

Liturgical Readings for Cycle B - The Gospel of Mark - Part II

How Jesus Tells The Truth

Parables

I read recently where Sergio Romo, the erstwhile relief pitcher of the San Francisco Giants, has signed up to pitch for the Oakland A's. The article says the A's will welcome Sergio's skill with his inside/outside curve ball. Unlike a straight 95 mile an hour fastball, Sergio's curve stymies hitters in crucial moments.

If Emily Dickinson knew anything about baseball back in the mid 1800's she might have been a fan of Sergio's - for she was good at pitching curve balls by way of her poetry. She preferred the word slant for curve. The dictionary's definition for the word slant is to turn or incline something from a straight line; synonyms may be to bend or twist or go diagonal.

For instance listen to this poem:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant -
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man is blind -

In this Emily seems to be in harmony with the Jesus of Mark's Gospel. In chapter four Mark says of Jesus: *With many . . . parables he spoke the word (his truth) to them . . . Without parables he did not . . .*

Why was that? Jesus explains: *. . . so that they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand . . .* So does this mean Jesus would share Emily's concern that the truth he tells may be too much for people to handle, too frightening to experience or behold, like lightning? For he goes on to say he speaks in parables *lest people be converted . . .*

In other words, if they caught the slant or gist of his parables (his brief stories or similes illustrative of a brave new world), they would be challenged to undergo a change of mind and heart and life that would scare them while at the same time enticing them indeed to cross into a more profoundly real way of seeing, hearing, behaving, existing – as expressed in that other Emily Dickinson poem I quoted recently:

He touched me, so I live to know
 That such a day, permitted so . . .
 It was a boundless place to me
 And silenced, as the awful sea
 Puts minor springs to rest.

And now, I'm different from before
 As if I breathed superior air
 Or brushed a Royal Gown . . .

That's the kind of change the Jesus Gospel aims to achieve – while at the same time realizing how shattering that change can be to one's ordinary passage through life – and so his parables hide while even revealing the depths of Being they present.

Mark doesn't have as many such sayings of Jesus as do the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but his chapter four presents a handful that tell it slant. And considering how Emily compares the change that took place in her to her immersion into a boundless, awesome sea, it's interesting that, in Mark, Jesus delivers these parables from a boat to a "whole crowd lined up beside the sea".

The Parable of the Sower

In that pre-industrial age when agriculture was the key economy of civilization, we hear of someone sowing seed extravagantly so that some fell where traffic trod – so that it took no root; some on rocky ground with little soil for taking root; some among weeds too dense for his seed to compete with – yet much of the seed landed on rich soil and grew to reproduce itself one hundred, sixty or at any rate thirty percent of the seed that landed.

Jesus has just thrown us a curve ball; he has presented – slant - how life may be experienced. Any farmer might react to these words with: *why are you telling me this; I go through this process every year, every season. It's like the truth you are telling me is what I do as my occupation in life. So what else is new?* To which Jesus could say and does say in so many words: “Your ears need cleaning – they only pick up on the literal meaning of my words, the everydayness – their descriptive level. But if you dare to open your ears to the resonance of those words from a deeper source – you will find that all agricultural experience can be about you – that as a human being you are of the very soil you walk on (if you recall the story of how Adam and Eve were created out of the dirt of the garden). And the parable confronts you, as such soil, with your receptivity to a truth that will cause you to sprout thirty or sixty or a hundredfold depending on how deeply you are willing to go with your life.” As the discourse says; *the measure you measure, will be measured out to you.*

If everyday commerce paves the surface of your life, if your heart has become too hard for vital though tender words to penetrate, if the thorny issues of the news of the day choke your ability to utter anything but chatter, chaff - your life will lie sterile and as such, more barren as you grow old. In other words, your future may have already arrived as a life wasted. So whoever has ears to hear – listen closely!

And most important of all: whence does a harvest, any harvest, be it thirty or sixty or a hundred fold arise? From below, beneath the surface of things, from the ground up, from somewhere (as twentieth century philosophers have said) so deep as to be nowhere yet always somehow there – whence emerge

*All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,*

From a depth or source Dylan Thomas' imagination comes close to - in his poem:

*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower /
Drives my green age; ... // ... The force that drives the water through the
rocks / Drives my red blood ...*

We all share in an upwelling of Being with a capital B that – as a concept – comes awfully close to the Genesis voice that said and says continually: Let there be light.

The Seed that grows of itself

Then we read the parable about how seeds grow. A man scatters the seed over the field and then goes to sleep and wakes every day while the sown seed sprouts and grows. It sprouts under the soil (I remember as a boy planting a watermelon seed and then a day or two later digging it up – and being impressed as how a little white finger was emerging from inside.) As Jesus goes on: the seed grows without the farmer knowing how – the seed emerges seemingly out of itself – first the blade above the soil into the open air and then the ear of grain and then the ripened grain to be harvested to nourish other beings. Every farmer knows this – but if we tell it slant will he know that this process is one he himself undergoes – somehow planted on this planet, driven by a force from below, breaking into the open, full of potential, possibilities, widening its range and still emerging from within – in terms of knowledge, skills, productions, and then wonder, and questions, and searching, and reaching for the sun as for an ever bright, even blinding light?

A simple seed expressive of the nature and range and mystery of human existence – of the very fact that we can imagine *saying* something like:

*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower /
Drives my green age; ... // ... The force that drives the water through the
rocks / Drives my red blood ...*

*And now, I'm different from before
As if I breathed superior air*

The mustard seed

That spring is on its way in these parts is evident from the yellow fields of mustard flowers along our Sonoma Valley highway. I don't know

much about mustard seeds but Mark makes much of how the tininess of such seeds can grow into shelter for so many birds. Tiny, hardly visible in the hand – and yet so empowered to spice up the lives of people world- wide.

A seed hardly visible, issuing from the soil; once again a metaphor that has us looking *within* for the unobserved presence of the very Source of our being – as with the episode in John’s Gospel at Jacob’s Well – Jesus offering the Samaritan woman water from a well that will never be exhausted – for the water he will give her will become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

It’s a theme that we find elsewhere in the Gospels – as in Luke 17:21 where in response to the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God would come – Jesus says: *The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, “Look, here it is,” or, “There it is.”*¹ *For behold, the kingdom of God is entos humin within you.* (welling up)

And then there are all those suggested experiences of surprise, for instance in Matthew’s parable of the ten virgins: *Keep watch (stay awake) for you know neither the day nor the hour when the bridegroom will come.* Or then there is Luke: *Be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man [the Human Being] will come.*

This doesn’t mean that the force that drives my and your red blood is ever dormant. Our blossoming into truly human beings, this coming of the Son of Man is delayed not by God but by our own forgetfulness of what we are, where we come from, of a world that could be vibrant at any hour if we could but remember – amid the din of a scattershot existence – *the Voice that said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.*

The lamp

And then in chapter 4 we have the metaphor of the lamp. Jesus asks: *do you light a lamp to cover it with a waste basket or hide under a bed?* No. *You place it on a lampstand* to illuminate the world, to bring out, to make visible the wonder of creation – to reveal the wonder of your own creation – your self – to illuminate the gifts you have that have been hidden under a waste basket, shied away from revealing because you

hesitate to believe you can shed light on anything, because you want to keep your life a secret, to pass into anonymity because you don't think you are worth remembering. But that's not why you were born, for as Jesus says: *There is nothing hidden except to be made visible; nothing secret except to come to light.* God has already endowed you with a switch that God intends you to turn on – and surprise yourself and whatever darkness obscures the environment around you. Again, the flame, the pilot light glows from within you – ready to make you transparent.

The account of the transfiguration of Jesus in chapter nine illustrates what this is all about – where it says: . . . *and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.* That's about you as well as Jesus – who emerged as an exemplar of all humanity.

Do you see how much these few parables, these images spoken slant, tell you so much about yourself – and summon you to be the self you were – radically - born to be?

So what went wrong?

What prevents people from detecting and becoming transformed by the slant of Mark's parables? Fear? What generates the fear? Forgetfulness of the solidarity that underlies everything that IS. You are, I am, the trees are, the planets are, the mountains are, the seas are, people who don't resemble you are – we share a fundamental unity that – for some reason – we human beings forget. As did the Pharisee in Luke's parable who says everyday: *I thank you, God, that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income . . .* I've got my good deeds all tabulated. I send in a report once a week to God's Internal Revenue Service.

Our biblical tradition – in so many ways – speaks of a human recoil from the environment, the grace in which we stand – an abuse of our gift of consciousness. Seeing things and people as just so many “things” – distant and suspect objects to be dealt with in ways useful or abusive – we manage such tension by – as Scripture says – building Towers of Babel, protective boundaries, Pentagons. We organize existence into rules, regulations, rituals, ideologies – things external – external

enforcement for want of internal maturity – reducing differences to statistics – which isolate the correct from the incorrect – separate – which by the way is the meaning of the term Pharisee: *separatist*. Puritan.

It need not be that way. A civilization can be organized, spelt out in every detail as much by love as by fear and in many ways it has been made livable by way of care instead of force – but – look around – fear still seems to permeate the fabric of our society. Fear breeds ignorance.

And so – Jesus became an enigma to the institutions of his time.

How Did People React?

The Reaction of the Authorities

-*Why does this man speak that way [slant]? He is blaspheming.*

-*We have never seen anything like this. Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners [why does he behave slant]?*

-*Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees fast but your disciples do not fast?*

-*They watched him closely to see if he would cure [a man] on the Sabbath that they might accuse him, report him.*

-*He is possessed by the devil.*

-*They took counsel with the Herodians (the opposition party) . . . to put him to death.*

They speak – as human beings have tended to do down through the ages – from within a set of limits, wide or narrow – that exclude rather than commune with the world they inhabit.

The Reaction of the Disciples

The disciples are no different. They follow Jesus, they are touched by that depth from which he speaks and behaves but in a confused way – indeed as potential leaders of a take over establishment resembling the old. A new bandwagon to hop on.

-All were amazed and asked . . . What is this? A new teaching with authority. [This man is electable.]

*-He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.
Simon . . . pursued him and . . . said, Everyone is looking for you. [You've got fan base.]*

*-"Your mother and your brothers-and sisters are outside asking for you."
But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and [my] brothers?" And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. [For] whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."*

-He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed . . . Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get out of my way, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

*-Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." He replied, "What do you wish [me] to do for you?"
They answered him, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left."*

-Peter said to him, "Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be" Then Jesus said to him, "Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times."

And they all left him and fled.

The gospel of this man had stretched them too far as it continues to do – defused by even its followers into a discourse that has lost its slant – become too familiar to resonate. Except when, for instance, a voice of a woman from 19th century Amherst writes a poem or an actor of any century recites a line: *To be or not to Be, that is the question . . .*

In the absence of depth or (as Matthew says) if you build on sand, expect: *Collapse!*

At the climax of Mark's Gospel Jesus forecasts the breakdown of institutions (as well as individuals) that react rather than open up to the call *to be* that echoes down through the ages –when he says:

Do you see these great buildings [these institutions of a fearful humanity]? There will not be one stone left upon another that will not be thrown down. Visit the archeological digs worldwide where militant empires once flourished. They all collapse under their own top heavy weight of anxiety . . . when *the sun darkens and moon gives no light and the stars (their celebrities) fade away* - but only as prelude to the epiphany of the truly Human Being, who by the way emerges from generation to generation – even as you within your generation – we don't have to wait for some grand finale.

The Outcome

So the Gospel ends with Christ crucified and buried. But come the first day of a new week (a new era) we find his tomb empty and, standing within it, a *neaniskos* – Greek for a young man, an adolescent – saying to the women: *Don't be surprised! . . . he is not here . . . But go and tell his disciples . . . , He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him . . .*

There is no appearance of the risen Jesus in Mark (except in a later appendix). According to Mark we will find him in Galilee waiting for us. But if you read that message slant – Galilee is always here and now insofar as – St. Paul puts it in his letters - *I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.*

Postscript:

Of course this upsurge of authentic being or of the Spirit of Genesis that breathed forth our universe takes time – maybe your lifetime. As we say: time will tell. As in the case of the blind man in Mark's Gospel, after Jesus applied spittle to his eyes, he asked: Do you see anything? And the

man said: I see people looking like trees walking. So Jesus touched his eyes a second time – and he saw clearly, he began to see slant, his sight was restored and he could see everything distinctly. (And incidentally, you can see how even the miracle episodes in Mark's Gospel have the quality of a parable – they too speak slant.)

So, again: it takes time; time is grace arriving from moment to moment like an extravagant sowing of seed. We live by another clock. As Emily said at the beginning of our talk:

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man is blind.