

## **HOMILY FOR GOOD FRIDAY**

Friday, 15 April 2022

- 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: 40

#### **Reading I [Is 52:13–53:12](#)**

See, my servant shall prosper,  
    he shall be raised high and greatly exalted.  
Even as many were amazed at him--  
    so marred was his look beyond human semblance  
    and his appearance beyond that of the sons of man--  
so shall he startle many nations,  
    because of him kings shall stand speechless;  
for those who have not been told shall see,  
    those who have not heard shall ponder it.

Who would believe what we have heard?  
    To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
He grew up like a sapling before him,  
    like a shoot from the parched earth;  
there was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him,  
    nor appearance that would attract us to him.  
He was spurned and avoided by people,  
    a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity,  
one of those from whom people hide their faces,  
    spurned, and we held him in no esteem.

Yet it was our infirmities that he bore,  
    our sufferings that he endured,  
while we thought of him as stricken,  
    as one smitten by God and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our offenses,  
    crushed for our sins;  
upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole,  
    by his stripes we were healed.  
We had all gone astray like sheep,  
    each following his own way;

but the LORD laid upon him  
the guilt of us all.

Though he was harshly treated, he submitted  
and opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb led to the slaughter  
or a sheep before the shearers,  
he was silent and opened not his mouth.  
Oppressed and condemned, he was taken away,  
and who would have thought any more of his  
destiny?

When he was cut off from the land of the living,  
and smitten for the sin of his people,  
a grave was assigned him among the wicked  
and a burial place with evildoers,  
though he had done no wrong  
nor spoken any falsehood.

But the LORD was pleased  
to crush him in infirmity.

If he gives his life as an offering for sin,  
he shall see his descendants in a long life,  
and the will of the LORD shall be accomplished  
through him.

Because of his affliction  
he shall see the light in fullness of days;  
through his suffering, my servant shall justify many,  
and their guilt he shall bear.  
Therefore I will give him his portion among the great,  
and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty,  
because he surrendered himself to death  
and was counted among the wicked;  
and he shall take away the sins of many,  
and win pardon for their offenses.

**Responsorial Psalm Ps 31:2, 6, 12-13, 15-16, 17, 25**

R (Lk 23:46) Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

In you, O LORD, I take refuge;  
let me never be put to shame.  
In your justice rescue me.  
Into your hands I commend my spirit;  
you will redeem me, O LORD, O faithful God.

R Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

For all my foes I am an object of reproach,  
a laughingstock to my neighbors, and a dread to my friends;  
they who see me abroad flee from me.  
I am forgotten like the unremembered dead;  
I am like a dish that is broken.

R Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

But my trust is in you, O LORD;  
I say, "You are my God.  
In your hands is my destiny; rescue me  
from the clutches of my enemies and my persecutors."

R Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

Let your face shine upon your servant;  
save me in your kindness.  
Take courage and be stouthearted,  
all you who hope in the LORD.

R Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

**Reading II [Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9](#)**

Brothers and sisters:  
Since we have a great high priest who has passed  
through the heavens,  
Jesus, the Son of God,  
let us hold fast to our confession.  
For we do not have a high priest  
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,  
but one who has similarly been tested in every way,  
yet without sin.  
So let us confidently approach the throne of grace  
to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.

In the days when Christ was in the flesh,  
he offered prayers and supplications  
with loud cries and tears  
to the one who was able to save him from death,  
and he was heard because of his reverence.  
Son though he was, he learned obedience

from what he suffered;  
and when he was made perfect,  
he became the source of eternal salvation  
for all who obey him.

**Verse Before the Gospel [Phil 2:8-9](#)**

Christ became obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross.  
Because of this, God greatly exalted him  
and bestowed on him the name which is above every other  
name.

**Gospel [Jn 18:1–19:42](#)**

Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley  
to where there was a garden,  
into which he and his disciples entered.  
Judas his betrayer also knew the place,  
because Jesus had often met there with his disciples.  
So Judas got a band of soldiers and guards  
from the chief priests and the Pharisees  
and went there with lanterns, torches, and weapons.  
Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him,  
went out and said to them, "Whom are you looking for?"  
They answered him, "Jesus the Nazorean."  
He said to them, "I AM."  
Judas his betrayer was also with them.  
When he said to them, "I AM, "  
they turned away and fell to the ground.  
So he again asked them,  
"Whom are you looking for?"  
They said, "Jesus the Nazorean."  
Jesus answered,  
"I told you that I AM.  
So if you are looking for me, let these men go."  
This was to fulfill what he had said,  
"I have not lost any of those you gave me."  
Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it,  
struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear.  
The slave's name was Malchus.  
Jesus said to Peter,  
"Put your sword into its scabbard.  
Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?"

So the band of soldiers, the tribune, and the Jewish guards

seized Jesus,  
bound him, and brought him to Annas first.  
He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas,  
who was high priest that year.  
It was Caiaphas who had counseled the Jews  
that it was better that one man should die rather than the  
people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus.  
Now the other disciple was known to the high priest,  
and he entered the courtyard of the high priest with Jesus.  
But Peter stood at the gate outside.  
So the other disciple, the acquaintance of the high priest,  
went out and spoke to the gatekeeper and brought Peter in.  
Then the maid who was the gatekeeper said to Peter,  
"You are not one of this man's disciples, are you?"  
He said, "I am not."  
Now the slaves and the guards were standing around a  
charcoal fire  
that they had made, because it was cold,  
and were warming themselves.  
Peter was also standing there keeping warm.

The high priest questioned Jesus  
about his disciples and about his doctrine.  
Jesus answered him,  
"I have spoken publicly to the world.  
I have always taught in a synagogue  
or in the temple area where all the Jews gather,  
and in secret I have said nothing. Why ask me?  
Ask those who heard me what I said to them.  
They know what I said."  
When he had said this,  
one of the temple guards standing there struck Jesus  
and said,  
"Is this the way you answer the high priest?"  
Jesus answered him,  
"If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong;  
but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"  
Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing there keeping warm.  
And they said to him,  
"You are not one of his disciples, are you?"

He denied it and said,  
"I am not."  
One of the slaves of the high priest,  
a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said,  
"Didn't I see you in the garden with him?"  
Again Peter denied it.  
And immediately the cock crowed.

Then they brought Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium.  
It was morning.  
And they themselves did not enter the praetorium,  
in order not to be defiled so that they could  
eat the Passover.  
So Pilate came out to them and said,  
"What charge do you bring against this man?"  
They answered and said to him,  
"If he were not a criminal,  
we would not have handed him over to you."  
At this, Pilate said to them,  
"Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law."  
The Jews answered him,  
"We do not have the right to execute anyone, "  
in order that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled  
that he said indicating the kind of death he would die.  
So Pilate went back into the praetorium  
and summoned Jesus and said to him,  
"Are you the King of the Jews?"  
Jesus answered,  
"Do you say this on your own  
or have others told you about me?"  
Pilate answered,  
"I am not a Jew, am I?  
Your own nation and the chief priests handed you  
over to me.  
What have you done?"  
Jesus answered,  
"My kingdom does not belong to this world.  
If my kingdom did belong to this world,  
my attendants would be fighting  
to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.  
But as it is, my kingdom is not here."  
So Pilate said to him,  
"Then you are a king?"  
Jesus answered,

"You say I am a king.  
For this I was born and for this I came into the world,  
to testify to the truth.  
Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."  
Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

When he had said this,  
he again went out to the Jews and said to them,  
"I find no guilt in him.  
But you have a custom that I release one prisoner to you  
at Passover.  
Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"  
They cried out again,  
"Not this one but Barabbas!"  
Now Barabbas was a revolutionary.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged.  
And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it  
on his head,  
and clothed him in a purple cloak,  
and they came to him and said,  
"Hail, King of the Jews!"  
And they struck him repeatedly.  
Once more Pilate went out and said to them,  
"Look, I am bringing him out to you,  
so that you may know that I find no guilt in him."  
So Jesus came out,  
wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak.  
And he said to them, "Behold, the man!"  
When the chief priests and the guards saw him they cried  
out,  
"Crucify him, crucify him!"  
Pilate said to them,  
"Take him yourselves and crucify him.  
I find no guilt in him."  
The Jews answered,  
"We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die,  
because he made himself the Son of God."  
Now when Pilate heard this statement,  
he became even more afraid,  
and went back into the praetorium and said to Jesus,  
"Where are you from?"  
Jesus did not answer him.  
So Pilate said to him,

“Do you not speak to me?  
Do you not know that I have power to release you  
and I have power to crucify you?”  
Jesus answered him,  
“You would have no power over me  
if it had not been given to you from above.  
For this reason the one who handed me over to you  
has the greater sin.”  
Consequently, Pilate tried to release him;  
but the Jews cried out,  
“If you release him, you are not a Friend of Caesar.  
Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.”

When Pilate heard these words he brought Jesus out  
and seated him on the judge’s bench  
in the place called Stone Pavement, in Hebrew, Gabbatha.  
It was preparation day for Passover, and it was about noon.  
And he said to the Jews,  
“Behold, your king!”  
They cried out,  
“Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!”  
Pilate said to them,  
“Shall I crucify your king?”  
The chief priests answered,  
“We have no king but Caesar.”  
Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus, and, carrying the cross himself,  
he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull,  
in Hebrew, Golgotha.  
There they crucified him, and with him two others,  
one on either side, with Jesus in the middle.  
Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross.  
It read,  
“Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews.”  
Now many of the Jews read this inscription,  
because the place where Jesus was crucified  
was near the city;  
and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek.  
So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate,  
“Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’  
but that he said, ‘I am the King of the Jews’.”  
Pilate answered,  
“What I have written, I have written.”



When the soldiers had crucified Jesus,  
they took his clothes and divided them into four shares,  
a share for each soldier.  
They also took his tunic, but the tunic was seamless,  
woven in one piece from the top down.  
So they said to one another,  
“Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it will be, “  
in order that the passage of Scripture might be fulfilled that  
says:

*They divided my garments among them,  
and for my vesture they cast lots.*

This is what the soldiers did.  
Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother  
and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas,  
and Mary of Magdala.  
When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there  
whom he loved  
he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son.”  
Then he said to the disciple,  
“Behold, your mother.”  
And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

After this, aware that everything was now finished,  
in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled,  
Jesus said, “I thirst.”  
There was a vessel filled with common wine.  
So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop  
and put it up to his mouth.  
When Jesus had taken the wine, he said,  
“It is finished.”  
And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.

*Here all kneel and pause for a short time.*

Now since it was preparation day,  
in order that the bodies might not remain on the cross on  
the sabbath,  
for the sabbath day of that week was a solemn one,  
the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken  
and that they be taken down.  
So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first  
and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus.  
But when they came to Jesus and saw that

he was already dead,  
they did not break his legs,  
but one soldier thrust his lance into his side,  
and immediately blood and water flowed out.  
An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true;  
he knows that he is speaking the truth,  
so that you also may come to believe.  
For this happened so that the Scripture passage might be fulfilled:

*Not a bone of it will be broken.*

And again another passage says:

*They will look upon him whom they have pierced.*

After this, Joseph of Arimathea,  
secretly a disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews,  
asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus.  
And Pilate permitted it.  
So he came and took his body.  
Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night,  
also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes  
weighing about one hundred pounds.  
They took the body of Jesus  
and bound it with burial cloths along with the spices,  
according to the Jewish burial custom.  
Now in the place where he had been crucified there was a  
garden,  
and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet  
been buried.  
So they laid Jesus there because of  
the Jewish preparation day;  
for the tomb was close by.

## **PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS**

Today is Good Friday. All around the world, Christians  
are gathering at the foot of the cross of their Savior.

As you venerate the cross today, remember that we have  
been doing this for a long time. The earliest evidence we  
have of a Christian venerating the cross goes back to  
around 200 AD.

In 1857, archeologists, digging on the Palatine Hill in  
Rome, excavated what turned out to be a jail. They found

a graffito scratched on a plaster wall. ("Graffito" is the singular form of the word "graffiti").

It was a cross with Christ suspended on it. But instead of the head of Christ, with his crown of thorns, some prisoner had scratched the head of a jackass.

In addition, there was a message scribbled in (ungrammatical) Greek beneath this image of Christ crucified. The message reads,

Αλεξαμενος σεβετε θεον  
Alexamenos worships his God

Most archeologists assume that Alexamenos was a Christian in Roman custody being mocked by a fellow inmate because of his faith.

This makes sense. Christianity would be an illegal religion in the Roman Empire for another hundred years after Alexamenos' time in jail. Christians were subject to arrest and, with their bizarre veneration of the cross, they were also objects of ridicule. Remember what Saint Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth:

... we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Venerating a cross was like making a religious symbol out of a gas chamber or a gallows. The Romans could be ingeniously sadistic. They reserved crucifixion for prisoners they wanted to humiliate. Death on a cross was a painful, drawn-out, public spectacle. Why would anyone make a religious symbol of this brutal mode of execution?

On the wall in the jail, Alexamenos worships his jackass of a God dying on a cross. The archeologists think this is an image scratched by a thug set on humiliating poor Alexamenos.

I'm not sure that this is a good interpretation of the graffito. Let me offer another possible interpretation.

What if the graffito was etched by Alexamenos himself?

What would that mean?

It would mean that Alexamenos had fallen into despair.

Alexamenos had been arrested, possibly because of his faith. In Jail, the God to whom he prayed was not Jupiter or Demeter. Alexamenos' God had been arrested by the Roman authorities and had died the most humiliating death the fiendish Romans could devise.

Maybe Alexamenos was going to be crucified as well. The Coliseum is just a short walk from his jailcell.

Αλεξαμενος σεβετε θεον  
Alexamenos worships his God

As he scratched this commentary in bad Greek, Alexamenos was ridiculing himself. He was in despair.

Who scratched this graffito? Was Alexamenos being ridiculed by a fellow inmate or was he ridiculing himself in despair?

The graffito is ambiguous.

I like this ambiguity. It resonates with the ambiguity of the Gospels about the death of Jesus.

Today is Good Friday and, in keeping with the ancient tradition, the Church gives us the account of Jesus's crucifixion found in the Gospel of John. In John's Gospel, Jesus seems to be more enthroned on the cross than nailed to it. Pilate has little understanding of who he is executing. Jesus, in contrast, knows exactly what he is doing. On the cross, he has the presence of mind to make sure his mother is cared for. After this, he surveys the self-destructive folly of this world for the last time, and then, looking heavenward, he says, with remarkable composure,

It is finished.

Only then, in a mysterious act of obedience to the Father, does the Messiah give up his spirit.

Some have interpreted John's Gospel as saying that Jesus didn't really suffer on the cross. He only appeared to suffer. After all, he was divine. This is nonsense. The whole point of all four Gospels is that the Messiah suffered death for our sins.

Instead, I think John's account of the Passion is an act of defiance. Death by crucifixion, as I said, was carefully designed to humiliate. The dignity of Jesus in John's account is a call to resist the ancient power of empires and their obsession with violence and humiliation. Rome, for all its obsession with cruelty, was nothing but a prop in the drama of God's plan for our redemption.

John's Gospel was written for Alexamenos. But the Gospels of Mark and Matthew were written for him as well. These two Gospels give us a very different account. In Mark and Matthew, Jesus is humiliated, abandoned, tortured and then, just before expiring, cries out to heaven in despair:

Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani  
My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?

Jesus dies a "fool on a hill," abandoned not only by his disciples, but by his God as well.

Jesus is not enthroned on his cross, he dies in despair.

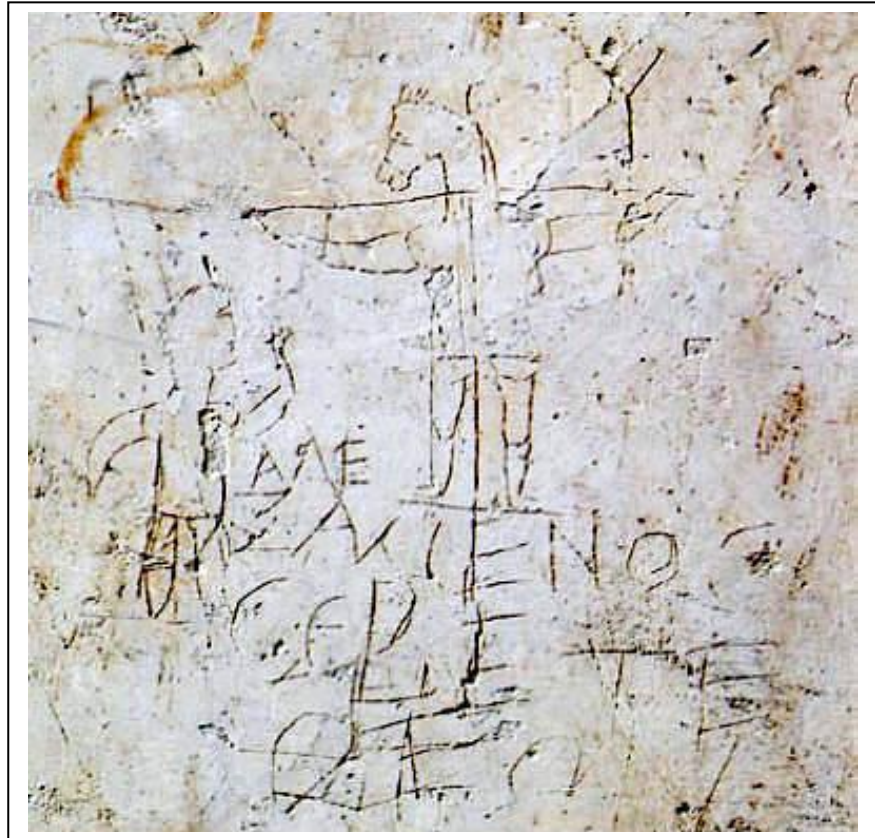
Like the graffito on the wall of the jail on the Palatine Hill in Rome, Jesus' crucifixion is ambiguous. It is about being ridiculed and humiliated. It is also about dying, forsaken by God, in despair. It is also a revelation of the innate dignity of every human being and resistance to empire.

Today is Good Friday. I feel very close to Alexamenos as he languished in jail nineteen centuries ago. In truth, I think it was Alexamenos himself who scratched that graffito onto the plaster in the Roman jail. No doubt Alexamenos was being ridiculed by his fellow prisoners.

But I think it was he who etched the graffito. Alexamenos was in despair.

As you venerate the cross today, open your heart to poor Alexamenos. Recognize the enormous dignity of this human being that no ridicule can take from him. This is a good way to learn how to open your heart to all our fellow human beings who have fallen into despair. And as John's Gospel teaches us, it is a good way to resist the power of empires and their obsession with humiliation and death.

Αλεξαμενος σεβετε θεον



### **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?