

HOMILY FOR THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 13 June 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: 92

Reading I Ez 17:22-24

Thus says the Lord GOD:

I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar,
from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot,
and plant it on a high and lofty mountain;
on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it.

It shall put forth branches and bear fruit,
and become a majestic cedar.

Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it,
every winged thing in the shade of its boughs.

And all the trees of the field shall know
that I, the LORD,

bring low the high tree,
lift high the lowly tree,
wither up the green tree,
and make the withered tree bloom.

As I, the LORD, have spoken, so will I do.

Responsorial Psalm 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16

R. (cf. 2a) Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praise to your name, Most High,

To proclaim your kindness at dawn
and your faithfulness throughout the night.

R. Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.

The just one shall flourish like the palm tree,
like a cedar of Lebanon shall he grow.

They that are planted in the house of the LORD
shall flourish in the courts of our God.

R. Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.

They shall bear fruit even in old age;

vigorous and sturdy shall they be,
Declaring how just is the LORD,
my rock, in whom there is no wrong.
R. Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.

Reading II 2 Cor 5:6-10

Brothers and sisters:

We are always courageous,
although we know that while we are at home in the body
we are away from the Lord,
for we walk by faith, not by sight.
Yet we are courageous,
and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord.
Therefore, we aspire to please him,
whether we are at home or away.
For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
so that each may receive recompense,
according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.

Alleluia

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower.
All who come to him will live forever.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 4:26-34

Jesus said to the crowds:

“This is how it is with the kingdom of God;
it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land
and would sleep and rise night and day
and through it all the seed would sprout and grow,
he knows not how.

Of its own accord the land yields fruit,
first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.
And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once,
for the harvest has come.”

He said,

“To what shall we compare the kingdom of God,
or what parable can we use for it?
It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground,
is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth.
But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants
and puts forth large branches,

so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.”

With many such parables
he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it.
Without parables he did not speak to them,
but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Today, I want to lift-up a woman I knew when I was a graduate student down on the South Side of Chicago. I will call her “Belle.”

Most people would say that Belle is pretty useless. People who say this about Belle have a point. Belle doesn’t have a lot of what we call “marketable skills.” Belle can’t read. She can’t write either. Belle’s parents were share-cropper’s outside of Tupelo, back in the day when the Supreme Court agreed with the State of Mississippi that, when it comes to education, schools can be “separate, but equal.” Belle is an African-American, so the separate-but-equal school she went to didn’t teach her how to read and write.

Belle is sick too. She has diabetes and didn’t get proper medical treatment for it. When I knew Belle, long before the Affordable Care Act, she had no health insurance. She would wait until she was sick enough to be seen at the emergency room at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. Diabetes, of course, should be treated proactively, not by periodic visits to the ER.

No one could say that Belle was lazy. Complications from the diabetes, however, made it difficult for Belle to hold down a job.

I don’t want anyone to say that Belle was irresponsible either, although I wish she didn’t have so many mouths to feed. Why am I so judgmental? Her life was difficult and she was lonely.

During the winter months, Belle used to tell me about how cold her apartment was. The furnace would go out in her building and the landlord would stop answering his phone. Winters in Chicago get cold. Belle worried most about her youngest children. She worried about rodents too.

Over the years, I have worked with lots of people (colleagues and students) who are immensely talented and doggedly competitive. I had students who you could hire for the most demanding jobs. They can do anything and do it all very well.

Belle, on the other hand, is pretty useless, at least in the eyes of the competitive society we have created for ourselves. She can’t do things that people are willing to pay money for: write a memo, stand on her feet to bag groceries, teach kids in a classroom, let alone dig ditches or serve on a corporate board.

I am coming to understand, however, that God does not see Belle that way.

This brings us to the first reading for today's mass. It's from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel is the prophet that went into exile with the people when Israel was conquered by the Babylonians. Ezekiel's poetry is very beautiful, especially when he conjures his great vision of hope for the deliverance of the people from their exile.

Thus says the Lord GOD:

I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar,
from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot,
and plant it on a high and lofty mountain;
on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it.

A "tender shoot" from the top of the cedar will be taken away from lonely Babylon and transplanted back home on the "mountain heights of Israel."

And there, on that "high and lofty mountain," the tender shoot will thrive.

It shall put forth branches and bear fruit,
and become a majestic cedar.

The God of Israel will not forget his promise to his people, Israel. Neither does he turn away when he hears the cry of the poor. When Ezekiel speaks of the exiles in Babylon as a "tender shoot," he is thinking of the afflicted, the abandoned, the marginalized, and the forgotten.

There is a Hebrew word for the afflicted, abandoned, marginalized, and forgotten. In the Bible, these people are called the *anawim*.

In the poetry of the Prophets of Israel, the *anawim* are "the Lord's poor," and the "widow, the orphan and the stranger in your land." In the Psalms, we are instructed that "the Lord hears the cry of the poor."

The *anawim* also include all those who are useless in the eyes of our insanely competitive society.

Belle is one of God's *anawim*.

If we are to look on this woman and see her as God sees her, we must see her as the "tender shoot" that will be rescued from her exile and transplanted atop "the mountain heights of Israel."

However, the teaching of Ezekiel, as we have it in the first reading for today's mass, goes considerably further than this. We would do well to reflect in depth about what the Prophet

is teaching us. Ezekiel, who went into Exile with the people, is the Prophet of Hope – and hope, unlike mere optimism or self-serving pessimism, is demanding.

The *anawim* of Israel will be taken from their exile in Babylon and transplanted “on the mountain heights of Israel.” There, the “tender shoot” will “put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar.”

Yes... but then,

Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it,
every winged thing in the shade of its boughs.

The people who have been abandoned to their exile, the people who are humiliated and marginalized, the people who cannot compete, will one day become a “majestic cedar,” such that “birds of every kind” will come and dwell within “the shade of its boughs.”

This is what God has promised to do for the *anawim*. The humble of the earth – those who are useless – will one day give shelter to “birds of every kind.”

Ezekiel’s prophecy is about Belle, but it is also about us. The one who we dismiss as useless will be freed from her exile. But what’s more, she shall become a “majestic cedar” on the mountain peaks of Israel and will provide shelter for us all.

We will find shelter in Belle. But for this to happen, we must first come to understand that we too, for all our privilege, are in exile. There are many kinds of exile. One doesn’t have to be displaced to live in exile. Separate-but-equal can exile you. Alcohol and opioids can exile you as well. Estrangement from a loved-one can place you among the *anawim*. Coming to grips with our own exile is a first step in learning to look on Belle as the Lord, in his steadfast love, looks on her.

The Lord hears the cry of the *anawim* and, in a mysterious way that defies the logic of our world, the *anawim* will one day be a blessing *to us*. This is the paradoxical logic of the Bible – God’s logic – not the logic of those who have cast Belle aside.

The Church must wake up and pay attention to what God is bringing about in this world though his *anawim*. We must never lose sight of the truth proclaimed by the Prophets: God is intervening. God has not forsaken his *anawim*. God is gathering together the exiles and raising up a mighty cedar out of the dust of their exile and their disgrace.

Pope Francis, some years ago, said that we should think of the Church as a “field hospital in the midst of a battle.” The powerful of this world, those who are obsessed with competing and winning at all costs, will continue to wreak havoc on the humble of the earth and on the earth itself. The Church is here to provide shelter for the wounded.

God is intervening. The day is coming when

all the trees of the field shall know
that I, the LORD,
bring low the high tree,
lift high the lowly tree,
wither up the green tree,
and make the withered tree bloom.
As I, the LORD, have spoken, so will I do.

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?

