

Liturgical Readings for January 2020 (retroactive) – Cycle A

Introduction: Refiguring your Self

The word *figure* can mean many things. Often it is used as a term for numbers – as in *his income per year amounts to over six figures*. But more in consonance with the word’s Latin origin it can also mean *shape, outward appearance* (her dress flattered her figure), or *likeness* (as with the figures of the four presidents on Mt. Rushmore) or as a synonym for metaphor (as in *Night’s candles are burnt out, and . . . day / Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.*). We call that a figure of speech for the dawn of a new day.

Over the past fifty years in the field of hermeneutics (the art of how to interpret literature including the Bible) much has been written about “figuring ourselves out” – which means learning how to interpret our lives, what has been and is happening to us as we advance, subject to the influences of time. The conviction here is that, far from adequately knowing ourselves in abstract terms, be they philosophical or scientific, we can more meaningfully come to know ourselves in figurative terms – insofar as, being caught up in cycle after cycle of time, our lives have the quality of a story, a drama, a sequence of epiphanies, revelations that may open up one horizon of insight after another . . . until – as I have said before – the self you are today is not exactly the self you were at age ten, twenty or fifty. You have undergone certain changes in conscious identity over the span of your life, chapter after chapter.

Pre-, Con- and Re- Figuration

Figuration in the sense of translating an object into a work of art or a landscape into a poem is a more profound way of understanding what has been happening to you over the course of your life – whether you have been aware of it or not.

Prefiguration

Prior to any articulation of your life in *meaningful* terms, you may have lived from day to day, doing this or that, eating, drinking, sleeping, attending school, choosing an occupation, which in itself entails lots of things to do and worry about. There is nothing poetic about it; it has been a workaday existence with all sorts of biological, informational, delightful, or

aggravating experiences. It's not something anyone would publish. It's more like a *record* of experiences, like a notebook than anything expressive of deeper concern – or ultimate concern.

This may be described as the pre-figured status of your life, before you begin to apply your imagination to your “being-here”; before you begin to figure things out at a more than everyday level, before you begin to question things, wake up to your life as a quest, a movement back and forth that generates a kind of altitude and depth that make you more pensive about what's going on. As in the lyric:

*What's it all about, Alfie? / Is it just for the moment we live? /
What's it all about when you sort it out, Alfie? / Are we meant to take more
than we give / Or are we meant to be kind.*

It's not that you aren't exposed to stories, narrative products. When the nuns taught us how to diagram sentences, they were teaching us how human discourse, stories are constructed. Then there are the fairy tales: Little Red Riding Hood. There are the newspaper reports of accidents, battles, “Catholic wins pie-eating contest”. But there is no depth. We read things at face value, relatively uninvolved. One could say the era of the motion picture contributes to this distance. What do we do? We sit in a large, darkened theater, maybe thirty rows back, and gaze at an enormous, flat screen – which can resist any attempt of the viewer to intrude upon the characters. It's all figuration -- but more like Plato's shadows dancing on the wall of a cave.

Configuration

This introduces you to the configuration phase of your existence. How do you pass from the shallowness or randomness of prefiguration (a scattershot or surface of life) into a rearrangement of your life into something that's no longer scattershot; how penetrate into a drama that awakens you to regions unexpected? It happens by way of reading. And note I emphasize reading – and not speed reading but reading contemplatively out of respect for the art - infiltrating the realm of human imagination, getting into the space between the letters.

We live within an enormous tradition of literature, narrative and poetic, that seeks to bring out the meaning of our lives and of the very world in which we live – and we do so figuratively. Human beings have been reaching

beyond bare facts and abstractions since the birth of consciousness. They live in the fleeting present but want to understand in terms that move them, in terms of their past as well as where they are headed individually and collectively as creatures unlike other creatures. And so we have the *Odyssey* of Homer, the plays of Shakespeare, classic novels, short stories, parables, the poetry of Hopkins, the Koran, the Old Testament and the New – and letters like those of Saint Paul that amount to poetic prose – and oratory as simple yet eloquent as the Gettysburg Address, declarations like: *We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .*

Or let's get to the very foundation of all such discourse: *language* itself, whose very origin must have been evoked by a need to articulate meaning even beyond the reach of everyday communication. Language: a miracle in both its range and variety and potential for beauty – and available to us as a way of figuring ourselves out!

All such art lays out a sequence of events as undergone by human characters that lead from one situation to another, fraught with detours - enlightening or tragic - interwoven with ethical challenges to be taken or resisted. And as such they educate us to analogous situations, diversions and challenges that have marked our own actual lives, our own actual story. And so we learn to value life as not just a matter of breathing, of labor, or rising and retiring day after day, but as an adventure – like the stories we read - with a sense of an ending – some destination or destiny.

Refiguration

Passing from prefiguration wherein we often don't know where the heck we are – to configuration: the vast region of song and story, literature, ritual – *becoming enfolded in* such narratives and not just holding them at arms length as if they were only about someone else – we sense the influence of the characters, Hamlet, Mary Garth, the great Gatsby, Jane Eyre, Job; of the vision of Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Philip Larkin, the prophet Jeremiah. As when I was initiated into the order of Saint Francis, to emulate his way of life, I was clothed in his thirteenth century habit – so also we, as we enter into the characters of a novel, undergo an investiture. We take on whatever virtue or vices they reveal and become a bit more conscious self. As St. Paul says in Galatians 3:27: *For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* By way of re-figuration, through our immersion in the figurative language of our collective humanity we can

arrive at a transformation or transfiguration of the kind the disciples saw of Christ on that mountain in the Gospels.

A simple and even explicit example of what I mean may be found in Joyce Kilmer's poem *Prayer of a Soldier in France*. Kilmer was a convert to Catholicism and served with the New York Irish 69th regiment in 1917/1918. He was killed in action. Clearly he was familiar with the Passion narrative as configured in the Gospels and in this poem he refigures, i.e. interprets his own situation while plodding toward the frontlines as corresponding with Christ's self-sacrifice for –somehow - the good of human kind.

My shoulders ache beneath my pack
(Lie easier, Cross, upon His back).

I march with feet that burn and smart
(Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart).

Men shout at me who may not speak
(They scourged Thy back and smote Thy cheek).

I may not lift a hand to clear
My eyes of salty drops that sear.

(Then shall my fickle soul forget
Thy agony of Bloody Sweat?)

My rifle hand is stiff and numb
(From Thy pierced palm red rivers come).

Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me
Than all the hosts of land and sea.

So let me render back again
This millionth of Thy gift. Amen.

The Passion of Christ was the consequence of Christ's demand that humanity live by grace instead of oppression. Despite his expectation that the powers and principalities of an ignorant world would crucify him, he set his face toward Jerusalem and this world's manifold ways of resistance –

trusting that a resurrection will ensue. And so Kilmer makes sense of his own agony in his trust, even his conviction, that his millionth of a contribution may make a difference. Not only that but that somehow, as Thomas Mann at the end of his novel *The Magic Mountain*, losing sight of his hero Hans Castorp amid the smoke of a battlefield, concludes: *Out of this universal feast of death, out of this extremity of fever, kindling the rain-washed evening sky to a fiery glow, may it be that Love one day shall mount?*

[Please note: in neither of these writings, by Kilmer or by Thomas Mann, is reference to be confined to the actual, historical World War. Once the poet and novelist set their creation in a war setting, that setting passes from historical time into what Paul Ricoeur calls monumental time. The whole scene rises or settles into a region imagined, yet real. Kilmer is not marching toward German trenches in Picardy as he recites this poem, but toward another destination that demands courage, hope, some kind of victory other than Armistice Day.]

But let's not stop there. Let's consider another illustration. Charles Dickens' story:

Great Expectations

Let's experience the metamorphosis of the boy Phillip Pirrip, otherwise known as Pip. Pip is introduced at the start of the story as an orphan who lives with an irritable and abusive sister and her much more kind husband Joe Gargery – who is a blacksmith in a village near the mouth of the Thames river. He is Joe's apprentice – unhappy, missing his mother Georgiana who lies buried in a churchyard. It's Christmas Eve.

Epiphany # 1

It's while he is visiting her grave, tidying it up, grieving, that he is startled by the sudden appearance from behind a tombstone of the actor Finlay Currie [playing the convict Abel Magwitch] - six foot two and a wearing a face, from which the child in the film version needed no acting ability to recoil!

Magwitch has just escaped from a prison ship and is starving. He threatens the boy to fetch him some food and drink. Pip goes home to take a fresh pork pie and some brandy reserved for a Christmas dinner the next day.

Then – when, during that Christmas dinner, the time comes for the brandy and the anticipated pork pie - Pip becomes increasingly anxious. In his fear of his sister’s finding the pie missing, he is about to run out of the house when the door opens and a sergeant and other soldiers request entrance. They have a pair of handcuffs that need repair by the blacksmith. Pip thinks the cuffs are for him – but no, they are for the escaped convict from the prison ship.

The soldiers then depart, with Joe and Pip tagging along – and soon they capture Magwitch and place him in a boat for transfer to the ship.

But before they row off Magwitch wants to make a confession: *“I want to say something respecting this escape. It may preserve some persons laying under suspicion alonger me . . . I took some broken wittles, up in the village over yonder . . . From the blacksmith’s. It was some broke wittles – that’s what it was – and a dram of liquor, and a pie. . . .”* So, said the convict, turning his eyes on Joe . . . and without the least glance on Pip . . . *“I’m sorry to say, I’ve eat your pie.”*

As Pip then narrates his surprise: *My state of mind regarding the pilfering from which I had been so unexpectedly exonerated, did not impel me to frank disclosure; but I hope it had some dregs of good at the bottom of it.*

Among those dregs of good was the fact that Pip, already burdened by a bad conscience thanks to the constant harping of his sister and then by fear of the consequences of his theft and assisting a criminal, was exonerated by the very criminal he helped [You will recall that Christ was also a convict]. The grace of God had come to him in so unexpected a way. It was enough to make him wonder how things worked . . . wonder in the sense that Nathanael wondered how anything good could come out of Nazareth.

Yet that’s how epiphanies work – enough to encourage you to wonder about events in your past which, if you were to ponder them in depth, might have certain dregs for you to draw forth even today and contribute to your becoming more awake, a **self**, and not just the **same** as you were yesterday. For example, after my ordination sixty-four years ago, my first weekend Mass assignments were to a parish named Transfiguration. I thought nothing of it then but the whole transfiguring nature of our Gospel and literature in general pre-occupies me now in these my later years.

Epiphany # 2

Soon it was arranged by Pip's uncle that Pip do some caretaking of a rich, aged woman named Miss Havisham. He was to wheel her about a vast dining hall that was covered with cobwebs, dust, adorned with a long dinner table still bearing a high wedding cake half eaten by mice. It was to have been the scene of Miss Havisham's wedding banquet long ago, except that she was jilted before the party could begin. She still wears a faded wedding dress; all the clocks have stopped at twenty minutes to nine. In other words her life came to an end even though she continued to breathe. She was determined to keep her environment the *same*, defined by that one past event.

Perhaps she employed Pip simply to maltreat him in retaliation for the pain his gender inflicted on her. It does seem that her other ward, named Estella, had been encouraged to insult and criticize Pip's low class and absent manners – driving him to tears. But all this abuse only made him more aware of how uneducated, how common he and his family really were – yet stimulated a wish to improve his lot.

Again even out of this negative experience we have an epiphany, an experience that works a change in him, a desire to rise above being common. Self-awareness, a widening of horizons to accommodate a *wider self* than he has been, has begun to take place; even ambition, romance (when Estella allows him to give her a kiss on her cheek). Though it's just a tease.

Epiphany # 3

Then along comes Jaggers, a lawyer from London [among whose clients is Miss Havisham]. He announces to Pip and Joe that Pip is now a fellow of great expectations. He will be heir to a great fortune, an education, and must move to London to become a gentleman after all. But the benefactor must be kept secret. And so, once grown into a young man, Pip travels to the big city to share an apartment with another cultivated young man – and commence his grooming into a bourgeois fellow. When Joe Gargery comes to London to visit Pip, he gets the cold shoulder; Joe has become an embarrassment.

All the while Pip views himself as on a track that has begun to make sense. Connected to Miss Havisham, sharing the same lawyer, he can only

conclude that it is Miss Havisham who has favored him with his new status and intends to make him an heir. And he concludes also that Estella may indeed be involved in his future. His track is clear – a corridor the logic which is so obvious. [Ordained in 1955, my future was predictable.]

Epiphany # 4 [a switch is thrown]

Pip soon turns twenty-three and on a dark and stormy night he is disturbed – at eleven o'clock - when, as the text states, Pip *heard a footstep on the stair*. Pip listened again, and heard the footstep stumble in coming on.

Remembering . . . that the staircase-lights were blown out, I took up my reading lamp and went to the stair-head. Whoever was below had stopped on seeing my lamp, for all was quiet.

“There is some one down there, is there not?” I called out, looking down. “Yes, said a voice from the darkness beneath. “What floor do you want?” “The top, Mr. Pip”

“That is my name. – There is nothing the matter?” “Nothing the matter,” returned the voice. And the man came on. I stood with my lamp held out of the stair-rail, and he came slowly within its light. It was a shaded lamp, to shine upon a book, and its circle of light was very contracted so that he was in it for a mere instant, then out of it, [that’s how epiphanies tend to work] . . . I had seen a face that was strange to me, looking up with an incomprehensible air of being touched and pleased by the sight of me. Moving the lamp as the man moved, I made out that he was substantially dressed but roughly like a voyager by sea . . . That his age was about sixty . . . browned and hardened by exposure to weather.

As he ascended the last stair or two, and the light of my lamp included us both, [epiphanies tend to widen, brighten, embrace the observer] I saw with a stupid kind of amazement, that he was holding out both his hands to me.

“Pray what is your business?” I asked him. “My business?” he repeated, pausing. “Ah! Yes. I will explain my business, by your leave.” “Do you wish to come in?” “Yes,” he replied; “I wish to come in, master.”

. . . I took him into the room . . . asked him . . . to explain himself. [Epiphanies generate questioning, curiosity – like the Magi following a star.] He looked about him with the strangest air . . . of wondering pleasure . . . I

saw him next moment, once more holding out both hands to me. . . . “You acted noble, my boy,” said he. “Noble, Pip! And I have never forgot it!” . . . [Epiphanies illuminate our past, bring to light things we have forgotten, left unnoticed.]

“If you are grateful to me for what I did when I was a little child, I hope you have shown your gratitude by mending your way of life. [The young man’s mind still operates out of the same moralizing catechism all such boys were taught.] If you have come here to thank me, it was not necessary . . . but surely you must understand that – I –“

“What, surely must I understand?” “”That I cannot wish to renew that chance intercourse with you of long ago, under these different circumstances. I am glad to believe you have repented and recovered yourself. . . . But our ways are different ways, none the less . . .”

Pip and the visitor then share a taste of rum and hot water and Pip asks casually – at arm’s length: *“How are you living?”*

“I’ve been a sheep-farmer . . . away in the new world.” [echoing Christ] “I’ve done wonderfully well . . . “

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“ I hope to hear you say so, my dear boy.” And the visitor then inquires of Pip how he himself has done so well. Pip can’t really explain how he has done well until, after further exchanges, it gradually dawns on him that his visitor – Abel Magwitch – is his benefactor. *“Yes, Pip, dear boy, I’ve made a gentleman of you! It’s me wot has done it! . . . I’ve lived rough, that you should live smooth . . . Do I tell it, fur you to feel a obligation? Not a bit. I tell it, fur you to know as that there hunted dunghill dog wot you kep life in, got his head so high that he could make a gentleman, - and, Pip, you’re him!” [Pure grace]*

Pip is horrified. *“But didn’t you never think it might be me?” “O no, no, no,” I returned. “Never, never!” [The track he shortsightedly thought he was on had switched.]*

Pip soon finds out that Magwitch is risking his life to visit him – for, having been deported to Australia, he was forbidden to return to England under penalty of death.

Epiphany # 5

While being the surprise revelation of Pip's source of growth, Magwitch's return has awakened Pip's consciousness of something he hadn't yet experienced, namely *a sense of responsibility*. Indeed, Magwitch has provided Pip with a chance to become an epiphany himself, a manifestation of something more than a gentleman – a generous, caring human being, no longer just the same but now a self, transcendent. To prevent Magwitch's arrest and execution Pip and a friend arrange for his escape from England – but only to be thwarted by an informer. Magwitch dies in prison with Pip by his side.

Epiphany # 6

What then becomes the novel's ultimate epiphany, experienced by Pip, occurs during his later visit to Joe Gargery and his new wife Biddy at the old forge. After eleven years Pip meets these friends of his childhood *and there in the old kitchen, sitting on Pip's little stool by the fire was – I again!*

'We giv' him the name of Pip for your sake, dear old chap,' said Joe, delighted when I took another stool by the child's side . . . 'and we hoped he might grow a little bit like you, and think he do.' I thought so too, and I took him out for a walk next morning, and we talked immensely, understanding one another to perfection.

And may that not be what awaits each of us hereafter – meeting the child we were when experiencing one of our first epiphanies – as in my case the stained glass windows of St. Cyril's church – and realizing that's how it all began – from the vagueness of our identity then to the self we have become.

Nor is that the end, because the more epiphanies you experience – major or minor – the more you acquire a better ability, a **knack** of *seeing an epiphany in other people* – other people as epiphanies - as happens to Pip upon his last encounter with an older Estella, now chastened by a failed marriage. He meets her at the burned down property of the late Miss Havisham and says: *The figure showed itself aware of me, as I advanced. It had been moving towards me, but it stood still. As I drew nearer I saw it was the figure of a woman . . . I cried out: 'Estella!'*

'I am greatly changed', she says. 'I wonder you know me.'

The freshness of her beauty was indeed gone, but its indescribable majesty and its indescribable charm remained. Those attractions in it, I had seen before: what I had never seen before, was the saddened softened light of the once proud eyes; what I had never felt before, was the friendly touch of the once insensible hand.

Can you ever be the same after immersing, investing yourself in this metaphor of life, this gift of human imagination? Can you ever be the same after immersing yourself in the vast epic of our sacred Scripture? If not – you haven't plunged in a completely baptismal way into that anthology which is Greek for *a gathering of flowers*. What are you waiting for?

Application to the January Gospel Readings:

It's John Keats who said: *A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory*. And as you may invest yourself in the story of Pip Pirrip and refigure your own life under its influence, so may you do so with the Gospel accounts of Christ. The Gospels are not just about Jesus as a distant object. Like all imaginatively expressed truth about another, the Gospels narrate your own story on a deeper level. So looking at the four narrative Gospel readings from Matthew through the month of January, who do you become?

A star appeared in the sky heralding your birth.

Your birth was seen not by ordinary folk, by the Herod and scribes of our everyday world. But it was detectable by magi, people with enough insight to read the stars and come to honor your birth. Actually people like Herod and the scribes had good reason to fear your birth – and so they were disturbed by the quest of the magi. You could possibly be a contradiction of all that Herod – a ruthless being – could stand for. The interest of the scribes was commissioned to find you out and all they could come up with was relatively – you were from nowhere, a nobody, a birth statistic. Still there were rumors that you could be something after all. And so Herod – the negativity of this world - would be looking for you sooner or later to repress your being. [Did he succeed?]

But even though you were – from the standpoint of priests and scribes – from nowhere, these wise men had the knack to find you and endow you with all the gifts that would make you rich in more ways than you knew. Discover them; believe in them.

And next, suddenly, you are an adult, meeting with a prophet named John – who also, like the magi, recognizes something special about you, who feels he needs baptizing by you instead of you by him. But you insist on your being immersed in deep water, the tradition of your ancestors; that you be raised out of the primeval sea as a gift to the world – and behold the heavens opened at your baptism and not only that but the breath of God descended and a voice said: You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased. [Faith has to do with really believing that!]

Indeed this prophet John supplements the compliment: *Behold God's lamb, come to save the human race from missing the mark. I know because I could see the dove of peace settling upon you and witness to that incontestable, indelible fact.*

Next we see you by the shore of the Sea of Galilee against the background music of the prophet Isaiah: *Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light – namely you – and upon those dwelling in a land of darkness overshadowed by death – the shadow of Herod - light has arisen.* And no sooner do you meet others – people preoccupied with survival, entangled in the nets of everydayness, prejudice, crankiness . . . distraction, you say: *Change the way you think, for heaven, the real world created by the breath of God, is all around you. You are there but not there – so come, follow me.* And when and if you make such an invitation, some people may wake up and even as the magi at your birth: choose to live by another path.