

Lectionary Readings for November, 2016 – Cycles C & A

Introduction: From November to December: Transitioning from Darkness to Light

Recalling Last month's Visual Aid: On Literal and Metaphorical Speech or to put it another way, on the difference between Letter and Spirit, See Attachment

Literal Speech

The lower half represents the world of literal speech, “factual”, objective – such as science prefers, a world of just *things* that we hardly notice as we speed down Highway Twelve, a world of numbers as in a census, a world viewed superficially and not in any conscious way figuratively; an environment wherein night is simply 12 hours of darkness and Jesus a carpenter's son.

In Mark's Gospel his neighbors say of Jesus: *Is he not a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And are not the last four digits of his Social Security card XXXX?*” They are stuck at this level of recognition even after in Luke's Gospel Jesus has just read a passage from the poetry of the prophet Isaiah about the coming Messiah: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me . . . to bring good news . . . to proclaim liberty to captives . . .* After which he pointedly says: *Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.* In other words the poetry reveals the true stature, the true importance of this carpenter standing before you.

Metaphorical Speech

If the lower half represents the environment of literal, so-called objective, everyday, even trivialized vision and speech, the upper half represents the metaphorical sphere where things or events or persons below might be better seen in depth, more truly than they are literally. For instance, the nature of *Mary of Nazareth* is more profoundly, truly expressed as a *Tower of Ivory or Transfiguration* World/meaningful

metaphorical sphere

Tower of Ivory

House of Gold

Morning Star

Angelic bread

The Inn on the road to Emmaus

Prayer: a man well dressed

Night: the stop of busy fools the Zacchaeus Tree

The Light of the World

Immortal diamond

Prefiguration

literal

“factual”

realm of objects

things

prosaic

census statistic

hearsay

a carpenter's son

Mary of Nazareth

12 hours of darkness

Prayer = petition

Newton's Sleep

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood

an environment (not a World)

numbers

House of Gold or Morning Star or Mystical Rose; and the carpenter's son as The Light of the World; or you and I not just as This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood but as Immortal Diamonds!

Some people, attached to things as they appear to be, who like things demystified, concrete, confined within the range of 20/20 vision and the spectrum of our senses, say metaphors are dishonest. Poetry, fiction, falsify reality. But Denis Donoghue who seems to know what he's talking about says: *The point of a metaphor is to enrich the reader's experience by bringing different associations to mind. The force of a good metaphor is to give something a different life, a new life. [For instance, as on the chart: Night becomes not just 12 hours of darkness but the stop of busy fools.] The essential character of metaphor is prophetic. Metaphors intend to change the world by changing our sense of it. At the center . . . is the idea that metaphor permits the greatest freedom in the use of language because it exempts language from the local duties of reference and denotation. Metaphors conspire with the mind in its enjoyment of freedom.*

Without metaphor our world could be described as an environment without a soul, animated only by the gasses we breathe. Without metaphor, poetry, imagination, we become unmindful, forgetful of the things around us – if you can call a sunflower or a tree or a chair or a pool table or a pair of shoes or a landscape or a star a “thing” [Geoff held up a Van Gogh painting of each of these objects]; or your neighbor some-body or any-body or pedestrians “people”. Our very names are metaphors – such as Rose or Matthew (the gift of God) or Geoffrey (the peace of God) – something I personally have to live up to.

The whole point of our liturgical November to December transition each year is to convey us from the dimness of a literal, only objective, thingness, our ordinary sense of reality – in other words the end of a world as we usually know it - to a way of seeing not only the shape, the outline of things but also their inscape: as radiant, as alive, in some way holy, worthy of reverence, sacramental, right down to an infant in a manger: transparent,

offering access to the largeness, even the largesse of God. Advent will hasten this process that begins this month.

Remembering Being

But before advancing to the November Gospel readings let me take you on an excursion that can help one discover the very foundation of one's belief in the sacramentality of reality, the validity of metaphor as a language appropriate to the universe we live in.

Thanks to Martin Heidegger and the help of George Steiner in explaining the famous existentialist, I tried a process that might awaken me from my forgetfulness of things, of nature, of Being - and from my equally shallow way of being. Heidegger, raised Catholic and who into his early thirties called himself a Christian theologian, became grimly intent on connecting to what we call things, nature, the here and now. Descartes, the parent of modernism said: I think, therefore I am. Heidegger says, I am, therefore I think. He no longer had any use for otherworldliness, of mind over matter. A quote from the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz held his attention – the question: *why is there not nothing?* Why is there a world, why *am* I, why *are* you – and not nothing instead?

So I asked myself that question as I began my usual 6 A.M. daily walk around the Sonoma Plaza, especially on these predawn mornings, and tried (even by closing my eyes) to erase the presence of everything. Darkness, nothingness. And then, opening my eyes: *everything suddenly becomes noticeable, more than noticeable, the way a buttercup in the grass could startle me when I was three years old* – alive - no longer *things* but somehow each thing worthy of personal attention, reverence (I can understand now why primitive peoples worshiped nature).

I had to pause rather than wander through the Plaza paths absent-mindedly or preoccupied with the day's demands or my wife's TV preferences. The London plane trees that line the paths, *each* one of them, stood out, almost reached out to me, called for my attention; the old city hall emerged for what it really is, a work of art, so symmetrical, so sound, so stout, its stone work a

contrast of light and shadow due to lights applied to its exterior from above. And then the shops bordering the Plaza, the windows and their many items colorfully catching my eye; each one, to which I never paid much attention on so many previous mornings – each object, its shape, its reality pressing itself upon me as if it were awaiting Vincent Van Gogh to enshrine what it really is -- the occasional jogger becoming a history, a mystery it would take years to fathom. I mean, I was hesitant to move, needing to take my time to take it all in.

Later on I remembered Marcel's recalling in Proust's famous novel the town of Combray. It's like Marcel emerges from the everyday forgetfulness of his jaded youth and passes from the lower level of our handout to the higher one of sacramental, metaphorical experience. He has been stimulated by the taste of a pastry in tea:

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine . . . And just as the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little crumbs of paper which until then are without character or form but the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on color and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, permanent and recognizable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies of the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.

I mean, to my question why is there not nothing, the reply came: *because there is all of this!* I awoke to the fact that *something, anything*, indeed *everything* is so much more challenging, even astonishing than simply *nothing at all*. It was Genesis chapter one all over again! That things ARE, that fundamentally I could now say *that tree, that building, that shop, that jogger* simply IS – and that's enough, that they simply ARE, that I simply AM, before any attempt to qualify things. Whatever else that could be said about them was secondary to the fact that they ARE and in the recognition

that they simply share Being with me is enough to make of us all a family of Being.

And the feeling! A kind of thrill, intimacy, appreciation that extends to distant galaxies – I am no longer in a world of mere things, objects, things countable or merely accountable but of presences, sacraments that an artist like Gerard Manley Hopkins or Vermeer or Marcel Proust can so uniquely reveal. Anyway things seemed like poetry already – before any word was spoken. And when it *is* spoken it may sound like Hopkins's lyric:

God's Grandeur

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God . . .
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed . . .
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; . . . /*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

In the course of time, usage, haste, control, the seven capital sins may have erased the poetry from our everyday speech, from our everyday vision – but the use of metaphor (the promotion of which may be said to be a more profound mission of the Church), of seeing in Mary of Nazareth a *Mystical Rose, the Ark of the Covenant*, in persons *Immortal Diamonds*, in death a *resurrection*, restores the poetry which once was our primeval language, raises us from a language gone defunct and deadly, retells the first chapter of Genesis over and over again.

The End of the World

The liturgy has always used the descent of winter darkness as a metaphor for the end of the world. Fundamentalists vindictively take that to mean a literal end of the world and predict dates when it will happen. They fail to see the end of the world in Scripture as an extended metaphor of a prelude to the birth of light, birth pangs – therefore as the end of so shallow, even so mindlessly perverse way of being that some literal catastrophe almost seems necessary before we can ever wake up - before a truer way of being can ever dawn upon us.

And so, as we enter November, our readings direct our attention to a sense of an ending to be followed by a dawning – this in the context of the winter solstice. We read this month of the disciples admiring the beautiful architecture of Jerusalem’s temple only to hear Jesus say, *As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left upon another; everyone of them will be thrown down.*

Then there is the passage in Matthew where Jesus foretells the coming of a catastrophe similar to the flood in the days of Noah that will cascade upon us at an hour we least expect and wash away or better unmask all the ideologies whereby we periodically destroy our world. Then in early December we are told of someone coming with a winnowing fan and of chaff being consumed by fire. And even though these passages were composed 2000 years ago – the liturgy makes them applicable to us just as urgently today.

In terms of the chart I gave you, the end of the world takes place as we pass *from the lower half* expressive of the dead metaphors we speak, our failure to communicate and behave soulfully, to the upper level of the chart where Christmas happens, where language, behavior, vision, depth, breadth, wonder begin to blossom like a sunflower – words meaningful beyond their letters, alive with the breath, the spirit of Christ.

So let’s move on to a brief survey of the Gospel readings for this month of November that signal the end of the year but also the end of an environment en route to a profoundly meaningful, ever unfolding, genuine world.

November 6th – 32nd Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 20: 27-38

The very location of this episode, where Sadducees question the whole idea of an afterlife, falls within the shadow of the Passion Narrative – a time which John's Gospel sums up with the simple statement: *It was night* and of which Luke's Gospel has Jesus say to the Sanhedrin: *This is your hour, and the power of darkness.*

Assuming that Jesus did believe in the afterlife (as the Pharisees did) these Sadducees challenge him to reconcile an afterlife with the levirate law promulgated by no less than Moses himself. That law was geared to the only kind of perpetual life one could have within the absolute boundaries of one's own birth and death. It required the nearest male relative to marry the widow of a man who died without offspring. The child born of this second marriage would bear the name of the deceased and thus keep the property of the deceased within the overall clan and also perpetuate his name. It was a legal fiction that had to do with the only kind of immortality a person could have in a world where death was final. We find it practiced in the story of the patriarch Judah and his daughter in law Tamar and in the story about Ruth and Booz.

But what if (the Sadducees say) that widow became the wife sequentially of brother after brother up to the total six brothers – because each one, after marrying her, failed to get her pregnant with an heir to the first brother. How do such multiple marriages sort themselves out in the afterlife? It's got to make for a lot of laughs.

Jesus's response. To be brief, he uses a term we use a lot today in management courses. He says in effect: You fellows don't seem able to think *outside the box*. Your minds can't see past the boundaries of life as you know it – birth, then death, then nothing. If you would join me in learning how to think *outside the box* (which of course means in this case outside the coffin) you wouldn't have to worry about his being absolutely dead; you would trust him to be alive even beyond the coffin, beyond the

grave and spare yourselves the convoluted, Rube Goldberg ways you have of creating rather than solving problems in general.

All of which should remind us of perhaps how convolutedly we organize our own lives (consider the tax code or methods installed to guide us by phone to a live human voice somewhere within the maze we call AT&T or how we run our political campaigns). And of course there's the Church that has been pretty adept at making doctrine and practice obscure, even formidable. And why? Because we can't think outside the box, a demonstration of which Jesus gave us throughout his Sermon on the Mount beginning with: *You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . . think big!*

November 13th – 33rd Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 21: 5-19

Speaking of thinking and behaving outside the box, in this Sunday's reading we find the disciples admiring the legalist box within which they were confined, namely the Temple of Jerusalem. Jesus startles them saying: "As for what you see here . . . not one stone will be left upon another; everyone of them will be thrown down."

In other words this box, within which God has been confined to an inner sanctum and men, women and Gentiles have been confined within even tighter boxes – like those babushka dolls wherein dolls are enclosed in diminishing ways within one after another and another, in other words buried - is soon to be literally demolished – by the birth of a new day.

The word temple comes from the Greek verb *temnein* which means to cut or cut out – hence the Latin *templum*, which occupies a sacred space cut off from the darker, profane world outside which is inhabited by diabolical presences. Rather than being, like Ezekiel's metaphorical temple, the source of refreshing water overflowing into the countryside in every direction, getting wider and deeper – temples over time tend to amount to a circling of the wagons against the rest of suspect reality – as might be said of Vatican I.

But the New Testament sees in the destruction of the Temple more than a physical, negative event. It sees it as the bursting forth, as if by a new birth, a resurrection, of the presence of true God to lay claim to all places and all peoples, as might be said of Vatican II. Or to put it in the words of Scripture, we are all to become inhabitants of a living temple – universal in scope; within which *we are no longer strangers and sojourners, but all fellow citizens – Jews and Greeks, male and female, slave and free, just and unjust – built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the capstone . . . in whom we also have been built (each personally and collectively) into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*

Still, the darker days of November can remind us of our faith weakened by the stress of time, of crises personal and global – political campaigns in which there is no quarter, brainless violence that reduces human life to that of an insect, polarizations within even the Church that will not go away. And the only light we can see ahead is that of a holocaust by which humanity may insanely try to consume itself. But not to worry too much for our first reading for today says: *But for you who revere my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays.*

By the way: the Temple and city's actual demolition by the Romans in 70 AD influenced this metaphorical description of the destruction of the Temple. I mean much of the detail of that crisis in Luke is less attributable to Jesus and more to later contemporary Christian witnesses of those events, whose memories are borrowed to intensify Jesus's prophecy.

November 20th – Christ the King Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 23: 35-43

Now we approach the darkest hour, the crucifixion of God, of which - even at midday- it says: *there came a darkness over the whole land.* The death of God, the death of metaphor, of meaning, that lingers over us every autumn,

cold in our hemisphere, intensifying our tendency to despair - as I almost did at times during my younger son's addiction to drugs, and especially when the phone rang one afternoon and a voice said: Mr. Wood, Philip is dead.

But I say *almost* because in today's Gospel, amid all the violence and ridicule of Jesus on the cross, one character provides me – and you – with hope. It's that part of us which won't despair, that despite our mistakes sees in a crown of thorns, thanks to the gift of metaphor, a king. To whom we say, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." To which Jesus answers: "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise; you will begin to see things so much more differently, insightfully, poetically – thus introducing December, the darkest month of the year, with the glimpse of a new day, a fresh beginning, an infant in a manger.

November 27th – 1st Sunday of Advent – Cycle A

Gospel Reading: Matthew 24: 36-44

The theme of the end of a world continues, and let's hope in our times the end of the world of tweets, of the discourse of social media that sometimes sounds like it's coming right out of the mouth of hell – ignorant, insulting, false, absolute - like the abuse Jesus hears from the cross. The flood of devilish discourse must reach its peak for its emptiness to be exposed.

Still one must keep watch lest – at some time during this nighttime of not only the year but of social and political tension – our own language of faith, hope and love, of sacramental insight weaken. For as Denis Donoghue said earlier: *The force of a good metaphor is to give something . . . new life.*

But again not to worry for our first reading for this Sunday, taken from the prophet Isaiah encourages us with promises of transformation, of swords being beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks . . . *nor will they train for war anymore. Come . . . let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

Postscript: I came across a passage written by the English poet Samuel Coleridge that almost echoes my experience on the Plaza which I described earlier in this talk. I leave it for you to contemplate:

Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of EXISTENCE, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself, thoughtfully, IT IS! Heedless in that moment, whether it were a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand? Without reference, in short, to this or that particular mode or form of existence? If thou hast indeed attained to this, thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery, which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder . . . (quoted by Steiner from Coleridge's The Friend II, xi)