

Liturgy Readings for August 2019 – Cycle C

Introduction: *Everything that rises must converge*

I once wrote about an experience I had somewhere within the past twenty to twenty-five years. In a moment of idleness my memory had again called up a scene in which a young man is driving to work on a country road. In front of him is a 1930's type coupe driven by a young woman wearing one of those cloche or bell shaped hats fashionable at the time. She is looking straight ahead and therefore fails to see a large truck positioned at the top of a hill on a road that intersects with the road she is on. The young man does see the truck and gasps as its brakes go loose and it gradually rolls down the hill. The young man panics, wants to warn the driver in front of him . . . but to no avail. The truck picks up speed and smashes into the young woman's car, killing her. The young man was helpless to intervene.

Now I had been having that remembrance since my early years and wondered why; always the same incident, isolated from any fuller remembrance of the circumstances in which I first beheld it. Or was it a morbid fantasy of my own imagination? And then decades later I am idling my time watching the Turner's Classic Movies channel. A short 1930's film is showing – dealing with mental telepathy. A young man, having overslept, is preparing to go to work. He pays passing notice of his mother's photo on his dresser and then descends to his roadster and pauses. He thinks he hears his mother's voice, saying, "John! John!" - but she's in faraway Chicago. He dismisses the thought and goes to start his car and realizes he has left his key by his mother's picture on the dresser. Irritated, he goes back for it and then sets off to work. (Ho-hum!)

Now he's driving through a residential area and out onto a narrow road. (I sat up on the couch!) Ahead of him was a gray coupe driven by a woman in a bell shaped hat. ("This is it!" I shouted, as I leaped to my feet.) At the top of a hill a truck's brakes give way and down it comes. The young man looks helpless. The truck smashes the coupe. A crowd gathers around the woman lying dead upon the road. The young man realizes he was spared the same fate by the delay initiated by what he thought was his mother's voice. Telepathy! At a tender age – maybe four – my mother had probably taken me to a matinee I had completely forgotten.

But what moved me more than my recovery of the film's story and theme was how - after almost seventy years - *all the pieces of a puzzle had come together for me* around the one piece I had retained. In some small way, I felt fulfilled.

Proust

It was like I shared in the similar experience Marcel Proust describes in his opening volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. It's when his character Marcel as a

somewhat jaded young man came home and his mother offered him some tea – which he did not ordinarily take – and he writes:

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray [the village of his Aunt Leonie where the family vacationed in Normandy] . . . had any existence for me, when one day in winter, as I came home, my mother . . . offered me some tea, . . . I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind . . . I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea . . . No sooner had the warm liquid . . . touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body . . . And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me . . . its brevity illusory. . . . I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic . . . What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; . . . I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state . . .

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray . . . when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flower tea. . . . But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality . . . the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the . . . almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

And once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers . . . immediately the old grey house upon the street . . . rose up like the scenery of a theatre . . . and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. 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 on 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.

Convergence

What's going on here? It seems to say that we somehow have a fragmentary sense of who and what and where we are . . . like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Some people are content to live day by day, piece by piece – no time to understand things; as Jesus himself said: *sufficient for the day is the evil thereof* – or as the Roman poet Horace said it: *avoid asking what the future will bring*. But what seems to make us

human is this need to see the whole picture. Science tries to do it piece by piece, cause by effect by cause by effect – as if constructing the whole edifice of reality in a Tower of Babel way, brick by brick, interminably. Philosophers and religious thinkers and great writers follow inspirations of a destiny, a summation of nature and history that makes sense of everything – Plato’s world of Ideas, Hegel’s quest for Absolute Awareness, the German poet Hölderlin’s vision of a Homecoming longed for by beings lost in time and space.

We are the only creatures we know that anticipate a future derived from a distant past - - a destination that wraps things up – or should I say opens things up? And which besides issuing from the past and reaching into the future can be experienced even now, from moment to moment – if we could only wake up.

Flannery O’Connor

In her short story *Everything That Rises Must Converge* this Georgia Catholic writer, who died in 1964 at age 39, works over the fragmentary nature of society in the 1950’s era of Civil Rights. The central characters are a recently graduated college student named Julian and his mother. Julian is what you would call a “smart ass” – claiming to be open minded, up-to-date, condescending to his mother and her conservative, inbred background.

He lives with her and takes her on Wednesday nights to a downtown Y for reducing classes. [Reducing classes? Out of a culture overweight with unconscious prejudices?] He hates going public with her; she wears a hideous hat, purple velvet flap down the side, the rest cushiony and green. *Everything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him.*

They go to the Y by bus – at the very time that bus seating was opening up to African-American citizens. She says, *With the world in the mess it’s in, it’s a wonder we can enjoy anything. I tell you, the bottom rail is on top . . . Most of them in it are not our kind of people, but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am.* To which her son replies: *They don’t give a damn for your graciousness . . . You haven’t the foggiest idea . . . who you are.*

For her the world is in fragments – her culture at odds with the alternative African-American culture within which her own exists. Pieces that don’t fit together, not apparently parts of the same puzzle, the same cohesive picture! She remembers proudly Grandpa’s old, decayed mansion and she recalls her old nurse Caroline. *There was no better person in the world. I’ve always had a great respect for my colored friends . . . I’d do anything in the world for them and they’d . . .* At this point Julian says, *Will you for God’s sake get off that subject?* Obviously she is fond of the “colored” people of her past but as “them”, not “us” – as other than she, as a piece that’s been forced to fit within the puzzle of her inherited world.

They board a bus. He takes off his tie. She stiffened: *Why must you deliberately embarrass me?* He replies, *If you’ll never learn where you are, you can at least learn where I am.* He too is segregated – different from her, given his liberal

education. Mother and son, yet they have become painfully distant from each other. He puts the tie back on. *Restored to my class*, he muttered.

The now integrated bus (though occupied by only white passengers) arrives. They board. Julian picks up a newspaper to hide behind. The mother reveals to a woman across the aisle: *He wants to write but he's selling typewriters until he gets started.* The other woman says, *Well, that's nice. Selling typewriters is close to writing. He can go right from one to the other.*

The bus stops to take on a large African-American man, well dressed and carrying a brief case. He immediately unfolded a newspaper behind which he – like Julian – can avoid contact with the other passengers – probably to ward off attempts to patronize him by chatting about politics or anything that would distinguish them both from the “uncouth” others on the bus – a liberal tendency. Julian's mother prods him in the ribs and says, *Now you see why I won't ride on these buses by myself.*

Next a large African-American woman boards with her four year old boy. Julian hopes she will sit down next to him - a giant of a woman - so he can show his tolerance. Oddly enough she wears the same kind of hat as Julian's mother – purple and green. The little boy climbs into the wide seat with Julian's mother. It was like the two sons were swapped – he next to the boy's mother and the boy next to his. [Things synthesizing?] The boy's mother tells him to sit with her – in an angry tone. *Isn't he cute*, says Julian's mother. *I think he likes me*, she says. The other woman *stood up and yanked the boy off the seat as if she were snatching him from contagion.*

And so it goes – mutual distrust veiled on Julian's mother's part by an aggravating condescension – that only intensifies the other woman's anger. A world divided, cultures segregated.

Julian's mother wants to give the little boy a nickel. When both parties get off the bus she searches her handbag and comes up with a shiny penny – to give the boy. Julian hisses *No! No!* The huge woman turned . . . *her shoulders lifted and her face frozen with frustrated rage.* She explodes, strikes Julian's mother. *He don't take nobody's pennies* she shouts and drags the boy away. Julian's mother winds up sitting on the sidewalk. Julian says, *Now get up.* But she soon exhibits all the signs of having had a stroke. *I hope this teaches you a lesson*, says Julian. She didn't seem to recognize him. *Aren't you going to the Y?* he asks. She mutters only the word *Home.*

He lectures her: *Don't think that was just an uppity black woman. That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure, it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn . . .* And he adds: *You needn't act as if the world had come to an end because it hasn't. From now on you've got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change. Buck up, it won't kill you.*

Of course this is a self-righteous, recent college graduate who claims to understand things better than others, yet isolated himself as much as the two women of different races are isolated. He is a fragmented being himself, just another piece of an unfinished puzzle, an unfinished symphony? . . . until he realizes his mother has had a stroke and *is* dying. When his mother in her condition says, *Tell Caroline* [the colored nurse of her childhood] *to come and get me*, he feels heartbreak. *Mamma, Mamma!* he cries. Something's dissolving. (For a moment it's like me standing up as that short film unfolds in its entirety shouting: This is it!) This is the world of the text! Rebirth!

He senses a tide of darkness sweeping her from him [maybe the powers of darkness that overcome every insular society]. He shouts *Help, help!* toward a cluster of lights in the distance. Indeed, but the tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her – *postponing from moment to moment his entry into a world of guilt and sorrow*. That's the closing line of the story. He's at a limit situation, a border crossing.

Nor would he escape the grip of those powers of darkness until he recognized the guilt of this whole world of dis-integrated, polarized parts that keeps us running in place, getting nowhere . . . and the immense sorrow it produces. Which is the condition required – as St. Paul says in his Letter to the Romans – for that ultimate, climactic world of universal grace to appear as our true, collective destiny. Which is what the Church should be about.

The Omega Point

Flannery O'Connor called her story *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. The title is taken from an essay by the Jesuit scientist (paleontology) and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in which he says: *Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge*. Another philosopher might say the same thing in terms of depth – reach into the depths of Being and you will begin to Be in the deepest sense of the word.

The Omega Point (omega being the final letter of the Greek alphabet) is where the best of human aspirations combine (as in the Sermon on the Mount) to prevail over the divisiveness of so many eons of immature consciousness, when we get to see the whole (unfolding, not static) picture, the whole vital meaning of existence, the solidarity that makes us kinfolk of everything and everyone that was and is and will be, that raises us from a fate of mere death – to a sense of being at home, the world no longer an alien place but a holy (holistic) one – ready to be mutually enjoyed.

The Readings

August 4th – 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

First Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2; 21-23

The Greek title of this book means “collector.” It’s a collection of reflections expressing a skepticism that unsettled even the compilers of the Bible, although they finally decided to include it. It dates from around 150 BC – when the culture of Alexander the Great had already permeated the Middle East. You can sense the depression of the writer in words like *Here is one who has labored with wisdom and knowledge and skill, and yet to another who has not labored over it, he must leave his property. Vanity of vanities! . . . All things are vanity – a mere puff of air, then gone. Such is the experience of a humanity that fails to see the whole picture: What’s it all about, Alfie? / Is it just for the moment we live? / What’s it all about, Alfie? / Are we meant to take more than we give / or are we meant to be kind*

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11

The author of this epistle encourages us – insofar as we are already raised by baptism from the depths of ignorance – *to think of what is above . . . leave behind the life style of aimlessness: greed, lying, a mere survival existence, from pillar to post, since you have put on a new self, which is being renewed . . . in the image of the Creator . . . Look to a world wherein all things come together beyond partisan conflict, where there is not Greek and Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free – but Christ is all and in all.*

Gospel Reading: Luke 12:13-21

Jesus, the Omega Point of our tradition, the complete human being in a world made complete through love, finds himself in our everyday world of day to day survival – confronted by a citizen who wants Jesus to advocate for him – presumably in court – regarding a conflict of who gets what out of an inheritance. Constant juridical rivalry! The world we know so well from the daily news. Jesus refuses to be engaged. Base your salvation on acquisition of as much as you can accumulate, insure yourself to the hilt, build walls, maintain deposits in as many banks as possible . . . and what happens anyway? *You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you, and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?*

At my age the accumulated “things” – even the most personal that I cling to out of sentiment – are all expendable – a drag that I’m just as glad to have someone get rid of – so that by way of thinking, faith, reading hard stuff I may store up for myself “treasure in heaven” – i.e. an ever advancing comprehension of our destiny beyond an otherwise random existence.

August 11th – 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Second Reading: Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19

Here we have a summary of the whole history of Israel as one of faith. *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place . . . not knowing where he was to go . . . By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents (ever ready to pull up stakes, to advance) for he was looking forward to that city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God.* As Judeo-Christians we live by that same faith, trust – such as revived in me when a television show recovered for me a long lost memory, no longer lost but real after all; when Marcel recovered in the mere taste of a petite madeleine the whole of his childhood – when an arrogant Julian breaks out of his own narrow-mindedness and experiences a heartfelt change that makes him cry out like a newborn child: *Mamma, Mamma.* Everything that rises must converge.

Gospel Reading: Luke 12:32-48

We read this Gospel as though it were about the arrival of the last judgment, the end of the world. But it is addressed to us everyday: *Gird you loins and light you lamps and be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival* (today, next week, a month from now or even out of a past arrival that we have forgotten which returns even as that film returned and in some small way put me together again or as that cup of tea revived for Marcel the whole of a forgotten Combray. *Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them.* “Do this in remembrance of me.”

August 18th – 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

First Reading: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

Jeremiah delivered what we call jeremiads, synonymous with terms like diatribe, harangues, rants, or tirade. He would have been great on talk radio. At a time when the leadership of Judah was entangled in a diplomacy of fear – in the face of powerful Middle Eastern empires – he relentlessly advocated loyalty to Judah's unique traditions. He was like Churchill in 1930's Britain, warning fainthearted politicians not to cozy up to Fascist dictators. As a result Judah's leaders had him put down a deep cistern. Until a black royal servant pleaded for and gained Jeremiah's release – a man from Cush (Ethiopia?) – and raised him out of the mud. Interesting that a man not of Judah's race, an outsider free of insider introversion, had a broad enough sense of reality - to salvage for Judah and for us – one of the four greatest prophets of the Hebrew Bible! A man from Cush (Ethiopia)! Diversity! A sign of hope in our day?

Gospel Reading: Luke 12: 49-53

While the Gospel and the whole of our tradition (even its secular expressions like *We hold these truths to be self-evident*) look to a convergence that takes us beyond the divisions that fracture us - the very thought of such a holistic humanity, a cosmic harmony can *aggravate* people - as at political rallies. There is something about us that does not want to grow, become whole in some profound way - as evident in the Flannery O'Connor story. People may bemoan strife but they also *enjoy* it, can be rallied into almost fanatic behaviors. And so the Gospel of Christ - the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount - can generate resistance, even hate. Diversity bothers us.

Jesus in today's Gospel, being aware of this - that advocating love, even justice can split households, nations, even creeds - says in effect: *So be it!* For such divisiveness in itself will sooner or later become so aggravating as to orient people to a better way of being - toward an Omega Point. Inflamed himself he declares: *I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!* But we should read this metaphorically, in the sense that the Ink Spots sang those lyrics: *I don't want to set the world on fire, I just want to start a flame in your heart.*

August 25th - 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle C

First Reading: Isaiah 66: 18-21

What we have here is a great poem of convergence: the gathering of nations of every language, fugitives arriving in far away regions on horses and in chariots, in carts, covered wagons, the back of trucks, in steerage (as did my ancestors), upon camels - to Jerusalem (the Jerusalem of William Blake who wrote of England in the sense of: *I will not cease from mental fight / Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand / 'Til we have built Jerusalem / in England's green and pleasant land.*

Gospel Reading: Luke 13: 22-30

And yet people live their whole lives stuck in a "past" (like Julian's mother) that yields in no way to the relentless flow of time - time as grace, recovery, fulfillments great and small. Why? Because the gateway to convergence is hard to sort out amid the din of distractions, opinions, demagogues who leave us *wailing and grinding our teeth.* And yet the vision is proclaimed; *people will come from the east and the west, north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God.* That's poetry - and therefore: true.

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The Skylight
by
Seamus Heaney

You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
Its claustrophobic, . . .
Effect, I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.
Under there, it was all hutch and hatch, . . .

But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.