

HOMILY FOR THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 1 August 2021

- 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: 113

Reading I Ex 16:2-4, 12-15

The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

The Israelites said to them,

“Would that we had died at the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt,
as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread!

But you had to lead us into this desert

to make the whole community die of famine!”

Then the LORD said to Moses,

“I will now rain down bread from heaven for you.

Each day the people are to go out and gather their daily portion;
thus will I test them,

to see whether they follow my instructions or not.

“I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites.

Tell them: In the evening twilight you shall eat flesh,
and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread,
so that you may know that I, the LORD, am your God.”

In the evening quail came up and covered the camp.

In the morning a dew lay all about the camp,

and when the dew evaporated, there on the surface of the desert
were fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground.

On seeing it, the Israelites asked one another, “What is this?”
for they did not know what it was.

But Moses told them,

“This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.”

Responsorial Psalm Ps 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54

R. (24b) The Lord gave them bread from heaven.

What we have heard and know,

and what our fathers have declared to us,

we will declare to the generation to come

the glorious deeds of the LORD and his strength

and the wonders that he wrought.
R. The Lord gave them bread from heaven.
He commanded the skies above
and opened the doors of heaven;
he rained manna upon them for food
and gave them heavenly bread.
R. The Lord gave them bread from heaven.
Man ate the bread of angels,
food he sent them in abundance.
And he brought them to his holy land,
to the mountains his right hand had won.
R. The Lord gave them bread from heaven.

Reading II Eph 4:17, 20-24

Brothers and sisters:
I declare and testify in the Lord
that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do,
in the futility of their minds;
that is not how you learned Christ,
assuming that you have heard of him and were taught in him,
as truth is in Jesus,
that you should put away the old self of your former way of life,
corrupted through deceitful desires,
and be renewed in the spirit of your minds,
and put on the new self,
created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.

Alleluia Mt 4:4b

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
One does not live on bread alone,
but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Jn 6:24-35

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there,
they themselves got into boats
and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus.
And when they found him across the sea they said to him,
"Rabbi, when did you get here?"
Jesus answered them and said,
"Amen, amen, I say to you,
you are looking for me not because you saw signs
but because you ate the loaves and were filled.
Do not work for food that perishes

but for the food that endures for eternal life,
which the Son of Man will give you.
For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.”
So they said to him,
“What can we do to accomplish the works of God?”
Jesus answered and said to them,
“This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.”
So they said to him,
“What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you?
What can you do?
Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written:
He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”
So Jesus said to them,
“Amen, amen, I say to you,
it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven;
my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.
For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven
and gives life to the world.”
So they said to him,
“Sir, give us this bread always.”
Jesus said to them,
“I am the bread of life;
whoever comes to me will never hunger,
and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Do you remember the miners in Chile?

Thursday of this week (5 August) marks the eleventh anniversary of a horrific mining accident in Chile’s Atacama Desert. Thirty-three men were trapped 2,300 feet underground in a copper mine. They were rescued after sixty-nine days of captivity in a space with no light, and limited amounts of food and water. The temperature was 90 degrees, and the humidity was a soul-crushing 80%. (I’ve lived in Kyoto, and I can tell you what this is like).

At the time of this mining accident, the media reported that

“it was seventeen days before anyone knew if they were alive.”

I remember being puzzled by this statement. Surely, this was not the real news. The real news was that the miners spent seventeen days in their dark, humid tomb before *they* knew for sure that anyone on the surface was looking for them. The people on the surface were just taking a guess: if anyone survived at all, maybe they had managed to get into the safety-zone within the mine.

After the first drill-bit poked through into their little cavern, the miners sent up a note saying that they were doing well. (This was a simplification of the truth). The people above began to send down food and water and an air hose for ventilation. The miners wanted to communicate with their families, of course. And then they asked for bibles, crucifixes, rosaries and statues of the Blessed Virgin to be sent down.

You must understand, after the collapse of the mine, the miners created a chapel for themselves and had been holding religious services the whole time they had been “dwelling in darkness and the shadow of death.” They wanted the crucifixes and statues of the Blessed Virgin because they needed to adorn their chapel with the *ikons* (the “signs”) of their faith. They wanted the rosaries and the bibles so that they could pray.

(Pope Benedict sent thirty-three rosaries).

I find it affecting to think that these men did not know if they had been abandoned by the people walking about in the daylight above, but they never thought for a moment that they had been abandoned by God.

The Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the Abba of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – does not abandon the people he has gathered to himself.

This great teaching takes us to the first reading for this Sunday. This reading is taken from the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah. The Hebrew people have witnessed the Great Works of God (the *magnalia dei*) back in Egypt. This includes the ten plagues against “stiff-necked” Pharaoh and the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea.

Now, the people are wandering in the desert, and they are not happy about it.

The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

And then, the people commit what is, for a Jew at least, a kind of Original Sin.

The Israelites said to them,
“Would that we had died at the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt,
as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread!
But you had to lead us into this desert
to make the whole community die of famine!”

I call this “a kind of Original Sin,” for a Jew at least, because it gets to the heart of our relationship to the God who promised that he would never abandon Abraham or Abraham’s people.

The people are saying, in effect,

“We would have been better off dead *by the Lord’s own hand*, with bellies full of Egyptian bread, than starving out here in the desert.”

There is an enormous amount of our humanity revealed in this portion of the Torah. The Jewish people have bequeathed to us the insight that the life of faith is a “journey” or “sojourn” in this world. At times, the *Camino* takes us into the desert, where the going gets tough.

How many times have I stood with a widow at the grave of her spouse?

“I ironed his shirts for sixty years, Father. Now what am I supposed to do?”

Or the alcoholic who, after many years of sobriety, has “fallen off the wagon.”

“Father, what’s happening to me? Has God abandoned me to a bottle of gin?”

Has God led us all this way only to trick us? In the desert, has God abandoned us to our hunger or sorrow or despair?

I repeat: there is an enormous amount of our humanity revealed in this portion of the Torah. The Hebrew people awoke from their despair that morning to find *manna* in the desert waiting for them.

In today’s Gospel portion, Jesus explains the meaning of the miraculous feeding of the loaves and fishes we heard last week. Like their ancestors in the desert, the people have been given a “sign” in the midst of their own despair in the desert.

And the Chilean miners? They are a “sign” as well.

In the darkness, the heat and humidity, the hunger and thirst of their own desert, 2,300 feet below the surface of the earth, they built a chapel and waited, knowing that the God who had led them all this way on the *Camino* of faith would not abandon them when the *Camino* led into the desert.

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?