

HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION

Sunday, 16 May 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: 58

Reading I Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus,
I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught
until the day he was taken up,
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit
to the apostles whom he had chosen.
He presented himself alive to them
by many proofs after he had suffered,
appearing to them during forty days
and speaking about the kingdom of God.
While meeting with them,
he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,
but to wait for “the promise of the Father
about which you have heard me speak;
for John baptized with water,
but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”
When they had gathered together they asked him,
“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”
He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons
that the Father has established by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”
When he had said this, as they were looking on,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.
While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going,
suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them.
They said, “Men of Galilee,
why are you standing there looking at the sky?

This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven
will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”

Responsorial Psalm Ps 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

R. (6) God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia.

All you peoples, clap your hands,
shout to God with cries of gladness,
For the LORD, the Most High, the awesome,
is the great king over all the earth.

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia.

God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy;
the LORD, amid trumpet blasts.

Sing praise to God, sing praise;
sing praise to our king, sing praise.

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia.

For king of all the earth is God;
sing hymns of praise.

God reigns over the nations,
God sits upon his holy throne.

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II Eph 1:17-23

Brothers and sisters:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation
resulting in knowledge of him.

May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened,
that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call,
what are the riches of glory
in his inheritance among the holy ones,
and what is the surpassing greatness of his power
for us who believe,
in accord with the exercise of his great might,
which he worked in Christ,
raising him from the dead
and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,

far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,
and every name that is named
not only in this age but also in the one to come.
And he put all things beneath his feet
and gave him as head over all things to the church,
which is his body,
the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Alleluia Mt 28:19a, 20b

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Go and teach all nations, says the Lord;
I am with you always, until the end of the world.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mk 16:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Go into the whole world
and proclaim the gospel to every creature.
Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved;
whoever does not believe will be condemned.
These signs will accompany those who believe:
in my name they will drive out demons,
they will speak new languages.
They will pick up serpents with their hands,
and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them.
They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”
So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them,
was taken up into heaven
and took his seat at the right hand of God.
But they went forth and preached everywhere,
while the Lord worked with them
and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Many years ago, I spent about two months on a sojourn through parts of India with a group of Jains. (Jainism is a religion that is like Buddhism in some ways and like Hinduism in other ways). India, I can assure you, is nothing less than a river of humanity.

In the city of Jaipur, I stayed at a retreat house for the Jains. The caretaker of the retreat house lived with his family in a little shack behind the temple. The youngest child in this family was a little boy, about ten years old. He had an infectious smile, a bubbly charm and a gift for hospitality that seemed to know no limits. He was not the least bit concerned by the fact that I couldn't understand a word that he was saying to me.

One afternoon, the little boy came to me and said, "Mister Jeem! Mister Jeem!" Then, he took me by the hand and led me to the back of one of the buildings where there was a stairway that led to the roof.

Up to the roof we went together.

The blazing hot sun was just setting and painting the bluffs overlooking the city a powdery rose color. On the roof, the little boy gestured at some trees lost in the distance and the summer heat. I looked at the trees obediently, not understanding what the fuss was about.

After a few moments, I began see peacocks leaping up into the trees from the ground. After a few more moments, the peacocks began to make a tremendous racket, calling out into the sky.

Then something happened that I have never forgotten. Suddenly, from behind me, more peacocks began to crow. I could see them when I turned around. They too were making a tremendous racket. They had flown up into trees an equal distance away, but in the opposite direction.

As I was just making sense of this, more peacocks began to crow from yet another direction. And then yet another direction. As the sun was casting its last rays on sandy Jaipur, peacocks all over the city were flying up into trees and calling out to the whole world.

I looked over to my little friend who had taken me by the hand and led me to this rooftop so I could witness the evening prayer of the peacocks of Jaipur. Hard as this was for me to believe, the little boy's smile was even bigger. He continued to point enthusiastically into the distance at the peacocks. All he could say was, "Mister Jeem! Mister Jeem!"

If I was ever told the name of my tour-guide that afternoon in Jaipur, alas, I cannot remember it. These days, when I pray for him, of course, I am filled with gratitude for his kindness to me.

As I watch the poppies bloom in the far corner of my yard today, here in Sonoma, I am thinking about the little boy in Jaipur and the liturgy of the peacocks. I am astounded to think how wide this world is and how different we all are. Where is this little boy today? How far did he get in school? Does he have a sweetheart? Is he married with little ones of his own? What have become of his smile, his gift for hospitality and his love of peacocks? Most of all, I wonder what hopes he has for his future. As we listened to the peacocks of Jaipur together, I thought of what a different life this little boy's life was from my own. No doubt he has continued to live a life very different from my life.

This brings me to the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord.

After the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning, the Risen Christ immediately began to appear to his disciples. As I have said many times, the discovery of the empty tomb proved nothing to the disciples. It led to fear and confusion. Easter Faith transforms the disciples only when the Risen Christ begins to appear to them.

These post-Easter appearances go on for forty days. Then, as we learn in the first reading, the Risen Christ tells his disciples that he must return to the Father so that the Father can pour out the Holy Spirit over the face of the earth at Pentecost.

While meeting with them,
he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,
but to wait for “the promise of the Father
about which you have heard me speak;
for John baptized with water,
but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Then, taking his disciples to the top of a mountain, and,

as they were looking on,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.

How are we to understand the meaning of this Ascension into heaven? I suggest we think of the Risen Lord’s Ascension in light of what he said to his disciples at the Last Supper. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says,

“And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”

I am astounded at how vast this earth is and how different we are from one another. At times, when I read the papers and watch the news on television, I begin to think that the human family is being dispersed and that our foolishness is separating us from one another. I am reminded of the ancient curse of Babel, the tower we tried to build in the desert which would reach up to heaven itself. Babel is where we were scattered into a confusion of languages such that we were no longer able to understand one another.

This pessimism, however, is not in keeping with Christian faith. On the mountain of the Ascension, the Lord has been “lifted up from the earth.” And in being lifted up, he has begun to draw everyone to himself – indeed, he has begun to draw *all things* to himself. We are not being dispersed. All things are being gathered together in the Risen Christ and lifted up.

This includes the bluffs of Jaipur, with their rose-tinted warmth imparted by the setting sun. This includes those peacocks leaping from the ground into the trees and calling out to their Creator. And this includes that little boy who took me by the hand and, with infectious

enthusiasm, led me to the rooftop so that I could share in his wonder over all that God is bringing about in this world as He gathers it together and lifts it up.

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?