

HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Sunday, 17 March 2024

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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: 35

Reading I Jer 31:31-34

The days are coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers
the day I took them by the hand
to lead them forth from the land of Egypt;
for they broke my covenant,
and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD.
But this is the covenant that I will make
with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD.
I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts;
I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives
how to know the LORD.
All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD,
for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

Responsorial Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15

R. (12a) Create a clean heart in me, O God.
Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.
R. Create a clean heart in me, O God.
A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,

and your Holy Spirit take not from me.
R. Create a clean heart in me, O God.
Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners shall return to you.
R. Create a clean heart in me, O God.

Reading II Heb 5:7-9

In the days when Christ Jesus 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 Jn 12:26

Whoever serves me must follow me, says the Lord;
and where I am, there also will my servant be.

Gospel Jn 12:20-33

Some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast
came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee,
and asked him, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus."
Philip went and told Andrew;
then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.
Jesus answered them,
"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.
Amen, amen, I say to you,
unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies,
it remains just a grain of wheat;
but if it dies, it produces much fruit.
Whoever loves his life loses it,
and whoever hates his life in this world
will preserve it for eternal life.
Whoever serves me must follow me,
and where I am, there also will my servant be.
The Father will honor whoever serves me.

“I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?
‘Father, save me from this hour’?
But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.
Father, glorify your name.”
Then a voice came from heaven,
“I have glorified it and will glorify it again.”
The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder;
but others said, “An angel has spoken to him.”
Jesus answered and said,
“This voice did not come for my sake but for yours.
Now is the time of judgment on this world;
now the ruler of this world will be driven out.
And when I am lifted up from the earth,
I will draw everyone to myself.”
He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Our Christian faith is a school of desire. Or perhaps, I should say that the proper practice of faith is *a schooling of desire*.

We come into this world driven by desires that are wild and unbridled, savage and often self-destructive. Then begins the long and painful process of bridling the unbridled. The tutoring of desire is a life-long pursuit. We should not pretend that it is easy.

When I say that we should think of Christian faith as a schooling of desire, do not misunderstand my meaning. Our faith does not seek to suppress desire. Rather, in the mystery of faith, desire is finally set free.

Faith is the liberation of desire.

I say this with some confidence because the Church teaches us that the deepest desire within the human person – the desire that remains permanently established within the human heart – is the desire for God.

The practice of Christian faith, therefore, must always be a quest for this deepest desire in the hope that this deepest of all desires might finally set be set free. And in being set free, our desire for God will set us free.

The liberation of desire is what it means to be redeemed by the unfathomable grace of God.

A few weeks ago, I visited with a friend from Hong Kong for a few days. She gave me a new translation of the *Analects* of Confucius. The Jesuits, when they went to China in the 1600s, fell in love with Confucius. Confucius taught about the necessity of shaping our desires by cultivating virtues. The Jesuits saw that Confucianism, like their Christian faith, is a school of desire.

In the *Analects*, Confucius tells his students that, at age fifteen, he made up his mind to cultivate virtues by a life of study. At thirty, he reports, "I had found my place to stand in the world." At forty, he was no longer confused by things and, by fifty, Confucius came to understand the destiny that Heaven had appointed for him. At sixty, Confucius tells us that "my ears were attuned to the true meaning of what others were saying."

This is a sizable achievement. Confucius tells us that only after sixty years of study and cultivation did he begin to understand the "true meaning" of what others were saying to him.

But look what Confucius says next about the slow and gradual education of his desires:

And since seventy, I have been able to do what my heart desires without transgressing the moral norms.

Here is a great human achievement: the ability to desire spontaneously in the depths of our hearts what is good and what is just.

I think this Confucian ideal is very close to what we call, in Christian tradition, the liberation of desire.

With Confucius in mind, look at the first reading. This passage from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah is momentous.

The days are coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

The Covenant with Moses was given to us when the LORD led his people out of the slavery of Egypt. Let there be no doubt: the Mosaic Law is truly a schooling of desire.

And yet, we have refused to accept this schooling. In our self-destructive disobedience to God's moral law,

I had to show myself their master, says the LORD.

But Jeremiah assures us that we will be given a New Covenant. In Jeremiah's poetry, God speaks words to us that are poignant and tender:

I will place my law within them
and write it upon their hearts;
I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
No longer will they have need to teach
their friends and relatives how to know the LORD.
All, from least to greatest, shall know me,
says the LORD,
for I will forgive their evildoing
and remember their sin no more.

The moral law will be written in our hearts.

The early Jesuits in China were right about Confucius. We would do well to emulate this exemplary man, whose teachings have done so much good for so many over the centuries.

But even as we emulate Confucius, who resolved at age fifteen to tutor his desires in search of goodness, let us also remember that the LORD is preparing a New Covenant for His people. At long last, He will inscribe his moral law within our hearts. The day is coming when we will finally be set free to desire what in fact we desire most within our hearts.

And on that day,

All, from least to greatest, shall know me,
says the LORD,
for I will forgive their evildoing
and remember their sin no more.

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Nuestra fe cristiana es una escuela de deseo. O tal vez debería decir que la práctica adecuada de la fe es una educación del deseo.

Venimos a este mundo impulsados por deseos salvajes y desenfrenados, y a menudo autodestructivos. Entonces comienza el largo y doloroso proceso de salvar a los desenfrenados. La tutoría del deseo es una tarea que dura toda la vida y no debemos pretender que es fácil.

Cuando digo que debemos pensar en la fe cristiana como una escuela del deseo, no malinterpretéis lo que quiero decir. Nuestra fe no busca suprimir el deseo o abandonar el deseo. Más bien, en el misterio de la fe, el deseo queda finalmente liberado.

La fe es la liberación del deseo.

Digo esto con cierta confianza porque la Iglesia nos enseña que el deseo más profundo dentro de la persona humana – el deseo que permanece permanentemente establecido en el corazón humano – es el deseo de Dios.

La práctica de la fe cristiana, por lo tanto, debe ser siempre una búsqueda de este deseo más profundo con la esperanza de que este deseo, el más profundo de todos, finalmente nos haga libres.

La liberación del deseo es lo que significa ser redimido por la gracia insondable de Dios.

Hace unas semanas, visité a un amigo de Hong Kong durante unos días. Ella me dio una nueva traducción de las *Analectas* de Confucio. Los jesuitas, cuando fueron a China en el siglo XVII, se enamoraron de Confucio. Confucio enseñó sobre la necesidad de dar disciplina a nuestros deseos mediante el cultivo de las virtudes. Los jesuitas vieron que el confucianismo, como la fe cristiana, es una escuela de deseo.

En las *Analectas*, Confucio les dice a sus alumnos que, a los quince años, decidió cultivar las virtudes mediante una vida de estudio. A los treinta años, informa, "había encontrado mi lugar en el mundo". A los cuarenta años, las cosas ya no lo confundían y, a los cincuenta, Confucio llegó a comprender el destino que el Cielo le había designado. A los sesenta años, Confucio nos dice que "mis oídos estaban atentos al verdadero significado de lo que decían los demás".

Este es un logro considerable. Confucio nos dice que sólo después de sesenta años de estudio y cultivación comenzó a comprender el "verdadero significado" de lo que otros le decían.

Pero mire lo que dice Confucio a continuación sobre la educación lenta y gradual de sus deseos:

Y desde los setenta puedo hacer lo que mi corazón desea sin transgredir las normas morales.

He aquí una gran conquista humana: desear espontáneamente en lo más profundo de nuestro corazón lo que es bueno y justo.

Creo que este ideal confuciano está muy cerca de lo que llamamos, en la tradición cristiana, la liberación del deseo.

Pensando en Confucio, mire la primera lectura. Este pasaje del libro del profeta Jeremías es trascendental.

Vienen días, dice el Señor,
cuando haré un nuevo pacto
con la casa de Israel y la casa de Judá.

El Pacto con Moisés nos fue dado cuando el Señor sacó a su pueblo de la esclavitud de Egipto. La Ley Mosaica es verdaderamente una escuela del deseo.

Y, sin embargo, nos hemos negado a aceptar esta escolarización. En nuestra desobediencia autodestructiva a la ley moral de Dios,

Tuve que mostrarme su señor, dice el SEÑOR.

Pero Jeremías nos asegura que se nos dará un Nuevo Pacto. En la poesía de Jeremías, Dios nos dice palabras conmovedoras y tiernas:

Pondré mi ley dentro de ellos
y escríbelo en sus corazones;
Yo seré su Dios y ellos serán mi pueblo.
Ya no necesitarán enseñar
a sus amigos y familiares cómo conocer al Señor.
Todos, desde el menor hasta el mayor, me
conocerán, dice el SEÑOR,
porque perdonaré sus maldades
y no recuerdes más su pecado.

La ley moral quedará escrita en nuestros corazones.

Los primeros jesuitas en China tenían razón acerca de Confucio. Haríamos bien en emular a este hombre ejemplar, cuyas enseñanzas han hecho tanto bien a tantas personas a lo largo de los siglos.

Pero incluso mientras emulamos a Confucio, quien a los quince años decidió tutorizar sus deseos en busca del bien, recordemos también que el Señor está preparando un Nuevo Pacto para Su pueblo. Por fin, Él inscribirá su ley moral en nuestros corazones. Se acerca el día en que finalmente seremos libres para desear lo que más deseamos en nuestro corazón.

Y ese día, Todos,
desde el menor hasta el mayor, me conocerán,
dice el SEÑOR,
porque perdonaré sus maldades
y no recuerdes más su pecado.

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?