

*It was the way things were. It was what they had come to expect of life . . . He himself had not yet come to that . . .* Thomas Wolfe

If you were to return to the town or neighborhood in which you grew up – as Jesus returns to Nazareth in today's Gospel – what would you find? Of course we assume Jesus was not too old when he returned and so things may have been pretty much the same: same layout of the streets, buildings, familiar faces, many former playmates and schoolmates, even relatives whom he knew – older but still plentiful.

That wouldn't be so in the case of a fellow like me – who grew up in a city neighborhood called Brewerytown way back in the 1930's – over eighty years ago. I actually did go back with Jane somewhere around 1990 – fifty years later – and, yes, the layout of that inner city location was the same, same street names, same style row houses, but a whole different ethnic population and structural deterioration due to the wear and tear of decades, landlord negligence, the once commercial avenue practically deserted due to suburban flight and far away shopping malls. And my old parish church which, with its gothic interior, stained glass windows, convent, school, shaped my sense of life's meaning and history: a shambles within the lifetime of its *original* membership.

The street I lived on, where in the 1930's you were surprised to see two parked cars at most, was lined with so many that driving through the space between the opposite curbs where we used to play *kick the can* and *hide and seek* and *London Bridge is falling down* and *stick ball* and *giant steps* and hold block parties — was so narrowed that driving a car through was like threading a needle. And the house I lived in? It was there: 1448 Corlies Street; and two children were seated on the very front concrete steps against which I used to bounce and catch a rubber ball maybe 60 times to improve my fielding skills. And there was the front porch where family gathered in summer and where one day I burst into copious tears for apparently no reason at all – except there must have been something about my home and environment and world that welled up out of some inner, indecipherable terror so that at night I always slept with my covers over my head.

So the place had changed. It scarcely resembled the place I had once known. Or could it be that *I* had changed? Relatively speaking the old neighborhood was for the kids who now lived there what it had been for me – structurally at least. But I was no longer what I was then – in terms of my comprehension of my society, my culture, my creed, *my-self*. Time is grace they say. It works you over if you do not retreat into your past under the illusion that you'd be safer there – reacting to change the way the residents of Nazareth reacted to Jesus – with “who the heck is this!” So disturbed were they, his not being what they expected him to be, it says in the full text of today's Gospel: *They rose up and drove him out of the town*, an alien presence.

If you were to return to your earliest neighborhood or environment, would you find it pretty much the way it was? Or, better still, would you realize that you *yourself* were not the same? Would you be able to stand up before that world of your beginnings and sum up your life in words like: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free?* If after so many decades of existence one cannot echo Jesus, then it's not just a matter of not having grown up. It's closer to one's not having yet been born.

**Geoff Wood**