

Liturgical Readings for July, 2017 – Cycle A

Introduction: Repositioning ourselves or Coming Home, i.e. down to earth

Over the past – let's say – century, experts in biblical and literary interpretation (known as hermeneutics) have resorted to what I think is a truer, more engaging, more religiously transforming way of reading biblical and our whole culture's range of poetic texts, stories, imaginative works, long and short. Specifically, I'd like to *illustrate* that way by applying it to the first and Gospel readings of the Sundays of July, Cycle A.

The thing that drew biblical and literary scholars in general toward this fresher way of interpretation during the 19th and 20th centuries was *a switch in the way we human beings think about things* in general and in particular. In the breakdown of so many of the vertically, hierarchically oriented institutions of our Western civilization in modern times we had begun to feel homeless in a meaningless universe.

And so meanings alternative to standard beliefs were sought to explain our world: the findings of science; secularism (nothing is really sacred); freedom from all constraint, including belief in God . . . one could go on. The result? Everything from “anything goes” to choose your favorite ideology to “Stop the world, I want to get off” to “Stop thinking, just concentrate on your job”, to console yourself with the latest issue of *Action Comics* (putting your hope in Superman) - in other words cultivate whatever helps you arrive at deliberate amnesia.

Background I: Plato [We've touched on him before]

We modern folk came into this world influenced after many centuries by a secular philosophy attributable to the Plato of long ago. His philosophy gave us the idea that the world we live in is a shadow land, not really real; and that true reality can only be found in a world of Ideal, Perfect Forms or Patterns or Eternal Blueprints from which the things of our world are derived – for instance an Ideal Table, perfect, from which all tables are imperfectly derived, that all tables imitate more or less but never get quite right.

The result then is for us to think of a perfect reality “up there” and an imperfect one “down here”, changeable and insecure (like the fact that we age) – making us want to *ascend* toward a Perfection, a permanence of some kind, unchangeable ad infinitum. Much of our Christian spirituality is influenced by this Greek arrangement, making us feel guilty of simply being inadequate to some Ideal world, doomed forever to engage in a head-trip that often puts students to sleep as when I slept through a whole semester of a course called metaphysics. Maybe I was just stupid – but I *wasn't* stupid; the courses left me unmoved.

Background II: Descartes [We've dealt with him before]

Closer to our times we meet Rene Descartes. Giving up on philosophy, belief in some distant world of Ideal Forms to be pursued by a kind of contemplation. Descartes rather talked himself into a method of doubting everything until the only thing he could be sure of was himself and the actuality of his brain. From there his ability to think logically, to weigh and measure things, his faith in mathematics, became his really verifiable way of knowing anything.

He placed himself (and all of us) on a kind of platform from which (as an observer and calculator) he saw instead of just flowers, trees, stars, people, the fish in the sea; a world of objects as if lined up on a mantle piece (or before a firing squad) – to be physically analyzed and manipulated in whatever way might suit our needs. Thus we ourselves became the masters of nature although as a consequence we began to feel ourselves lonely within a universe of silent space and aimless time. Homeless. Basically objects ourselves.

Reaction: Homelessness

With all power within our grasp – scientifically - and this material world our *only* world and no Platonic, faraway, perfect world of perfect models to be contemplated and no heaven to be inhabited, and eventually no God, we lost the universe as our home, our sense of belonging to anything, being a part of our world, being kin to the honey bee, the spider, the sparrow, the very soil we walk on, the clouds – unlike the mystic St. Francis of another time who felt quite at home in his world – as expressed in his famous *Canticle of the Sun*. It is said that he composed it in 1224 as he was recovering from an illness at San Damiano. Let's listen closely to it again:

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praise be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs . . .

[The original Italian of each verse begins with *Laudato si* (Praise be to you) used by Pope Francis as the title of his 2015 encyclical on the environment.]

A modern poet, Wallace Stevens, alert to our sense of homelessness in a demystified modern world of “things”, mere objects, you and I mere numbers – subtly echoes in a sad way what’s gone wrong – in his poem:

Anecdote of the Jar (notice: *not* a vase]

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.*

*It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

The contrast? I think he would prefer the original Tennessee of bird and bush and wilderness, of nature unfettered, loquacious, unforced, to becoming the world we know of neatly shelved jars and canned goods, a super market??

Recovery

Like the Israelites of old, and many a thinker and poet and theologian has since the 20th century turned his and her back upon the bare and empty jar, the empty object we have made the idol of our times, and advocated a return to the Tennessee of bird and bush, the mud out of which Adam and we and all creation have emerged. I look out the window on Sunday mornings at St. Leo’s and see the poppies, flowering hollyhocks, the nearby trees upon staunch trunks, firmly gripping the soil, raising so many leafy branches to play in the breeze, even seeming to join in the music of the choir, clapping like so many hands, conjoined with, not alien, to me. The world we live in.

We may have forgotten that we are of the earth, the same stuff of all the reality around us – materially relatives of the water, the air, the trees, all animals; of

insects and butterflies and spiders and sparrows and crows. We are made of the same matter – which word is derived from the Latin: Mater – matter, our common mother. We are family – indeed we are the responsible caretakers of this cosmic family – not some imaginary nature god, but we ourselves.

And why? Because of all these beings we are the ones who can speak. We have somehow learned to speak, communicate, utter, express – outer nature. We have linguisticity.

We have learned to see all the things of nature, of creation as phenomena – from the Greek word *phainesthai* (related to our words epiphany, manifestation, appearance). It means that things are not mute, they somehow manifest themselves, un-conceal themselves, show themselves to us from which we learn to know them, express them, name them, escort them into consciousness whereby they become words, language, poems, holy. We are the priests of creation, articulating its worth and beauty and even intellectually its utility to heal, enlighten, excite, to make of this world an electric bulb or a cathedral of love. *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*, within us, to dance off our tongues, to make not just music but lyrics of it all.

Given that closeness of things, as relatives rather than objects, we learn how to reveal the meaning of our world and lives – as in “you have heard it said, but I now say to you . . .” And we also get – in things – to know ourselves.

Letting things speak

Rather than just analyzing in a Cartesian, empirical way the material make up of what are our most intimate relations – the things of our environment – we are now encouraged to listen, to let things emerge. To illustrate such a way of reading our world, our nature, God’s nature, God’s word, *let’s pass on to the liturgy selections of July.*

Readings of the first (OT) and Gospel readings of July, 2017

July 2nd, 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time - 2nd Kings 4:8-16
Elisha’s visit to a household in Shunem

Elisha was successor to the great (Lone Ranger type) prophet Elijah. He resisted slavish idolatry among the Israelites during the 800’s BC. He was a frequent visitor of a couple who lived not far from Mt. Carmel. . The woman and her husband often showed Elisha hospitality, ultimately making a little furnished apartment for his use. Rather than analyze the historical, so-called “factual” details and background of this episode, let’s allow the *episode itself tell us* what it is about – in a kind of Gestalt manner.

The woman is hospitable always in *deliberate* ways to the visit of this prophet, this vocal link to the creator, the source of all things – who speaks so often through all of nature and through the human voice of poets, of music, or silent insights. The woman is therefore accessible to surprises that we all experience at times in our lives, that turn us in a direction we did not anticipate the day before . . . for instance the major event of Christ that has given us so potent a way of seeing things and being human. Elisha tells his servant to call this woman and ask what he can do for her.

[It makes me remember the telephone call I received (which I have mentioned in prior lectures) from Bucknell University after I had resigned the priesthood and had been waiting for a whole month after a lengthy interview – wondering why I had received no news. And then to find by my own impatient phone call, first that there had been ten others competing for the job – and *then* to hear the subsequent words, “But we have chosen you. When can you come?”]

Elisha’s servant tells him, “She has no son and her husband is old.” So Elisha says, “Call her.” When she came to his door, he said, “This time next year you will be cradling a baby son.”

Experience that episode. You wait, wanting to know what life is all about. Sometimes it seems so barren, mute. But “this time next year . . . “ New horizons become your destiny. How often has that happened to you? Elisha is but one instance of a voice rising unexpectedly from the depths of reality with good news . . . as was the angel Gabriel to a virgin of long ago.

Time is no monotonous journey into night. It is the sequence of a guaranteed promises of “this time next year . . . “

Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:30-42
Whoever welcomes you welcomes me

The Gospel reading reiterates the sense of the first reading. Hospitality, a welcoming attitude should be shone to every source of divine insight, awakening, discovery, enhancement of our current way of existing that touches us – as in the case of the woman of the first reading above. Hospitality in its wider sense means a readiness to learn, a trust that meaning lies behind everything we meet in life – God wants to tell us something. But if you are so distracted by MSNBC and CNN and Fox and the worn out plots of film producers, the idols of the marketplace, you will soon become deaf, dumb and blind; going to church itself becomes a non-event. You are destined to *everlasting silence amid so much noise – the paradox of hell.*

The revelations that well up out of the depths of God, out of a very vocal creation, clearings in the forest into which we stumble, may be potent or even minimal – graded by impact; of prophetic force, enlightenment, motive power or of something issuing from “a little one”, someone who never got through high school, un-credentialed. Listen! Be hospitable! Taste! -- as if the bread and wine of the Eucharist were being presented to you in what is being told, revealed, experienced.

July 9th, 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Zechariah 9:9-10
Your king comes to you; . . . humble and riding on an ass.

The prophet Zechariah (was he several people?) wrote just after the Babylonian Exile – c. 520 BC – except that chapters 9 ff. may date from about one hundred years later. The aim of Jewish leaders back then was to restore their Temple, destroyed c. 586 BC, as the focus of their faith, since politically the dynasty of David was not likely to be restored anytime soon. It has much to do with cleaning up Jerusalem’s act after so much suffering. That could be why the writer prefers a gentler vision of God, a less violent existence – peace among the nations.

But as I attune my ear to these verses liturgically addressed to me, I find myself filtering my way through the usual oracles presented by the daily news, nationalist bravado, constant belligerence, even ecclesiastical controversy. Somehow from deeper down out of the deep well of God I see an earlier version of royalty emerging – riding upon an ass, a colt, the foal of an ass – with a humility that in itself is overpowering, shaming bravado, silencing loud mouth power brokers. A human being whose influence will disarm us in every sense of the word – even maybe literally as in “cutting off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem and the bow” -- spreading peace throughout the earth, a vision to trust.

Personally, as these words well up in me I begin to relax, breathe deeper, let down my guard, cease to rise each day to a new battle, new confrontations (even within my head) . . . to lay down my weapons (figuratively speaking) so that I can open my arms to all that is yet to be unconcealed about this reality into which I have been born.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 11:25-30
Come to me, all you that are weary

The Gospel reading follows upon that first reading from the prophet/poet Zechariah. Agitated as I (and so many are) by “the people with credentials”, who have the “answers”, the pundits or gurus, the TV panels who are the authorized

oracle givers of our age, who stop at mathematics or abstractions or opinions or at the denial of any meaning to life whatsoever --- the voice of the Word made flesh breaks through to us, congratulating us in terms of our *really being privy – in our poetry, scriptures, art, prose and music – to utterances that imbue us with peace*; that relieve our weariness, give us rest, the relaxation that comes of hearing (as Wallace Stevens expressed it) *Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses . . .*

No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, [acquire my range and depth of vision] and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. You will sense a homecoming.

July 16th, 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Isaiah 55: 10-13
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven . . .

In keeping with the theme of these readings of July as I have been trying to state it – that the whole of creation and the divine source of creation are ever unveiling the meaning of life and that we need to be always hospitable to such unveilings; and moreover, alert to our gift of language making us the oracles of such unveilings in ways that even surprise us, today's reading from the second part of Isaiah – needs no explanation:

55:10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

55:11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

55:12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

55:13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13: 1 - 23
A sower went out to sow . . .

And so what do we have for a Gospel reading for today but the parable and allegory of the Sower of seeds, the sowing of God's word as the planting of seeds alive with growth, too numerous to repress, to be cultivated for the meaning, the truth, the refreshment they provide. Sometimes the word of God in whatever subtle way it would grow lands on hardened hearts, hardened minds – rock hard. Or it gets lost, ignored among the transient issues of politics or strangled by thorny questions or dry as dust explanations, sermons. But the sowing continues, extravagantly, there's plenty of seed, seeds of life, moments alive with a message for you which if you miss out on it today will land in your lap again tomorrow – and reproduce itself in so many ways – one insight releases other insights – too many to keep up with if you show them the hospitality they require.

July 23rd , 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19
You have the power to act whenever you choose

Written in Greek about 50 years before the birth of Christ, within a Jewish community in Alexandria in Egypt, a chief point is: God takes his time, which is a way of saying he is a hopeful, compassionate guide throughout our lives. There is no graduation deadline, no failing to learn the truth about things and yourself and the source of the universe over time. Indeed time itself will amount to crossing one horizon, one day after another, only to arrive more intimately at the same yet now so much wider space you have known.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13: 24-43
Let them grow together until the harvest . . .

Our problem is that (to use Dylan Thomas' words) *for all the force that through the green fuse drives the flower . . . that drives the water through the rocks [and] drives my red blood*, there are forces that sow weeds amid God's wheat. But the contradictions, the negations we run into, including our own frequent pessimism, only enhance our being, sharpen it, invigorate it, indeed teach us to be merciful to things that impede. Indeed as time advances we consume – as with fire - such negativity, transforming it into ever more creative energy. Has there ever a poet, a saint, a grandparent who has not known agony or sweat?

July 30th , 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time - 1st Kings 3:5-12
Give your servant . . . an understanding mind . . . It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba (whose husband David got rid of by placing him in the front rank of battle) reigned a long time and amid considerable domestic tranquility due to his reputation for making wise decisions and inspiring (with the help of Egyptian courtiers) a kind of wisdom (philosophical) tradition in Israel.

Today's reading begins with a prayer; Solomon doesn't ask for a long life or wealth or the lives of his enemies – but for an understanding mind, an ability to think deep. You could say the readings for this whole month encourage such depth and discernment. Let it well up out of the poem you read, the play you ponder, the happening that somehow demands your deeper attention.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13: 44-52

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast . . .

This Gospel explicitly offers you several gateways to a deeper understanding of yourself – makes you work at it but more the way an artist does. The Gestalt method of psychotherapy, which comes out of the thing known as phenomenology, requires that a patient identify with everything in his or her dreams – not analyze but BE everything in the dream. It's a great way of reaching into the images of Scripture in general.

For instance, be a mustard seed. Feel as tiny as you can – and buried deep in the soil. Then imagine yourself cracking your tiny shell, pressing out ever so little (when I was a kid I once buried an watermelon seed and left it for a few days, then dug it up and a white, tender sprout was curling out from within it – fascinating). Then feel yourself, your shoulders pushing upward, breaking out into the sunlight, feeling stronger, reaching out with arms like branches, sprouting leaves . . . casting shade. What does the mustard seed, what does God tell you about yourself by way of that image.

Or be a treasure hidden in a field. That's what you are, you know? A casket but full of gold and silver and diamonds and emeralds, all locked up, left behind somewhere in your early education – and waiting to be unearthed, unburied – like Christ.

Or be yeast buried in flour or be a merchant who seeks fine pearls. Or be that pearl, of great worth, lost amid a stall full of costume jewelry, junk, feeling somewhat alone, hoping to be found and valued . . . and so on. You can do it better than I.

Or be a net cast into the sea, a child cast into this world so full of cathedrals and pizza shacks, classics and B movies, *Babette's Feast* and Howdy Doody and gather in whatever promises you better nourishment from your catch . . . Acquire a hunger for hidden messages in things that attract your attention. Grow.

A gloss from Eudora Welty's *Curtain of Green*:

“In that moment, the rain came. The first drop touched her upraised arm. Small, close sounds and coolness touched her. Sighing, Mrs. Larkin lowered the hoe. She stood still where she was, close to Jamey, and listened to the rain falling. It was so gentle. It was so full - the sound of the end of waiting. In the light from the rain everything appeared to gleam unreflecting from within itself. The pear tree gave a soft rushing noise, like the wings of a bird alighting. A wind of deep wet fragrance beat against her. Then as if it had swelled and broken over a levee, tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body. It has come, she thought senselessly. Against that which was inexhaustible, there was no defence.”