

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 14 February 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: 77

Reading I [Lv 13:1-2, 44-46](#)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron,
“If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch
which appears to be the sore of leprosy,
he shall be brought to Aaron, the priest,
or to one of the priests among his descendants.

If the man is leprous and unclean,
the priest shall declare him unclean
by reason of the sore on his head.

“The one who bears the sore of leprosy
shall keep his garments rent and his head bare,
and shall muffle his beard;

he shall cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’

As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean,
since he is in fact unclean.

He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.”

Responsorial Psalm [Ps 32:1-2, 5, 11](#)

R. (7) I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

Blessed is he whose fault is taken away,
whose sin is covered.

Blessed the man to whom the LORD imputes not guilt,
in whose spirit there is no guile.

R. I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
my guilt I covered not.

I said, “I confess my faults to the LORD,”
and you took away the guilt of my sin.

R. I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you just;

exult, all you upright of heart.
R. I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

Reading II [1 Cor 10:31—11:1](#)

Brothers and sisters,
Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do,
do everything for the glory of God.
Avoid giving offense, whether to the Jews or Greeks or
the church of God,
just as I try to please everyone in every way,
not seeking my own benefit but that of the many,
that they may be saved.
Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Alleluia [Lk 7:16](#)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
A great prophet has arisen in our midst,
God has visited his people.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel [Mk 1:40-45](#)

A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said,
“If you wish, you can make me clean.”
Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand,
touched him, and said to him,
“I do will it. Be made clean.”
The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.
Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.
He said to him, “See that you tell no one anything,
but go, show yourself to the priest
and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed;
that will be proof for them.”
The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter.
He spread the report abroad
so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly.
He remained outside in deserted places,
and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS

In the 1860s, the Kingdom of Hawai'i established a quarantine compound for people who had contracted Hansen's disease. Kalaupapa, a remarkably isolated spit of land jutting off the north coast of the island of Moloka'i, became the Kingdom's official "leper colony."

Hansen's disease is an affliction of the peripheral nervous system caused by a bacterial infection. The infection leads to the breakdown of the nerves in the extremities (the nose and ears too). Eventually this disease leaves a person disabled and disfigured. Hansen's disease is contagious, but not very contagious. In fact, Hansen's disease is hard to contract.

Hansen's disease is nowhere near as prevalent as leprosy.

This statement might seem nonsensical. "Hansen's disease" is the medical term for what ordinary people commonly call "leprosy." How can leprosy be more prevalent than Hansen's disease?

Answering this question goes a long way toward opening up the readings for today's mass.

Hansen's disease and leprosy are different – in fact, they are very different. Hansen's disease is an affliction of the nervous system. Leprosy is an affliction of the soul – the soul of the one who is declared a leper and the soul of the one who declares that another human is a leper. Hansen's disease results when you get infected by a germ. Only another human being can make you a leper.

I have a story to show you what I mean.

In 1928 (I think), a little boy in Hawai'i went to school one day and was discovered by his teacher to have signs of leprosy. Here is the little boy's account of what happened to him after that.

"My father and mother came to take me home from school. But instead of taking me to the Kalihi Receiving Station immediately, like the principle said they should, my parents took me home.... The whole family cried, including my father.

"The next day my father took me downtown and bought me a new suit. It was my first suit of clothes. They were so nice! I looked good. I had never had clothes like that before, because we were poor.

"So I wore the suit of clothes to the Kalihi Receiving Station. Even though we were poor, my father said he wanted me to be dressed nicely when I was taken to Kalihi and declared a leper. They took my picture for the official record of the Board of Health wearing that new set of clothes.



“When the picture was taken, my father broke down again and cried. In this way, I became a leper.”

The little boy is not telling us how he contracted Hansen’s disease. He is telling us how he “became a leper.” He became a leper by being “declared a leper,” separated from his family and sent away to Kalaupapa.

I said earlier that people contract Hansen’s disease only rarely and with difficulty. In contrast, sadly, people become lepers all the time.

A person becomes a leper whenever we look on another human being as unwanted and unlovable. A person becomes a leper when we refuse to see their suffering. I have to say, as well, that a human being is “declared a leper” and banish from our midst when we refuse to forgive them when they have trespassed against us.

Pope Francis laments what he calls the “throw-away society.” We throw away much

more than our trash. We throw people away as well.

In Jesus’s day, the Law of Moses stipulated how a person should become a leper.

If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch which appears to be the sore of leprosy, he shall be brought to Aaron, the priest, or to one of the priests among his descendants. If the man is leprous and unclean, the priest shall declare him unclean by reason of the sore on his head.

...

He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.

In the Gospel today, we see how a leper is un-made. A leper approaches Jesus and kneels before him. Technically, this is a violation of the Law of Moses. Then the leper makes a truly remarkable statement:

“If you wish, you can make me clean.”

The leper in Mark’s Gospel speaks for every human being that has been marginalized and despised, neglected and abandoned, stigmatized and rejected. Moreover, he is not just speaking to Jesus. The leper is speaking to all of us when he says,

“If you wish, you can make me clean.”

And how did Jesus respond to the leper? Jesus violates the Law as well:

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand,
and touched him...

Jesus *touched* the man who had been cast out of the community as unclean.

The Law of Moses was laid down before we knew about bacterial infections and antibiotics. Like the early days of the AIDS epidemic, fear and ignorance led us to declare others “unclean.” Today, we still have rules about who is clean and unclean; who is to be welcomed and who is to be excluded.

The world is full of those who have been “declared a leper,” and they approach us with the simple words that the leper used in approaching Jesus:

“If you wish, you can make me clean.”

The time has come for us to stretch out our hand, as Jesus did, and touch the one we have declared unclean.

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?