

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 14 March 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: 32

Reading I 2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23

In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the LORD's temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place.

But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy.

Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects.

Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power.

All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah: "Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled."

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing:

"Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia:

All the kingdoms of the earth

the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me,
and he has also charged me to build him a house
in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people,
let him go up, and may his God be with him!”

Responsorial Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

R. (6ab) Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

By the streams of Babylon

we sat and wept

when we remembered Zion.

On the aspens of that land

we hung up our harps.

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

For there our captors asked of us

the lyrics of our songs,

And our despoilers urged us to be joyous:

“Sing for us the songs of Zion!”

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

How could we sing a song of the LORD

in a foreign land?

If I forget you, Jerusalem,

may my right hand be forgotten!

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

May my tongue cleave to my palate

if I remember you not,

If I place not Jerusalem

ahead of my joy.

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

Reading II Eph 2:4-10

Brothers and sisters:

God, who is rich in mercy,

because of the great love he had for us,

even when we were dead in our transgressions,

brought us to life with Christ — by grace you have been saved —,

raised us up with him,

and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,

that in the ages to come

He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace

in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith,

and this is not from you; it is the gift of God;
it is not from works, so no one may boast.
For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works
that God has prepared in advance,
that we should live in them

Verse Before the Gospel Jn 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.

Gospel Jn 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

For 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.

And this is the verdict,
that the light came into the world,
but people preferred darkness to light,
because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light
and does not come toward the light,
so that his works might not be exposed.

But whoever lives the truth comes to the light,
so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS

I'm reading a book that I can recommend to you, even though I am only about a hundred pages into it. Joan Didion wrote *The Year of Magical Thinking* to tell the story of her grief after the death of her husband. The book is affecting.

As she tells the story of her loss, Joan Didion reflects on an important truth: “we tell ourselves stories in order to live.”

I agree. At least I want to agree. I'm trying to believe that any sorrow can be endured, if only we can make it into a story.

Before our lives are obscured by statistics or hijacked as "data points" by the corporations that surveil our comings and goings on the internet, each of us stands out in this world as a story that yearns to be told.

What Joan Didion says about telling stories has important repercussions. If we hope to know another person – certainly, if we ever hope to love another person – we have first to listen to the stories they tell. This is a truth to learn early-on in life. The sooner the better.

Commenting on Joan Didion's observation about the importance of storytelling, Masha Gessen (another great woman of letters whose writing I can recommend to you) observed that, like people, nations also must tell stories in order to live. Without stories, nations wither. "The center does not hold," as Yeats famously wrote. The people are dispersed. We become strangers to one another. Nations can have a common hope about the future only if they have a common story to tell about their past.

Here in the United States, I sometimes think that we have despaired of our future because we can't seem to agree on what's the right story to tell about our past. Like people, nations must tell stories in order to live.

This is a good way to think about the Bible. Our scriptures are a treasury of stories we have told ourselves, century after century, in order to live. But this must be understood correctly. The Bible is the great story that God, in his mercy, has given us to tell in order that we might live.

With this in mind, I want to reflect on the psalm for today's mass.

Psalm 137 is a wrenching expression of loss, maybe unequalled in all the literatures of the world. It is a story about real human beings, their grief, and their struggle with hope for their future.

As I make my way through *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I find myself hoping that Joan Didion knows this psalm. Based on the story she is telling, I think it safe to say that she does.

Here it is:

By the streams of Babylon
we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the aspens of that land
we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked of us
the lyrics of our songs,
And our despoilers urged us to be joyous:
“Sing for us the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing a song of the LORD
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand be forgotten!
May my tongue cleave to my palate
if I remember you not,
If I place not Jerusalem
ahead of my joy.

We know next to nothing about what these songs sounded like – their modes and scales, their melodies and harmonies. They must have been “lyrical” for they were accompanied by a lyre (“we hung up our harps”). If you read Psalm 137 attentively, you will see that there is a story behind its words. To make sense of the story, look to the first reading. It gives the background to the psalm.

Jerusalem was lost to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. Solomon’s Temple, the great sign of God’s faithfulness and presence among His people, was a ruin.

Their enemies burnt the house of God,
tore down the walls of Jerusalem,
set all its palaces afire,
and destroyed all its precious objects.
Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon,
where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons.

This took place in the year 587 BC.

Psalm 137 was not written by David, who, according to tradition, was the shepherd boy who could calm the raging and delirious King Saul with his lyre and sweet verses. Many of the psalms are attributed to David, but not this one.

Psalm 137 was written long after the time of David, by some lonely Jew in exile in the great city of Babylon. Read the psalm carefully. A story within the story emerges.

Apparently, a group of Jews had been singing songs about Zion (Jerusalem) by the waters of the Euphrates River when a Babylonian task master overheard them and asked, innocently enough, about the meaning of their words. (I doubt if a Babylonian would have understood Hebrew).

By the streams of Babylon
we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the aspens of that land
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked of us
the lyrics of our songs.

And then, naively, the Babylonian must have asked, "Why the glum faces?"

"Sing for us the songs of Zion!"

And instead, the exiles wept.

How could we sing a song of the LORD
in a foreign land?

After twenty-five centuries, the pathos of this exchange, which must have seemed innocuous to the Babylonian, is still riveting in its expression of grief.

I haven't finished Joan Didion's book yet, but I think I can say something about why I like it so much.

Joan Didion wrote the story of her grief in order to live.

The same can be said of the Jew that composed Psalm 137 so long ago. In his grief, some exiled Jew sang a lament, telling his people's story in order to live.

Easter is drawing near. We will gather for the liturgies (I rejoice to think that more and more of us are getting vaccinated) and we will tell the story God has given us to tell so that we might live.

And the story is just this: Those who grieve in their exile from all they love have not been abandoned. The Lord, in his faithfulness, is gathering them together. The exiles are returning. The Temple is being raised up from its ruins into a New and Heavenly Jerusalem.

Pick up your harp – the one you left by the streams of Babylon. Easter is coming. Sing, for all the world to hear, the songs of Zion.

And try to believe, with Joan Didion and that exiled Jew, that any sorrow can be endured if only we can make it into a story.

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?