

Liturgical Readings for March 2020 – Cycle C

There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them. (Closing lines to a 1948 detective film)

Time

We don't think much about time. We take it for granted. It comes and goes; here today, gone tomorrow. Yet famous saints and scholars have wrestled with this thing called time at some length and depth. Of course there is what we call clock or cosmic time. We measure the movement of the sun and stars, assign numbers to their rotations, call them hours, days, years and thereby organize our lives, civic, domestic and cultic. We add them up into centuries and millennia and acquire some sense of security, some sense of control, needing to know where we are within this silent universe – as if we were going somewhere – the way mariners actually took their bearings from the North Star upon an empty sea.

But people like St. Augustine still showed concern. His question was not so much *what* is time as *where* is time. I mean, the past is gone, the future is not yet here and the present is gone the minute we pronounce the word present. So does time even exist? Is clock time, cosmic time really an illusion, a handy device to make us feel oriented in an otherwise inscrutable universe?

But as I read interpreters of St. Augustine, he began to solve the riddle of time, suspecting that time, far from being a matter of transient sunrise and sunset and season after season, something external to us, was rather something internal. In other words, as we experience events we internalize them, file them away within this thing we call memory whence we then project time or events forward by way of this thing we call

expectation. Internally or mentally or soulfully we retain moments or spans of past time and based on such retention we anticipate or imagine things to come: the future.

And so past, present and future are not merely ethereal but tangible, durable; they have weight, the power to move us no matter how far that past may be or our future may extend. Time could very well be defined as moments of divine interventions – like the Exodus or the birth of Christ.

Stories

And proof of this is to be found in the **stories we tell** – that begin with “once upon a time” or are titled Star Trek, episode 3.

Classically their retained power is so evident in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. I guess everyone is familiar by now with the effect upon his character Marcel – as a jaded young man – of the taste of a petite madeleine (a pastry) dipped in tea, how it caused him suddenly to recall the whole forgotten village of Combray of his boyhood, unfolding out of the depths of his memory like those crumbs of paper designed by the Japanese, *having no character or form until they are placed in water and 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 the water lilies . . . and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings . . . sprang into being, town and gardens alike - more so now than then!*

[Parenthetically has it ever occurred to you that every episode, every prophecy, every metaphor of the Bible is capable of behaving that same way if you ever come to understand the nature of narrative writing, sacred and profane? Every passage - like those crumbs of paper! Indeed such unfolding is meant to

happen within your mind and soul at every liturgy of the Word, every Eucharistic meal you reenact – which liturgical moments do not occur simply in clock time (no matter whether the Mass is scheduled for 7:30 or 9:30 or 11 o'clock. Rather whenever we enter into the liturgy we pass into what has been called Messianic Time (by Walter Benjamin) or according to Hans von Balthasar the Real Time of those forty days the disciples spent with the risen Christ. Do any of us come to Mass with that expectation in mind?]

There are other such moments Marcel felt in Proust's novel when a present sound or texture of cloth or stumble upon a loose paving stone triggers an upsurge of forgotten times – his stumble upon a paving stone in Paris prior to a party, reviving a past visit to Venice with his mother, reminding him of the unevenness he felt of the pavement in the baptistery of St. Mark's – and thereby renewing all the wonder of that exotic city – so that the actual Proust (who is himself the Marcel of the novel) could later write to a friend: *When I went to Venice I found that my dream had become – incredibly, but quite simply – my address!* Has the liturgy become your address?

Hence our appreciation of narrative writing as the better key to understanding who and how we are – being so much the focus of interpretation or hermeneutics today. Last time we walked you through the narrative of Dickens's novel *Great Expectations* to demonstrate how such writing reaches into the past (episodes of the boyhood of Pip) then into subsequent events which factor into his development, detours, surprises, the shock of learning that the convict Magwitch is his benefactor . . . on into his meeting a chastened Estella at the end which leaves us envisioning their possibly living together in the future . . . an outcome that seemed unlikely when they first met as children. So there it is: a past, recurring presents,

future anticipation – all linked as a whole, and as such eloquent with meaning. Time begins to make sense.

So also does your life have the makings of such a story – as occurrences of your past are energized to emerge in some present moment, some “now” and jettison you forward to visions of further change or growth. And what is your storehouse of time but similar in so many ways to that of everyone else and to the plots of every story and history ever written so that we all rest upon a vast, deep ocean of memories and expectations that testify to our solidarity as a human race – events so often similar even if personal – that we share and can understand whenever they are shared. We are not alone. As I find in the episodes of Pip’s story moments that remind me of analogous moments in my own life. His story is my story – even as Christ’s story is your story and mine.

Indeed, much of our mutual story seems to have been forgotten – all the prehistoric moments. For instance we remember or have photos of the first time we stood on our hind legs as a two year old and walked wobbly to the delight of our parents – but we also retain in our very anatomy or brain that moment when a prehistoric ancestor first stood on his hind legs and raised his front legs – finding them capable as forearms and hands of marvelous things – like conducting an orchestra or painting a picture or smashing a rock or – presaging by way of his fingers how to count. We don’t remember that moment of our prehistoric past – except in that we continue to stand up and reach out as a reflex.

And what have we in the Bible but the remembrance of past things – all dredged up in narrative and poetic ways like a dream – to orient us as to why we are here, where we come from, where we are going – as a whole race and yet as

individuals – from *In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters- then God said: Let there be light, and there was light.* [Dawn witnessed after a starless night.]

And thereafter the memories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark, [all figuratively told] the call of Abraham, the birth of the twelve tribes, the descent into Egypt, the Exodus as led by Moses, the theophany of Sinai, Joshua, Saul, David, Bathsheba . . . on through prophetic times into a new age, a resurrection . . . until as we look into the future: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea [which was everywhere in the beginning] was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband- I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race".*

A story every human being can identify with as his and her story; catholic, universal. And no need to dredge it up out of our unconscious because – “it is written” – already exposed for us, its meaning waiting to be interpreted.

And so at each Eucharist we enter into the Liturgy of the Word – the reading and experiencing of selected passages from our written or may we say dehydrated Scripture, which our lectors and homilists are meant to revive – to plant booby traps like that petite madeleine that awoke Marcel to his recovery of the whole of Combray as a child. So also the liturgical readings are loaded with concealed phrases or metaphors or characters or moments designed to plunge you into a deeper understanding and experience of why and who you really are and how to behave and not to behave.

Application

Let's limit ourselves to the three major Lenten readings assigned for the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent. And you can work from an experience of them upon the other readings of the Sundays of March.

Third Sunday of Lent – Cycle C

First Reading: Exodus 17: 3-7

The Israelites are lost in a desert, having escaped from Egypt. They are hungry and thirsty; on the verge of preferring slavery in Egypt to liberty in a desert. And so are you. Given the state of our present day, the toxic nature of politics, of church discord, the rush of traffic, the constant distraction of the daily news, life becoming impersonal, everyone caught up in his or her private issues . . . life has become arid. Personally we thirst for a more meaningful sojourn on this planet. But we become so disgruntled that Moses pleads (you plead) with God: what can we do with these people . . .?

We are all becoming hardhearted. And welling up from the depths of our narrative we envision a rock – solid, inert – and we are told to strike that rock, that heart of stone; to fracture it and release the fluid vitality that resides within it – and thereby be thirsty no more, indeed become a refreshing personality. Fracture that hardened heart the way a celebrant fractures the host of the Eucharist to make it distributable. As one writer says: *Open is broken. There is no breakthrough without breakage.* Let your immersion into this story, this moment not only of an ancient past but of today as it is read in the Real Time of the liturgy, compel you to exclaim, like the

Israelites of old after watching that rock spout living water: *Is the Lord in our midst [my midst] or not?* Of course he is!

Gospel Reading: John 4: 5-42

Again we are invited into the world of John's story of the Samaritan woman - - - echoing the experience of that prior Exodus reading about water from a rock. Again we are invited to experience a fluidity, a freshness that issues from the upwelling of God, God's Spirit, God's depth into our otherwise tired existence. The embodiment of that Spirit confronts us as Jesus . . . who teases us with a simple request: *Give me a drink*. We are at Jacob's well, which has become a metaphor out of the ancient annals of old Israel - located now within the boundaries of a hybrid creed and people of Samaria - that's us!

That Jesus comes as a resource more profound than Jacob's well is evident in his readiness to speak to a woman, a Samaritan at that, in his openness, in the tidal expanse of his being. We hold back, not being open entirely to strangers, to others whom we have been educated to suspect somehow, like: *how can he, a Jew ask me a Gentile for a drink, given the ethnic, even ideological distance between us?*

And now *he* offers *me* a drink of water, unlike the stagnant beverage of my routine existence, - water that is alive, fresh, clear, like out of a spring issuing from somewhere deep. Yet he has no bucket: seems unequipped to do what he says? Yet he persists, insuring me: Geoff, everyone who drinks the water you have been imbibing will be thirsty again, the constant distractions. What I offer is a refreshment that can spring from your stoney heart as well as from a rock - that will link you to

the everlasting grace that was hidden, seemingly encased within that rock I cracked open in today's first reading.

And under the influence of such recovered fluidity I yield, saying: *Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty nor have to keep coming here to such shallow resources to draw vitality.* Give me this water so as to dissolve all the enclosures that keep me from this, that and the other aspects of life I have long thought alien – so that I am bound neither by Samaria nor Jerusalem but worship and exist henceforth gracefully in a world that is true.

[By the way, this episode closes with an interesting remark by the Samaritan woman – thus: *Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me everything I have done."* That's what every story does, unfold for you in a seductive way access to an understanding of your whole life. As does the complete anthology we call the Bible. You're in there somewhere, everywhere.]

Being Jesus as well:

And by the way, you may also experience this narrative as Jesus himself – becoming personally able to recognize the thirst in others – as he does - and share with them the Spirit that flows out of the recovered depth of your own being.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Gospel Reading: John 9: 1-41

As I step into the world of this Gospel or as the text says, into the Pool of Siloam as a metaphor of the whole episode, I discover myself to be a man born blind and a beggar, dependent not on any sense of my worth but on whatever

other people make of me. Whatever negative opinion I think other people have of me, that's the verdict I'm inclined to accept. I am a sinful fellow, always falling short of the mark. But I encounter the Christ of today's Eucharist who assures me that my beggarly, blind condition has nothing to do with sin – but simply gives God an opportunity to work a miracle, to open my eyes that I may see – *experience* daylight, illuminations, epiphanies, watch the world around me open up in so many dimensions. And how does he do this? By blending earth with his saliva and reaching out to me not instructionally, didactically, but in a tangibly personal way – and by having me immerse myself in water that can wash away all that has made me think of myself as a beggar, a nobody. Of course a change occurs in me that turns heads – Isn't this the guy who keeps a low profile in class, whose absence of vision has saved him from ever having to look at his own face with approval? Others say, "It's him!" But others say, "It just looks like him." And yet somehow I am now capable of saying myself: "I AM!" the way God says it in the Book of Exodus – "I am who I am – by the grace of God."

And now I have to put up with the *how's*. "How has it happened that you can see – not just see but SEE – even see through objects, stories, through the prose to the poetry of things and people?" And I reply, "Someone touched me in a decidedly caring way – in a classroom in Rome, in a dream wherein all the letters of a missal turned into flowers, in friends and moments out of my past that struck oil.

But, say the authorities, whoever did this, did it on the Sabbath; he broke the rules that often are imposed to keep you blind. Your own parents – fearing complicity – claim they know nothing about this YOU we now have to deal with. They testify: "All we know is he went off to a seminary at age fifteen and we

don't know what they did to him after that. Ask him yourselves." And then indirectly I am touched again through their ignorance for they say more than they realize. "Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself!" How true at last at this stage of my life.

Feeling now outside the boundaries of ordinary conversation, the same old news of the day, the commercials, the hype, the canned noise they call music, which Pope is the true Pope – who do I later meet liturgically but the Christ whose interventions healed me, helped me grow up and grow down into deeper regions. He asks me do I believe in what the Son of Man, that really Human Being, has done to me – and I ask: "Who is he, that I may believe in him?" And he replies: "You have seen him, the one who is speaking to you this very moment is he." [Every moment} Talk about the Real Presence – in bread and wine and so many other ways!

And being Jesus as well:

And again, it's worth imagining yourself to be Jesus, too, in this narrative – opening the eyes of people born blind – by simple gestures such as making a paste of spit and soil like this talk and touching their souls by the way you live and see and love.

Fifth Sunday of Lent:

Gospel Reading: John 11: 1-45

Our world is sick, seriously so – and so am I, tired, slow, de-energized, so that people say to Jesus: *The one you love is ill.* To which Jesus says, *This illness is not to end in death – it is but prelude to something glorious – a recovery unimaginable.* Martha is not convinced. *If you had been here, Geoff or Mary or Annie or Stan, might have survived instead of seeming so often dead and buried – and already wrapped up for delivery into the*

hereafter from head to toe – like those premature burials narrated by people like Edgar Allan Poe.

But Jesus says it's never too late; *he will rise*, emerge from his sepulcher . . . And Martha agrees: *Yes, on the last day* – which seems always a long way off – in the meantime, he deteriorates more and more every day. Jesus says (within my hearing within my burrow and despite the stone whereby there is for me no exit): *I am the resurrection and the life; . . . everyone who lives and believes in me, in my Gospel, will never die. Do you believe this?*

Noticing hesitancy in Martha's response, Jesus gets emotional. His love for you and me wells up and with it the creative grace of God. *Where have you laid him? Drag away that stone* that weighs him down. *Lazarus, Geoff, Joan, Bill, Annie . . . come out* of the grave your depressions have excavated for you over so many years. *Unbind them and let them go*, faces exposed to a sunrise and to all the beauty of God's creation and . . . to the banquet of God's presence that is about to commence over the balance of today's liturgy.

And being Jesus as well:

If too many people may seem to be still confined to their chrysalis phase of development, then become Christ; call them out into their becoming *mariposas!*

Epilogue:

Since we have been talking about Time in its various connotations, I want to close by intoning the theme song of Rudy Vallee's 1930's radio show, which I am proud to say that I am old enough to have heard often as a child! I have however tampered with the closing line.

My time it your time
Your time is my time
There's no time like our time
And our time is *now!*