the faith to legalities is no substitute for the freedom, the responsibility and, often, the ambiguities that comes with living a life of genuine Christian faith.

In John's account of the healing of the sick man at Bethesda, the legalists were so "bewitched" by the power that the law gives us over other people that they failed to see the Good News that the man had been healed. Pope Francis, of course, is not saying that there is no need for rules and regulations in the Church. He is cautioning against making our faith into simply a matter of compliance with rules.

I said above, that "Bethesda," in Hebrew, can mean either "mercy" or "disgrace." The grace of the Holy Spirit is never about disgrace. It is always about mercy. Or perhaps I should say that the grace of the Holy Spirit is about the healing of our disgrace that comes about through the transforming power of God's mercy.

The wonderful story of the healing of the sick man at the pool of Bethesda is John's subtle way of teachings us that disgrace and mercy are never far from one another. As we draw near to Easter, think of the water in the Baptismal font as the pool of Bethesda: the place where our disgrace is being transformed by God's mercy.

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?