

## Liturgical Readings: April 2019–Cycle A–Easter Season C

### Introduction: Tradition

One thing about Charles Dickens's writings – it seems to me - is his ability to hit the nail right on the head. If he wants to criticize the industrial Britain of his day, he states its wrongs in graphically correct (and some may say even caricatured) ways. In other words, he writes a story. He can speak of the grimness of London slums, the density of its neighborhoods, the cold-heartedness of its institutions, its courts and orphanages . . . the sinister character of its exploiters, the hardness of its decent citizens.

In his novel *Hard Times* he lays out the way it educates innocent children – in austere adherence to the prevailing ideology of our times, namely a **secular, rational, pragmatic** way of evaluating nature, people, progress, the past . . . **methodically** excluding any kind of sentimentality, images, indeed what people cling to as “traditional”.

[What is it Tevye sings? *Tradition, tradition . . . Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky . . . as a fiddler on the roof.*]

But no! What our Western culture requires in the face of a mute, even inscrutable world – in industry, academics, the administration of our societies - is a hardnosed confrontation of the world as a world of objects to be mastered and made useful for one's material comfort and security – a sure and therefore mathematical vantage point from which **to engineer** the complexities of time and space

In the very beginning of the novel *Hard Times* we meet, along with a Mr. McChoakumchild, a Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, a well to do merchant and owner of an experimental school, addressing a classroom teacher: *Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children . . . Stick to Facts, sir!*

In the course of chapter two Gradgrind calls upon a girl designated as “girl number twenty” and asks her to define a horse. The girl is the daughter of a circus performer and so has been in the company of horses, performing and draught horses, throughout her childhood. However, she is unable to answer, given Gradgrind’s authoritarian manner.

So he calls upon a pale “teacher’s pet” named Bitzer to define a horse and he promptly states: *“Quadruped, Gramivoroous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.”* Thus (and much more) Bitzer. Mr. Gradgrind then addresses Sissy Jupe: *Now girl number twenty . . . You know what a horse is.*

Of course Sissy, being a resident of a travelling circus, knows a lot about them that’s far beyond the range of Bitzer’s quantified, shorthand definition. She may not have studied and analyzed horses biologically but she has *experienced* them.

### **Science / Tradition**

As I have said – our **predominant culture** has been under the sway of scientific analysis and its technological achievements for well nigh four hundred years – since the discoveries of Columbus, Copernicus, Galileo, the methodical doubt of Rene Descartes. And when I say technological achievements I need only refer chronologically to the steamboat, steam engine, electricity, the telegraph, telephone, wireless radio, combustion engine, flight, dynamite, nuclear energy, space travel to say nothing of cocktail blenders and Rice Krispies . . . none of which we would want to give up and none of which our religious traditions and their theology had ever been able to deliver – being so other worldly.

Indeed, given these miracles of modern times how can you not expect a falling away of educated people from the beliefs of their religious heritage, their viewing them to be pure fantasy, the stuff that fairy tales and novels are made of - in the light of the verifiable effects of modern laboratories and their relentless way of unfolding the *further* secrets of nature, even the human brain, the very thing we think with?

Now a *reasonable* rationalist would not want to discredit past human intelligence, the classics, Greek philosophy, the ancient traditions upheld by *The Fiddler on the Roof*. But our age of science and technology does also generate a sophomoric reaction of many, even on campuses, who view the past as an age of ignorance, a dark age, and by way of the media paint it even darker – all the while forgetting how dark our own modern age has been, given its world wars and money madness. And consequently, in a kind of knee jerk reaction, traditional institutions have responded *defensively*, upholding the past as something sacred, pastoral, final, an age of faith versus our age of reason, its cathedrals a refuge from a world gone godless.

But there is more than one way to skin a cat. People of a religious heritage need not excommunicate the changing times or modern know-how in which we've been living. **Tradition need not be seen as reactionary, "conservative"** as strict rationalists or agnostics or even some churchmen might define it. Tradition need not be seen as something **fixed in time** – even as some people revere the 13<sup>th</sup> century as the greatest of centuries or the Bible as a closed book to be taken at face value, beyond which all other books are profane. Nor is tradition fixated into a specific liturgical practice – like a Latin Mass.

### **Tradition is Alive**

The dominant thing in modern times is method. **But insightful twentieth century scholars** find that method, methodical analysis actually **leaves much of nature behind** in its quest for an abstract, technical, even mathematical certitude – as in Bitzer's definition of a horse. Insightful writers today hold that **the truth of things exceeds the data of our experiments**. The data of our experiments – we might say – rise to a position of "control" *above* the everyday world in which we live – and in so doing lose touch (in the sensual sense of the word).

So may we not argue that **Experiment cannot simply overrule Experience?** I mean, **what is Tradition** but the sum and substance, the truth of human *Experience*, which is best and often beautifully expressed in narrative forms, in poetry, epics, lyric, plays, works of the imagination, including biblical myth and parable, liturgical drama like the Exodus, Gospels and passionate letters such as St. Paul writes?

Modern rationalism and utilitarianism view all such writing as **pre-judgmental**, unfounded upon facts, illusory, primitive, naïve, the very seedbed of prejudice. But as someone has said: *that's* rationalism's *prejudice* – that such expressions of human **experience** are prejudiced!

We often forget that Tradition, our heritage of human experience, is not buried in some mausoleum, but is *alive* – **along with all great literature and art and music as well**. Even as Buffy Sainte-Marie has sung:

*God is alive; Magic is afoot . . .*

*Though mountains danced before them  
they said that God was dead  
Though his shrouds were hoisted  
the naked God did live*

*This I mean to whisper to my mind  
This I mean to laugh with in my mind  
This I mean my mind to serve 'til  
service is but Magic  
moving through the world  
and mind itself is Magic  
coursing through the flesh  
and flesh itself is Magic  
dancing on a clock  
and time itself the magic length of God.*

## **Horizons**

Tradition is not defunct, *passé*. Religion and Philosophy departments on campuses can be among the liveliest places in which to be enrolled. Many scholars see Tradition not as static but **as a series of horizons, one after the other, within which human experience gets expressed and extended and amplified** in writing or song as in Joshua's leveling of the walls of Jericho by the mere sound of music or King Lear, dying bereft of his three daughters, yet the Duke of Albany suggests that the play is not over, as he speaks his closing line: *The weight of this sad time*

*we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.* Does that not project us into a better future even as the curtain closes?

Whatever the storyteller of Genesis or the Exodus or the prophet Isaiah or Virgil or Ben Jonson or Milton or Jane Austen may have **meant to say** – what they have said remains open to further insights, further experiences than they themselves expressed. I often find that something I myself said forty years ago comes back to me more meaningful than when I said it. Time carries the ball, relays so many wider and deeper dimensions of the wisdom handed on to us. Which means **Tradition is present and future oriented, not just a closet of antiquities** or of precious china (like my grandmother’s tea sets) - not meant to be touched.

### **Where does it lead us? To Les Miserables**

Scholars I read say our sacramental, literary heritage conveys us into a **new** world, across a new horizon. Sooner or later the everyday world within our current horizon gets so familiar as to become opaque, closed to further traffic. And then we read a story **that opens things up again**, reveals what scholars call “the thing of the text” or the “world” as revealed by the text. As in *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo.

The key character is of course Jean Valjean, unjustly imprisoned as a young man but supported later by kindnesses to the point where he becomes a mayor under an assumed name and prospers. Except for a police officer named Javert who persists in tracking Valjean as a felon. Then Valjean learns another man has been arrested and will be on trial “as” Jean Valjean. From one point of view Jean Valjean is relieved. This will suspend Javert’s search. But Valjean vacillates. Can he let another man suffer a fate intended for himself?

There is the scene where he goes to the courthouse as the trial is pursued, is let into the judge’s chamber (he being a civil servant), looks at the door to the courtroom, the brass knob . . . backs off, retreats down a corridor, then pauses, returns, finds himself standing again by that door, that brass knob. *He seized the handle with a convulsive movement and the door opened. He was in the courtroom.* Then in the mildest of

voices he says, "*Gentlemen . . . you must acquit the accused . . . I am the man you are looking for. I am Jean Valjean.*"

**But was he Jean Valjean** or was he *Jean Valjean*, an entirely new being? Had he not crossed a horizon, a fresh one recurrent of similar horizons crossed down through time – over which one steps into a world that's true, real, beautiful – honest, caring. Tradition renewed. That moment could be called "the thing or world of the text" – the whole point of the drama, ***structured in such a way that you are there to share in the same transition and become what and who you truly are.*** Later, when Valjean offers the same opportunity to Javert, Javert can't cross over – into a world that defies all his hard and fast "principle" of quid pro quo. Border closed. Suicide.

### **The Secret Drawer**

Or take Kenneth Grahame's story of that title in his volume titled *The Golden Age*. A boy is introduced by his uncle to an attic where odds and ends were stored. The uncle points out an old writing desk and says, "*There's a secret drawer in there somewhere.*" The uncle leaves the room; the boy remains *vibrating to those magic syllables – a secret drawer*. He imagines some kind of treasure hidden there: ingots, Spanish dollars – plus all the old debts he might settle with such a find. Later he returns to the room and begins to finger the desk, hoping to touch some key that will open the drawer. No use. Still, he put his hand *once more to the obdurate wood, when with a small sigh, almost a sob of relief, the secret drawer sprang open*. Excitedly the boy carried the drawer to a window and what did he find but *two tarnished gilt buttons, a crayoned picture, some foreign copper coins, a list of birds' eggs and where they were found, and one ferret's muzzle. Nothing of any worth at all.*

And yet . . . *a warmth crept back into his heart, for he knew them to be the hoard of some long forgotten boy like himself . . . treasures he had cherished and then – what?* And he thinks: . . . *across the void stretch of years I seemed to touch hands a moment with my little comrade of seasons – how many seasons? – long since dead.* A moment within Kenneth Grahame's contribution of our literary tradition opened up to the boy and ***moreover can open us up as well – to a sensitivity, a humanity that is always the "thing", the "world", the ever old and***

*ever new “world” that Experience, as a counterpart to Experiment, holds in waiting for us - - Revelations, Unveilings. [Indeed, you could say Experiment (Science) without Experience (without Tradition) can lose all sense of morality and we may be well on our way in our time to that consequence.]*

### **One more: A Room with a View**

Charlotte Bartlett, elderly chaperone to Lucy Honeychurch, complains, in E.M. Forster’s novel *A Room with a View*, about the room assigned to them in a British run hotel in Florence, Italy. *The signora promised us south rooms with a view . . . instead of which here we are in north rooms, looking into a courtyard.* It was Lucy’s first trip to Italy, promising to be a pleasant change from foggy old England. Yet here they were looking out upon a backyard instead of the panorama of Florence’s domes and towers and ancient bridges.

Right away a dining room guest intervened. *I have a view . . . This is my son . . . He has a view, too. . . you can have our rooms. . . We’ll change.* Miss Bartlett wouldn’t hear of it: *Thank you very much indeed; that is out of the question.* The other guest said, *Why?* only to deepen Miss Bartlett’s embarrassment. By the way, this British hotel was so British in its ambience that they might as well have stayed in England in the first place. [Talk about horizons.]

Bartlett and Lucy finally do accept the offer – but immediately Miss Bartlett investigates the room’s interior, making sure all shutters and doors had locks. However, Lucy (whose name means light), yielding to her pent up need to be free of Britain and propriety and security, flings the windows of her room wide open, leans out into the sunshine and takes in the beautiful hills, marble churches, the river, the crowded trams and somersaulting children, the band and comic opera soldiers – life, people in all their wonder and worth . . . the “world” of the text, the environment beyond the horizons she had known, which your immersion in the text – in a sacramental way -opens up to you.

So let’s pass from this introduction to the liturgical readings of April.

## April 7<sup>th</sup> – 5th Sunday of Lent Cycle A

*Gospel Reading: John 11:1-45*

Before stepping into the Gospel for today just look at the readings that precede it. We start off with Ezekiel 37, his vision of dry bones scattered in a desert. We hear God saying: *O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them and bring you back to the land of Israel (the promised land). . . I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you . . . ; thus you shall know that I am the Lord.* And then we recite Psalm 130 wherein we ourselves cry out from within the closed horizon we inhabit: *Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice . . . If you, O Lord, mark iniquities (if you tolerate our static sense of being), who can stand? . . . More than sentinels wait for the dawn, let Israel (me) watch for the Lord . . . For . . . with him is plenteous redemption.*

Then on to John's narrative about the raising of Lazarus – as a kind of stage upon which you are to enter from the wings as Lazarus. You have been dead four days – a long time inert as far as really Being is concerned, entombed behind what feels like an immovable rock, confined within your everyday horizon. You've grown stale – to say the least. People who know you, like Martha and Mary, mourn your demise – so premature, four days adding up it seems to forty years? – static, each day the same, even diminishing.

Jesus himself grieves over your reluctance to live in the fullest sense of life, expansively, curiously, eagerly – oriented toward horizons to come and not just clinging to some past resentment. Martha welcomes the entry of Jesus into the scene – hopes he hasn't been too late: *Lord, if you had been here Geoff would not have died.* Jesus tells her you will rise – and she agrees as if to say, *Well I hope so and who knows maybe by the end of time he may wake up, leave obsessions behind – but that's a long way off.*

Mary seems actually to complain that Jesus has come too late. Jesus is not insensitive. In fact he mourns over your dormant rather than vital existence; he feels for you personally in all your uniqueness, your worth, your environment's need of you – he has that feeling you get in your solar plexus over certain people in your life. He even weeps over you, as I wept over my child Philip. *Where have you laid him?* he asks. *Take away the stone! Open up that cave, the womb, the tomb in which he hides.* Martha warns they may meet something other than the sweet smell of success. Jesus has to



remind her – and all believers who shelter doubts about their heritage – *Did I not tell you, Sunday after Sunday, that if you believe you will see the glory of God – the radiance of your brother raised upon a candlestick for all to see?*

And then! *Lazarus [Geoff] come out!* And you emerge like the mummy you have been and Jesus tells them to untie you and let you free. Free to advance to the banquet of bread and wine, your assimilation of the very Christ who himself rose from the dead into horizons yet to come – forever. See how tradition works? How it's alive? Livable?

Sometimes it's good to experience such a Gospel passage in the light of Jean Valjean's grasping the brass handle that led him into being another Christ or in the context of that boy whose touch finally sprang open a secret drawer that was in a way himself.

#### **April 14<sup>th</sup> – Palm Sunday of Lent Cycle C**

*Gospel Reading: Luke 22: 14 – 23: 56*

Even today the Passion narrative of the Gospels is dramatized before an audience. That recalls the fact that the very telling of the Passion narrative in the early Church was more a display than a reading. It was meant to be experienced – not watched. Experience of what? Of your own life and destiny. It was a vehicle structured (among other reasons) to unveil the deeper meaning of your own life as much as that of Jesus. What are the Stations of the Cross but a ritual for you to advance from condemnation (your own inherited self disdain), carrying the weight of many a cross or crisis, falling repeatedly, your vulnerability exposed – stripped of your disguises – buried by so much of your own culture, indeed by your own hand?

You begin baptized, anointed, another Christ only to find people arguing over who is superior to whom (around many a dinner table?). You pride yourself that you are not like the rest of people – you are a Simon whose loyalty is unquestionable, who is ready to give his all for the cause. Except that the mere suggestion that you are associated with Christ makes you recede into the crowd – invisible, safe. The forces of your culture will try to arrest your Christic self – with clubs if necessary. You meet violence in so many ways – issuing daily from the news, the hate that makes the headlines and links you to one party or another. You are always on trial – in your head – never measuring up to the Top

Dog that occupies your skull, that hates your body, your looks, your ignorance . . . You may assert your anointed status derived from the very Source of all Being – but you will be ridiculed, accused of blasphemy – you are a Galilean and that’s that. The way you talk betrays you. If called up before the Pilates and Herods of this world they won’t even think you’re worth judging – although to save their own skins they will pass sentence on you – to make you go away – for in what way are you unique?

But all the while your narrative is heading toward the “thing”, your “destiny” as inscribed in the text. A new “world” begins to emerge when you say or rather cry out: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* And you hear Jesus say – who has shares your agony – *Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.* And the veil of the temple is torn from top to bottom [both God and you are released from confinement] and a centurion says *This man was innocent beyond doubt* [from God’s point of view you are forever graced, his anointed still and always].

Once more a text is *experienced* – not just watched or read. Once more a brass handle has been turned, a door opened. Once more a secret drawer springs open. Once more, shutters are thrown open. Once more children begin to somersault upon a grand piazza.

### **April 21<sup>st</sup> – Easter Sunday - Cycle C**

*Gospel Reading: John 20: 1-9*

It’s the first day of the week – actually the first day of a life released from so long a burial. Mary Magdalene comes early to your burial site. She is surprised to see the huge stone behind which you lived your life – moved away. Something is wrong here! Can’t people leave you alone, let you rest in peace? She runs to get Simon Peter (who was last seen leaving you to your plight) – who now reappears on stage – out of the shadows. *They have taken you – me – from my final resting place.* Peter and a younger disciple come running . . . the younger looks into your tomb – sees the clothes, the burial clothes, the trappings of your former self nicely set aside – including the mask you used to wear – the cloth that covered your head, hiding your face, limiting your vision. All rolled up and set aside, no longer relevant. What has happened to you – why aren’t you dead?

It's because you have since Easter Sunday passed on into the thing, the "world" of the text – out of the text into life everlasting.

**April 28<sup>th</sup> – Second Sunday of Easter - Cycle C**

*Gospel Reading: John 20: 19-31*

Fear makes people lock doors. Fear, low self esteem, makes people wear signs saying, Closed for business or Don't tread on me. But today you have acquired with Christ a composure, an aplomb, a tranquility that even closed doors can't resist – maybe even closed hearts. You create an ambience of peace. You seem proud of the wounds that verify your transition from pain to rebirth; you want to show them off – "what I've been through – and see, I'm here at last." Your very breath – expressed in words – revives others. "Forgive sins," you say. "Loosen up even as I was released from all the resentments that tied me up in knots." There is a part of you named Thomas – a kind of shadow of one's tomb – that can't believe the "thing" that has happened to you, the "world" that you and the boy who touched the right spot to open a secret drawer have experienced – and so you ask Thomas to put his finger into your healed wounds – and a secret drawer somehow opens for him. "My Lord and my God!" he utters – not so much as a confession of faith as an *exclamation* - "My Lord! My God! – is it really you!"

**Postscript:**

The Poets light but Lamps -  
 Themselves – go out –  
 The Wicks they stimulate  
 If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns –  
 Each Age a Lens  
 Disseminating their  
 Circumference –

*Emily Dickinson*