

Scripture offers you ways to redescribe your life. Use it.

The Catholic poet Joyce Kilmer (age 31) arrived in France with the Fighting 69th Irish New York Regiment in November 1917 – one of the earliest American units to arrive after America declared war in April 1917. Indeed they were early enough to undertake a grueling 80 mile march to the front just after Christmas – through sludge up to their knees. The 1940 film about the 69th, which I sat through 3 times in one afternoon at age 12, starred James Cagney, Pat O'Brien, Frank McHugh (the whole Irish Mafia of Hollywood) and depicted that march, the men laden with heavy outfits, weapons, packs. In the course of it a weary, helmeted Joyce Kilmer (played by Jeffrey Lynn) composes a poem called *Prayer of a Soldier in France*. It goes:

My shoulders ache beneath my pack
(Lie easier, Cross, upon His back).
I march with feet that burn and smart
(Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart).
Men shout at me who may not speak
(They scourged Thy back and smote Thy cheek).
I may not lift a hand to clear
My eyes of salty drops that sear.
(Then shall my fickle soul forget
Thy agony of Bloody Sweat?)
My rifle hand is stiff and numb
(From Thy pierced palm red rivers come).
Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me
Than all the hosts of land and sea.
So let me render back again
This millionth of Thy gift. Amen.

What is Kilmer doing here? In his own agony upon the march, in cold and dark he is finding in the Passion story of Christ a way of understanding his own isolated suffering. He is lifting his pain, his plight up into the drama of Christ's own self-sacrifice for humankind – and thereby finding a reason to raise one foot after another, to see a transcendent aim ahead hidden by all the craziness of war.

In other words he is doing what we should do when we read the Gospels. The evangelists provide us with a pattern, many patterns, one episode or parable after another, that we may use to redescribe and better understand our own otherwise prosaic lives. Like the story of the magi. Let me lift my own life into the drama of the magi. I have seen a star that beckons to me – it has appeared many times during my life, an insight here, an incident there, a person, a teacher, a book – signaling a way to proceed, to find a royal understanding of why I exist and where I am headed. I run into people, like the scribes, the academics, who try to explain where this journey is headed – but their conclusions, their advice is always vague. I meet King Herods along the way who are bothered by my faith, my quest . . . feeling it is a threat to their negative or skeptical estimate of life, their tyranny over minds and hearts. But the star never ceases to reappear until I find what! – an infant, and maybe even an infant *who is my own newborn self*, mothered by Mary, by a community of faith and sacraments – and so, driven by that discovery, I am ready to depart “by another way”, to undertake a way of life permeated with profound, invincible hope.

Geoff Wood