

HOMILY FOR PENTECOST SUNDAY

Sunday, 31 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 Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Lectionary: 164

Reading 1 [EX 34:4B-6, 8-9](#)

Early in the morning Moses went up Mount Sinai as the LORD had commanded him, taking along the two stone tablets.

Having come down in a cloud, the LORD stood with Moses there and proclaimed his name, "LORD."

Thus the LORD passed before him and cried out, "The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity."

Moses at once bowed down to the ground in worship.

Then he said, "If I find favor with you, O Lord, do come along in our company.

This is indeed a stiff-necked people; yet pardon our wickedness and sins, and receive us as your own."

Responsorial Psalm [DN 3:52, 53, 54, 55, 56](#)

R. (52b) **Glory and praise for ever!**

Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our fathers,
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever;
And blessed is your holy and glorious name,
praiseworthy and exalted above all for all ages.

R. **Glory and praise for ever!**

Blessed are you in the temple of your holy glory,
praiseworthy and glorious above all forever.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

Blessed are you on the throne of your kingdom,
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

Blessed are you who look into the depths
from your throne upon the cherubim,
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

Reading 2 [2 COR 13:11-13](#)

Brothers and sisters, rejoice.
Mend your ways, encourage one another,
agree with one another, live in peace,
and the God of love and peace will be with you.
Greet one another with a holy kiss.
All the holy ones greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Alleluia [CF. RV 1:8](#)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit;
to God who is, who was, and who is to come.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel [JN 3:16-18](#)

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might not perish
but might have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.
Whoever believes in him will not be condemned,
but whoever does not believe has already been condemned,
because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Today is the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity. Some people think of this teaching as woefully abstract and inconsequential to our faith. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity should be, at most, an appendix at the back of our catechism. I disagree.

Last Fall, before the world changed so dreadfully, I had dinner with an old friend here in Sonoma. We talked about what you are not supposed to talk about in polite company – religion and politics. My friend was lamenting gridlock in Washington and the unwholesome influence of vast sums of money on our political leaders, both in the election process and in making laws. I listened attentively (as I always do...) until my friend made a comment that I haven't been able to forget.

My friend said, "What America needs now is a strong man to clean things up."

Lots of Americans have been saying this for some time in different ways and no doubt with different political goals in mind. I think it safe to say that, since the death of George Floyd on 25 May, lots of Americans are saying that we need a strong man today, more so than ever before.

Last Fall, even before the coming of the virus and the death of Mr. Floyd, I had to disagree with my friend. America doesn't need a strong man. We need leaders who will strengthen our political institutions. We also need more social solidarity. America needs to come together as a national community in order to form what the United States Constitution calls "a more perfect union."

This is my own political opinion, of course. As such, I don't expect you to be interested in what I said to my friend last Fall in response to his hopes for a "strong man." But I hasten to add, it is a political opinion that is shaped very much by the teachings of the Church regarding our social and political life and the morality that must inform the life we share.

But I want to go a bit further in this homily. I want to say that my fears about an American "strong man" arise more specifically out of my belief in the God of Christian faith.

This leads me to the Holy Trinity.

In Christian tradition, despite the impression some parts of the Old Testament might give, God is not a "strong man." Maybe a more traditional way of saying this is that, in the Church's teaching, God is not a distant, lonely monarch, removed from the world and unwilling to change his ways. Neither is God a bossy lawgiver who only casts down commands from on high and is deaf to everything else. Nor is the God of Christian faith a rugged individual who "stands his ground" and who can proudly say, "I did it my way."

Today, lots of Christians (Catholics as well as Protestants) want to think of God as a "strong man." I do not recommend this. This way of thinking about God can lead us to look for strong men within the world to solve our problems – not only our personal problems but our political

problems as well. Something peculiar is going on and I think we should be aware of it: our need to make God into a strong man leads us to place our faith in strong men here below and, at the same time, our faith in strong men here below leads us to think about God as a strong man.

There is a bitter irony in this belief in a strong-man-God. For the most part, my friends who are atheists also think of God as this strong man. Their thinking, stated way too simply, goes something like this: God is a strong man up in heaven; the injustices and brutality of this world demonstrate that there is no strong man in heaven; therefore, God does not exist. What makes this both ironic and bitter is that the god my atheist friends reject is a god that I reject as well.

Instead of a strong man, I recommend thinking of God as a kind of community.

I say that God is “*a kind of community*” because, of course, everything we can possibly say about God is woefully inadequate. To say that God is a strong man is a mistake. To say that God is “*a kind of community*” is also a mistake, but nowhere near as big a mistake. Whenever we try to paint a picture of God, the colors on the palette we paint from are taken from our limited human experience of the world and, of course, our experience of ourselves. This means that everything we say about God is not to be taken literally. It also means that some things we say about God strike closer to the mark than others.

Let me try to explain what I mean when I say that God is a kind of community.

Communities are made up of persons. Groups, clubs, committees, and even societies, on the other hand, are made up of individuals. I think the difference between persons and individuals is of crucial importance for our faith – and for the future of our country as well.

With groups, clubs, committees, and societies, we start with individuals and bind them together to make something bigger than the individual. Communities, on the other hand, are made up of persons. Individuals must surrender some of their autonomy into order to join a group, a club, a committee or a society. Persons find the fulfillment and the completion of their personhood in community. Individuals are always in some sort of uneasy tension with society. Being an individual in society always entails some sort of compromise (and Americans hate this word). Persons can only be persons in community. A person, unlike an individual, is a mysterious creation of God. A person is the part of God’s creation that is opened-up to other persons, to creation as a whole and, ultimately to the Mystery of God that lies beyond all that has been created. A “person,” therefore, is that which cannot stand alone – that which is not yet complete when kept in isolation from other persons. We cannot be persons by pretending to be rugged individuals. Human beings make themselves into individuals. God creates persons.

God is not a strong man. God is not even a group, a club, a committee or a society of three strong men. God is a community of three persons... (please excuse me, I need to be more careful: God is *a kind of community of three persons*).

The Bible teaches us that each and every single human being has been created “in the image and likeness of God.” This means that long before we are individuals, we are persons – like the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We have been created to be persons in community, even though we have made ourselves into individuals, and much too often into lonely individuals. And if we want to live lives that reflect the fact that we have been created in the image and likeness of God, we must seek to find the completion and fulfillment of our personhood in community.

This teaching, which is basic to Christian faith, places the Church at odds with what a lot of people are saying (and doing) these days. I saw a photograph of a man in Harrisburg Pennsylvania protesting the stay-at-home orders of his state government to protect us from the spread of Covid-19. He was waving a sign declaring, “selfish and proud.” I’m told that some people, who are wearing masks in the hope of protecting others from infection, have been ridiculed and even spat on. The “selfish but proud” guy didn’t have a mask. Peaceful demonstrations by persons have been defaced by individuals seeking to vandalize and loot.

All of this is a rejection of our God-given personhood and a failure to fulfill our personhood in community.

Last Fall, my friend said, “What America needs now is a strong man to clean things up.” I don’t recommend this. I recommend coming together, as is natural to persons, with the aim of binding the wounds of our community and building social solidarity through cooperation, trust and concern for our neighbors.

Let me say, once again, that this is a political statement and an act of faith at the same time. We have not been created in the image and likeness of a strong man or a lonely monarch. It is undeniably true and not a bad thing that we find ourselves in groups, in clubs, on committees and in society – but we have been created for community.

Worshiping a strong man defaces our common humanity and our mysterious, God-given personhood which is always opening us up to communion with one another – no matter what race we might be, what language we might speak, how rich or how poor, how weak or how strong we might be. We need to help Americans find a path to a better national community and a deeper sense of solidarity with one another, not a path to a strong man. As a practical matter, the Church needs to be of service to the American people by helping them to strengthen their democratic institutions and to honor the dignity of the human person.

In light of these reflections on the Holy Trinity and on our humanity as a reflection of the Trinity and of the plight of our nation and our world today, the second reading offers a remarkably practical politics for the Church as well as a profound insight into Christian faith in God:

Brothers and sisters, rejoice.
Mend your ways, encourage one another,
agree with one another, live in peace,
and the God of love and peace will be with you.

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?