

*Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. John 6:68*

One day while ostensibly walking home after school in North Philly I accompanied a classmate until we reached 29<sup>th</sup> Street where he made a left turn – and so did I. That made him look at me funny, for he sensed I had diverted from my usual route home. He was right. When he eventually turned into his own street I kept on walking south. At age 9, I was running away. I was heading for South Philly where my maternal grandmother lived and where life seemed saner than with my distressed parents and other *depressed* grandmother. I made it to Girard Avenue and stopped this side of the street – to wonder. My maternal grandmother and her still juvenile children would be confused; my father might be angry; the school might expel me; the distance was five miles through avenues and parkways and cobblestone streets. Then I thought: Well, maybe some other time. And I retreated but only to complete the idea later by entering a minor seminary at age 15. I got away after all! And have never lived in Philly since.

The Bible has several runaway stories or stories of regret for having forsaken some place or some one. Judas comes to mind. The charm of Jesus had apparently worn off; money concerns absorbed his attention – the more of it the merrier. And so he sold Jesus out and wallowed in remorse: *I have betrayed innocent blood*. Then there is the story of the Prodigal Son who much to the distress of his father took his inheritance and set off for a distant country and as the Gospel says: *squandered his wealth in wild living*. Then came the regrets – especially when all he had to live on were the pods thrown to barnyard pigs - *Here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father . . .*

And then there is Jonah. Told to go preach to the city of Nineveh, capital of a ruthless empire, he lights out not a mere five miles to South Philly but to the other end of the Mediterranean Sea – Spain. He was swallowed up by fear translated into a huge fish. And it says when he became faint he remembered the Lord in his Temple and promised to repent, which somehow made the fish nauseous so that he vomited Jonah onto a beach – where he could reverse his flight and serve his Lord.

But the modern classic of a runaway is presented in the famous poem of Francis Thompson (1859-1907), an English convert to the Church – who studied to be a doctor, became hooked on opium, lived on the streets, was cared for by a prostitute, taken in by the Catholic publisher Wilfred Meynell and recovered enough to write *The Hound of Heaven*. Given the chaos of his short life the poem reveals Thompson's personal experience of God's pursuit but it fits us all – in private. Of how like some divine beast of prey God was always there:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; / I fled Him, down the arches of the years; / I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways / Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears / I hid from Him, and under running laughter. // Up vistaed hopes I sped; / And shot, precipitated, // Adown Titanic glooms . . . / From those strong Feet that followed, followed after. // But with unhurrying chase, / And unperturbèd pace, / Deliberate speed, majestic instancy, // They beat—and a Voice beat / More instant than the Feet— // 'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'*

The Hound of course is the Love of God – as the poem says at the end: *Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me*.

(The poem has been recorded by outstanding actors like David Suchet and Richard Burton.)