

Bethlehem Round the Bend

As I remember my earliest Christmas Eve, during which my sister and I, not yet out of our toddler age, peeked through the staircase banister to see our living room transformed (my parents playing Santa Claus), it became a kind of mystical space. And every Christmas thereafter that spell lingered as a time and place out of sync with the relentless commerce of our everyday world, the news of the day. It was like the village set up under the tree, a location, quiet, a refuge latent with hope, surprise and peace. But as I grew older and the news of the day and unbridled technology clamored for my adult attention, that scene became a “thing to do”, a seasonal obligation – a motive for buying more stuff. It was for me hardly the child’s world it used to be.

And then long ago in reading Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* I came across a passage that struck that old chord again. It’s where the adolescent Marcel sets off from Paris by train to the seaside resort of Balbec. He depended on a familiar environment to feel secure and felt threatened by this excursion to a new location. Still, he spent a peaceful night in his compartment and woke to see the sunrise through his window. Slowly the train came to a stop at a wayside station and Marcel caught sight of a tall girl climbing a path bathed by the rays of the sun. She was carrying a jar of milk. *In her valley from which the rest of the world was hidden by these heights, she must never see anyone save in these trains which stopped for a moment only. She passed down the line of windows, offering coffee and milk to a few awakened passengers. Flushed with the glow of morning, her face was rosier than the sky.*

He recalls: *I felt in seeing her that desire to live which is reborn in us whenever we become conscious anew of beauty and happiness.* Normally his way of life would insulate him from beauty but here at a train stop situated in a strange landscape his insulation had given way. He was ready to get off the train of habit and spend the rest of his life with this lovely apparition. He signaled her to bring him some coffee. *She did not see me; I called to her She retraced her steps. I could not take my eyes from her face which grew larger as she approached, like a sun . . . dazzling you with its blaze of red and gold. She fastened on me her penetrating gaze, but doors were being closed and the train had begun to move. I saw her leave the station and go down the hill . . . ; it was broad daylight now; I was speeding away from the dawn.*

Do not our lives soon become a narrow corridor of habit – like a train coach set upon wheels that convey us rapidly through time, equipped, yes, with windows through which we can catch a glimpse of the passing years, a passing landscape – of people, of a sunrise? Otherwise we are confined – like the broken hearted captives of Isaiah’s poem. We are lulled to sleep by the clickety clack of TV news, commercials, politics, canned laughter and background noise (music?).

Until, thank God, we have a chance to slow down enough to arrive again at a station called Christmas, that tiny village under the tree, that creche, where we have at least a chance to see the Virgin Mary, *flushed with the glow of morning*, offering us, if not a pitcher of milk, then a nourishment even more profound. Time to sit up now! The coach of habit that so confines your soul is coming round the bend. Bethlehem lies just ahead, offering you the vision of a real Sunrise and of a lovely lady and the experience of a world permeated with the poetry of God’s Word made flesh, with that peace we long for so much.