

Liturgical Readings for January 2019

Introduction: *Metamorphosis vs. Reification*

Let's start off by directly addressing the first reading for this feast of Epiphany taken from the Book of Isaiah: 60:1-6. As we listen to this reading we can imagine the holy city of Jerusalem way back around 550 BC (a shadow of its former self since the glory days of David and Solomon and the building of its proud Temple some 400 years earlier) – its Temple recently reduced to a pile of rubble, so also its city walls and dwellings, commerce gone, the elite of its citizenry gone – carried off into Babylonian exile. And yet, despite all this recent history, a poet out of the school of the prophet Isaiah, raising hopes of Jerusalem's recovery, cries out:

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the peoples;
but upon you the LORD shines,
and over you appears his glory.
Nations shall walk by your light,
and kings by your shining radiance.
Raise your eyes and look about;
they all gather and come to you:
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters in the arms of their nurses.

Then you shall be radiant at what you see,
your heart shall throb and overflow,
for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you,
the wealth of nations shall be brought to you.
Caravans of camels shall fill you,
dromedaries from Midian and Ephah;
all from Sheba shall come
bearing gold and frankincense,
and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.

To what does this poem refer?

Obviously the *object* of this hopeful forecast is the fallen Jerusalem of old, that Jerusalem of 550 BC – to *Rise up in splendor* as of old.

Or, prophetically, Christians might see the poem's object as the Jerusalem of around 30 AD, welcoming the triumphal entry of Christ into the city on the first Palm Sunday – a glorious event, worthy of such words as *Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come.*

Or for that matter Christians might metaphorically apply the prophecy to the Church as an additional object of the poem – the universal and future Jerusalem of Jews and Gentiles, radiant with the presence of God.

But may there not be something *short sighted with these conclusions?* May we not fall short of the full and intimate depth of this poem, this prophecy? Why stop with the city of Jerusalem as the poet's intended target for these words – be it the Jerusalem of 550 BC or 30 AD or even the universal Church as the New Jerusalem? Why do we so often stand or sit so passively before these readings as an audience, rows of faces in a Sunday congregation? Why settle for such verses being about objects so far away, abstract or related to things of long ago or far into the future – the distance between us being not just the distance between ourselves and the lectern from which the poem is read - but ranging over centuries of distance in time – so remote from you and me in our passivity?

Reification

But then we modern people habitually look at everything as an object – mute and impersonal opposite us - don't we? We tend to *reify* everything – the word *reify* derived from the Latin *res* meaning *thing* and *facere* meaning *to make*. In other words we normally refer to trees, mountains, gazelles, stars, those lovely fish who meander among coral reefs, houses, microbes . . . as *things* – as even the chairs, tables, windows in this room. We *thingify*, reify, objectify whatever we encounter, reduce it to that common denominator, even people as when we sum them up as statistics.

The Big Stare

Or to expand upon this tendency: one misleading image imposed on us as Catholics out of our past was of heaven as a place of *beatific vision* – which seminarians I knew translated into The Big Stare; that we would be happily transfixed in the hereafter by the very sight of God – *as an object, an awesome thing* to look at – as with the consecrated host raised in a monstrance at the ritual of Benediction or elevated at the high point of the Mass – to be viewed from an adoring distance – *as an object*. Or for that matter the Pope on his balcony.

Or remember the design of the Temple of Jerusalem: its courts of separation, Gentiles from women, women from men, men from priests, priests from God's inner sanctum . . . solidarity fractured by the kind of distances that result from our habit of objectifying, reifying, classifying everything, even God as the most transcendent *thing* of all.

Metamorphosis

And yet it was not the intention of our New Testament nor of the Old Testament to leave us so out of touch with God and each other and nature, so much unexplored space and depth in between that is nevertheless there to be explored. We are not a collection of things among other things made adaptable to easy marketing, statistical manipulation.

I mean, listen to the central prayer of the Eucharist regarding the bread and wine:

*We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit, **that they may become the body and blood of your Son**, our Lord Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate this eucharist.*

On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks and praise. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said:

Take this, all of you, and eat it:

this is my body which will be given up for you.

When supper was ended, he took the cup. Again he gave you thanks and praise, gave the cup to his disciples, and said:

Take this, all of you, and drink from it:

this is the cup of my blood, [my life, my self] the blood of the new and

everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me. [Re-member me.]

*Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, **may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ.** Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever.
AMEN*

The Eucharist is not just a ritual; it is a *process*, a *medicinal process*, by which we are *processed* into our assimilation by Christ as much as he is assimilated by us.

Or listen to so much of New Testament discourse itself where it says:

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ (adopt his personality)

For all of you who were baptized into Christ-have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

As proof that you are children God sent the spirit [the breath] of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"- So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. [You can relate to God in diminutives.]

I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me . . .

Therefore, remember that at one time you, . . . were . . . without Christ, alienated . . . But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. -For he is our peace, he who . . . broke down the dividing wall . . .

*I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you- In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live.- On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and **I in you.***

Such readings emphasize your full immersion in Christ and Christ in you – sacramentally initiated and eucharistically nurtured. How many Eucharists do we attend without even thinking about that? The distances are gone, fusion has taken place and you can sense that spirit, that breath, that presence once you are **conscious** of how transforming a gift this presence is.

Another way of fusion

But then there is this other way of erasing distance, de-reifying God and Christ and the Spirit - and every image to be found in Scripture - bringing them closer to you or as e.e.cummings once put it: *as / close as i'm to you / yes closer.*

Take that first reading from Isaiah 60 assigned for today – which we read in reference to Jerusalem of old. Instead of hearing it as addressed to ancient Jerusalem, erase the distance, hear it as addressed to YOU – it's about YOU:

Rise up in splendor, Mary, Jim, Agnes, Bill – your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon YOU. The world may be in darkness, judging from the daily news, thick clouds may confuse the minds of people everywhere – given the distractions that demand their attention; but upon YOU the Lord shines and over YOU appears his glory, his radiance, his presence. Indeed YOU are meant to be a light to the nations, the world has need of YOUR insight, YOUR foresight. Raise you eyes, Mary, Jim, Agnes, Bill . . . look about, reality as it really is converges upon you, people as kinfolk seek you out – their being so alienated and therefore in need of YOU. Indeed YOU shall be radiant over everything you see, the world in its holiness, what you once referred to as “things” shall become lovable, wonderful – so much so that YOUR heart shall throb and overflow. You will behold how rich this creation of ours is; you will become conscious of the richness of different cultures, races, creeds – caravans of once strange creatures shall fill you with wonder and wisdom, bearing gold and frankincense – rendering YOUR life fragrant with goodness, having a heart of gold – as in the Neil Young quest: I want to live / I want to give / I've been a miner for a heart of gold / its these expressions I never give / that keep me searchin' for a heart of gold / and I'm getting old.

To step into the reading, the magical word, to let it permeate you with awareness of the truth about your being and destiny – is like entering again into a baptismal font and rising out of the poem, your transfiguration under way. How much time we waste – even centuries – letting such sacramental magic lie fallow.

Let's do another

Moving on to the first reading of January 13th, we read from again a fifth century disciple of Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
 my chosen one with whom I am pleased,
 upon whom I have put my spirit;
 he shall bring forth justice to the nations,
 not crying out, not shouting,
 not making his voice heard in the street.
 a bruised reed he shall not break,
 and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,
 until he establishes justice on the earth;
 the coastlands will wait for his teaching.

I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice,
 I have grasped you by the hand;
 I formed you, and set you
 as a covenant of the people,
 a light for the nations,
 to open the eyes of the blind,
 to bring out prisoners from confinement,
 and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

Here too consider yourself (not just the ancient prophet) as the person addressed by this inspired oracle:

God himself declares YOU his chosen one with whom he is well pleased; God likes YOU – and fills YOU with his spirit, breath, life. YOU shall stand for justice amid the world, not by crying out, not by shouting, not using bullhorns in the street. Indeed a bruised reed you shall not break – tenderness toward the broken, the misguided will be your nature; you won't have the heart to quench a smoldering wick whence light and

warmth may yet be revived (just as Christ would behave). Justice in the sense of understanding and mercy will be YOUR aim. God has grasped YOUR hand, shaped YOU, set YOU up as a bond, a sacrament among others – to open the eyes of the blind, release souls confined by fear and biases – who live as if in dungeons, in darkness.

And so in this season of Epiphany, of the manifestation, unveiling of Christ – YOUR OWN EPIPHANY is celebrated. It's not something to be forgotten – by routine piety, habitual observances. You are involved in something extremely important for the life of the world – and your own worth.

Or let's go to the Gospel readings January 6th from Matthew 2:1-12

Obviously the wise men, the magi, the magical fellows from the east are looking for a newborn child whom they might honor as the king of the Jews, the Anointed One. They are drawn by a star in this infant's direction. It's news that worries the current king of the region – Herod the Great, butcher, deceitful . . . insidious, . . . worried over rivals. His bootlicking advisors trace the possibility that this rival might be found in Bethlehem – from which a new Shepherd of Israel might arise. Go search diligently! The Star reappears over a house, they find the child and his Mother and do him honor, present gifts and to avoid Herod go home by another route.

The object of their search and of the text is this child. And so we objectify, we reify the readings: we set up crèches and statues representing Mary and Joseph and the Magi and the shepherds, and animals, all as visible *objects* reflecting the story; objects before our eyes, each at a distance, the story at a distance – arms length.

Why is it not also the intention of such biblical writing that the newborn child be YOU, that it is YOU over whom a star has appeared; it is YOU that wise, really wise men seek and long for – not Herod or the celebrities or high and mighty imposed upon us by the media of this world, but YOU as the Anointed One, as a Shepherd of not only the people among whom you live but of the environment, the trees, rocks, mountains, streams, store fronts a la Edward Hopper that with you share and emerge from the ground of all Being, the Spirit of God – YOU whose mission is to influence

people so that they do not submit to the Herods of this world but find their way home, to their true homeland, by another way. Why not YOU? Why is the Gospel not about YOU.

And again, can't you see? The more you wear Christ like a garment, the more you step into these readings as permeable, susceptible to their charm, their magic – the more you metamorphosize into what they proclaim – (as with other kinds of literature as well), you undergo a change in nature, evolve beyond being an anthropological specimen, cease to be as humble as you were warned to be but rather *proud* to be what the Word of God intends you to be.

Week by week reinforcement, a transformative journey through time.

Being creatures of time, our metamorphosis into grandeur, our emerging into fullness of life become fun because we grow incrementally by way of different images from day to day, from year to year. We are constantly arriving at our destination in Christ even as he remains our beckoning destination. So let's do a brief look into the Gospels of the next two Sundays.

For January 20th

There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee,
and the mother of Jesus was there.

Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding.

When the wine ran short,
the mother of Jesus said to him,

"They have no wine."

And Jesus said to her,

"Woman, how does your concern affect me?

My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servers,

"Do whatever he tells you."

Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings,

each holding twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus told them,

"Fill the jars with water."

So they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them,
 "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter."
 So they took it.
 And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine,
 without knowing where it came from
 — although the servers who had drawn the water knew —,
 the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him,
 "Everyone serves good wine first,
 and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one;
 but you have kept the good wine until now."
 Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs at Cana in Galilee
 and so revealed his glory,
 and his disciples began to believe in him.

The object of the text is primarily Jesus initiating his career. Receive this reading as you do the body and blood of Christ during the Eucharist — it is the word of God as the bread of life:

*You are present at a celebratory event — life as such. But it's not getting off the ground; the hosts can't seem to stir it up; the guests are preoccupied. They are drinking the host's wine but it has no kick. Something feminine in your makeup sensitizes you to the problem — could be the Holy Spirit or Lady Wisdom. You behave as usual, not wanting to be involved, a bystander, a face in the crowd — as the safest and least noticeable place to be. Whatever that feminine surge is, that prod of compassion, YOU step forward. YOU dare order six **huge** water jars to be filled with water — famous for its being flat like the water in Philadelphia. YOU then tell the world to distribute the contents of the jars — heads turn. The head waiter (who should know) compliments the until then embarrassed host: . . . you have kept the good wine, the best of yourself until now.*

So when are YOU going to trust your luck, become the miracle worker you are being fashioned to be — another Christ — when are you going to enliven people, the world around you, with YOUR Christic capacity to recharge people and things and institutions? When are you going to begin to reveal YOUR glory, YOUR radiance — to believe in YOUR TRUE SELF?

For January 27th

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit,
and news of him spread throughout the whole region.
He taught in their synagogues and was praised by all.

He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up,
and went according to his custom
into the synagogue on the sabbath day.
He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah.
He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down,
and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.

He said to them,

"Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

As you are transfigured into Christ, into your ultimate self from week to week – life becomes a “coming out” party. And so immerse yourself into this reading as well. Jesus is the object of the reading; but Jesus is more than that. Jesus and the event are a frame of being into which you are to stride, to become:

It is YOU who approach the lectern of long ago and even right now. It is YOU who unroll the scroll out of which shall pour out the real YOU God has created. And it is out of your mouth and in reference to yourself, YOUR God-given worth, that YOU proclaim: The Spirit of the Lord is upon ME, because he has anointed ME to bring glad tidings to the poor, those who need to be raised from their premature graves. He has sent ME to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind – to help people see what I see in all its transparency and depth . . . to let the oppressed go free . . .

*And rolling up this scroll out of which your faith, hope and love have cascaded – it is YOU who say to the whole world: Today – I emphasize: **Today** - this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.*

Postscript: a poem by James Richardson titled *Metamorphosis* – to show you that it can happen:

The week after you died, Mom,
you were in my checkout line,
little old lady who met my stare
with the fear, the yearning
of a mortal chosen by a god,
feeling herself change
painfully cell by cell
into a shadow, a laurel, you, a constellation.