Liturgical Readings for May 2019

Introduction: *Oscillation – meaning to and fro.*

The Gospel according to St. Paul
In past monthly sessions we have spoken of St. Paul's powerful proclamation of Grace as the experience of God that Christ introduces into our world – that God is not an accountant, a quid pro quo adjudicator (and punitive as well) but a personal Source of absolute mercy, compassion to the point of becoming incarnate in a self-sacrificial being - Christ himself - and resonant in all his parables and healings.

I mentioned my experience at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome when the Jesuit scholar Stanislas Lyonnet commented on chapter five, verses 1 and 2 of Paul's *Letter to the Romans: . . . since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access to this grace in which we stand . . .* That word access, said Lyonnet, is the technical term for the access the Jewish high priest – alone – had to the Temple's Holy of Holies - the otherwise forbidden residence of God – and this, once a year on Yom Kippur.

One would think Paul, in using this word, might also recall the veil of the Temple being torn from top to bottom at the moment of Christ's death. And what he is saying is: we *all* have access now to a God no longer remote, veiled, ambiguous but intimate to each and every one of us. And to expand on that: that we ourselves are each a temple where this intimate God dwells – alive with real life, welling up, wanting to overflow in our words, thoughts, behavior – our poetic existence.

I mentioned that Lyonnet's explanation of those verses struck me like a Klieg light suddenly illuminating a very dark space.

To illustrate the power, the enthusiasm of Paul in Romans let me quote again his conclusion to chapter 8:

What then shall we say . . ? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ [Jesus] who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? . . . No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Of course Paul's *Letter to the Romans* is an introductory letter composed in 58 AD. He hasn't visited Rome yet and so he takes the high ground. He lays out the essence, the heart of his good news.

But . . .
What about Paul's letter to the Christians of the city of Corinth (a commercial crossroads of extreme diversity and a wide range of loose living – a kind of miniature Manhattan of its day)! Paul was already known in Corinth. He helped build the community there and around 56 AD he wrote in quite a different tone – less sublime, less exuberant, less proclamatory, more authoritarian. Suddenly he has become an overseer – an epi-scopus, enforcing correct doctrine and behavior, sorting things out. Listen to him:

Brothers, I could not talk to you as spiritual people, but as fleshly people, as infants in Christ. I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were unable to take it. Indeed, you are still not able, even now . . . While there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not . . . behaving in an ordinary human way. Which do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a gentle spirit?

I now write to you not to associate with anyone named a brother, if he is immoral, greedy, an idolater, a slanderer, a drunkard, or a robber, not even to eat with such a person. And here Paul goes into a catalogue of pagan sexual practices that even the Stoics abhor – and adds: *neither thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.*

What's going on here?
Is this the same man who wrote Romans? About a God of Grace? Was it too early for him to have access to the canonical Gospels, which were not published until after around 64 AD? Too early for him to have access to the story of Jesus' prevention of the stoning of a woman taken in adultery or his readiness to associate with the sinners of society, his run-in's with strict Pharisees, scribes, "letter of the law" types? I don't think so. Paul was well aware of the compassionate nature of the Gospel tradition.

But I think what we see here in this comparison of these letters is his exhibiting a reflex that Christian churches have exhibited down through the centuries. When frustrated by the dead weight of ordinary human beings, the ignorance, or as Paul says, the perpetual infancy of most adults, you fall back from the New to the Old Testament.

In other words:
If the good news of our resurrection from all that buries us alive doesn't catch on, the reflex seems to be to resurrect the Law of Moses, a quid pro quo enforcement of virtue – with consequences of reward or punishment – assuming enough merit has been acquired to tip the scales. A little fear doesn't hurt. And remember, Paul was still Saul under his epidermis – he comes across in the early *Acts of the Apostles*

before his conversion as a relentless agent of the Temple, a persecutor of believers who don't adhere to the God and tablets of Sinai - almost to a Puritanical degree. In other words in Corinthians he oscillates in the face of humanity's gravitational drag. If the good news is not enough to excite them, if the fact of God's grace in its deepest sense doesn't knock them off their feet, then scare them with the bad news of their defects and their consequences before God's restored tribunal.

After all, what's merciful?
Indeed over time – given the challenge of the Gospel – some, in reverting to a more legal, rubrical, dogmatic, even apocalyptic enforcement of conformity, made a virtue of it . . . seeing in its minimalist approach, a "merciful" understanding or consideration of the density of human nature – in so far as rules and regulations and sanctions were familiar and easier to teach and even maybe obey. In other words, there is a mercy in keeping people's heads above water when otherwise they may simply sink rather than swim. (As Ronald Knox has said: the Church has always been wary of too much (Pauline?) enthusiasm.)

Two stories offering epiphanies – along this line:
James Joyce touches upon the above manner of "mercy" amusingly – especially in Ireland at the turn of the 19th century, the Ireland of his youth [and of that Jesuit retreat he describes in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*]. The story I refer to is in his collection titled *The Dubliners*. Its title is "Grace".

The story begins with friends picking up a somewhat intoxicated Tom Kernan off the lavatory floor of a local pub. Soon he is cleaned up and supported by a Mr. Power, a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary, in whose care he is also driven home. Mrs. Kernan appears used to such episodes. It shows in her patience as she says, *Such a sight! O, he'll do for himself one day and that's the holy alls of it. He's been drinking since Friday. . . We were waiting for him to come home with the money. He never seems to think he has a home at all.*

Mr. Power comforts the wife: *O, now . . . we'll make him turn over a new leaf. I'll talk to Martin. He's the man. We'll come over here one of these nights and talk it over.* This Martin was a Martin Cunningham, a thoroughly sensible man, influential and intelligent. He possessed knowledge, a natural astuteness . . . nurtured by long association with police courts – even had a grasp of general philosophy. Mrs. Kernan agrees to leave it all in the hands of Mr. Cunningham. *After a quarter of a century of married life she had very few illusions left. Religion for her was a habit and she suspected that a man of her husband's age would not change greatly before death.*

Anyway, along with a third party, a Mr. McCoy, Cunningham and Mr. Power meet with Tom Kernan to talk him into going on a retreat. Kernan, being a convert from Protestantism, is wary of their intentions but agrees he needs something to prod him into better behavior. The conversation among these men is interesting. They are Catholic but their information about their Church is haphazard – though

expressed with a comic certitude. They speak of the Jesuits (in whose popular church the retreat will be given) as *the grandest order in the Church, whose general stands next to the Pope. If you want a thing well done and no flies about it you go to a Jesuit. They're the boyos have influence . . . Every other order . . .. had to be reformed at some time or other but the Jesuit Order was never once reformed.* [However it was once suppressed!] They spoke of the current Pope Leo XIII – one of the lights of the age – whose motto according to our well - informed Mr. Cunningham was *Lux upon Lux – Light upon Light.* Another said: *I think you're wrong there. It was Lux in Tenebris, I think – Light in Darkness*. They also spoke of Pius IX and his business of infallibility – again with incorrect knowledge of the event . . . but impressed and proud of it.

The day of the retreat arrives. It is a businessmen's retreat, the congregation all men of trade and finance. And the preacher was a Father Purdon – popular among the Dublin faithful. Tom Kernan was nervous or let's say unused to this level of religious intensity. But the tone of Fr. Purdon's sermon relaxed him; it was quiet, gentle, reasonable – appreciative of the quality of his audience. His text was from Luke 16:8-9 – relative to the parable of the steward who cheated in settling his master's accounts to insure his employment by those debtors who benefited from the deed. The chosen text concludes: *For the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. Wherefore make unto yourselves friends out of the mammon of iniquity so that when you die they may receive you into everlasting dwellings.*

And then Father Purdon elaborates - saying this was a text *which might seem to the casual observer at variance with the lofty morality elsewhere preached by Jesus Christ. But . . . the text had seemed to him specially adapted for the guidance of those whose lot it was to lead the life of the world and who yet wished to lead that life not in the manner of worldlings. It was a text for business men and professional men. Jesus Christ . . . understood that all men were not called to the religious life, . . . and in that sentence He designed to give them a word of counsel, setting before them as exemplars in the religious life those very worshippers of Mammon* [money] *who were of all men the least solicitous in matters of religion.*

Purdon *told his hearers that he was there that evening for no terrifying, no extravagant purpose; but as a man of the world speaking to his fellow men . . . he was their spiritual accountant and he wished each and everyone of his hearers to open his books . . . and see if they tallied accurately with conscience.*

Jesus Christ was not a hard taskmaster. He understood our little failings . . . the weakness of our poor fallen nature . . . the temptations of this life . . . But one thing only, he said, he would ask of his hearers. And that was to be straight and manly with God. If their accounts tallied in every point to say: - Well, I have verified my accounts. I find all well.

But if, as might happen, there are some discrepancies, to admit the truth, to be frank and say like a man: Well, I have looked into my accounts. I find this wrong and this wrong. But, with God's grace, I will rectify this and this. I will set right my accounts.

The "thing" of the text:
You will remember our speaking of "the thing" of the text or the "world" that the text opens up to us as the key to the meaning of a story as a whole. There is a point or moment when the everydayness of the story gives way to an illumination that invites the reader or even deposits the reader into a truer world or beyond the horizon that limits the world of the story. In this story by Joyce I find that "world" opening up in the very last words of Fr. Purdon – whether he realizes what he's done or not. I find that epiphany or horizon crossed in the very laughter I experience – as the no win option of Fr. Purdon's interpretation becomes so apparent as to make me laugh – not cynically but delightedly, experiencing the grace of this ending of this story titled "Grace". Purdon leads us in a sugar coated way - to a life of pushing a rock to the top of a hill every Saturday only to have it come rolling back down again by Monday – like the mythical Sisyphus, absolved one day, damned the next – which cycle of payment followed by debt - again and again - can amount to a hell of a life. It sets the table for our wanting to dine rather at the table of true Grace and true God opened up by Christ and the St. Paul of Romans.

Story number two:
But Joyce is not finished. We have that other story in *The Dubliners* titled "The Sisters" narrated by a boy, nephew of two of the adult characters. Among the services the boy did for the now deceased Fr. James Flynn [including serving Mass] was to empty a packet of pulverized tobacco into his snuffbox, Fr. Flynn's hands trembling too much to do so himself. Flynn by the way, prior to his death, was suffering paralysis due to a stroke – which paralysis seemed also to be affecting the Church at that period in history.

It seems the boy did not enjoy his attending upon the priest. He says he was reluctant to view the deceased*. I walked away slowly along the sunny side of the street, reading the theatrical advertisements in the shop windows. I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed in a mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death. I wondered at this for, as my uncle had said . . . he taught me a good deal* [items of an elementary school curriculum in Catholicism] *. . . to pronounce Latin properly . . . stories about the catacombs . . . the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments . . . he amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections . . . I was not surprised when he told me that the Fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the Post Office Directory . . . Sometimes he used to put me through the responses of the Mass, and, as I pattered, he used to smile . . . pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril alternately.*

At evening the boy and his aunt visit the house of mourning. The priest was laid out, retaining a chalice in his large hands. The grown ups speak of his death: *Did he . . . peacefully*, asked his aunt. Eliza, the priest's sister said, *O, quite peacefully . . . He had a beautiful death, God be praised. . . . He looks quite resigned,* said the boy's aunt. They are sipping sherry. And so the exchanges went, like: *It's when it's all over that you'll miss him*.

Until: the sister says: *Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him lately. Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary fallen to the floor . . . he kept on saying that before the summer was over he'd go out for a drive one fine day . . . to see the old house where we were all born down in Irishtown . . . If we could only get one of them new-fangled carriages that make no noise . . . with the rheumatic* [pneuma-tic?] *wheels . . . He was too scrupulous . . . the duties of the priesthood were too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed.*

The room went silent. *It was the chalice he broke . . .. That was the beginning of it . . . That affected his mind, she said. After that he began to mope by himself, talking to no one and wandering about.* One night they couldn't find him anywhere. Then the clerk and Father O'Rourke and another priest thought of the chapel. *And there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself.*

Suddenly the sister stopped – so did the boy narrator. The sister resumed: *Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself . . .. So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think there was something gone wrong with him . . .*

Now this is James Joyce, a poet. He's not wasting his time recording the ordinary course of a death in a family, the stereotypical conversation at a wake. The ending is the "thing" of the text, our orientation toward the "real world" beyond the literalism of the text – Father Flynn's discovering at last the graciousness of God as the thing he was ordained to serve – and his quiet joy –possibly - at having realized *that*, there in that now empty, may we say obsolete, confessional-box in which he sat. You might say even the boy narrator shows indications that something is opening up to him as well – like the sunny side of a street.

Back to the Paul of Corinthians:
If it is valid to say that the Paul of Romans let himself slip back into the Saul of the Torah, the Law – given the drag of his Corinthians' behavior - and was then wearied in subsequent chapters sorting out their rivalries regarding this charisma versus that, it seems almost with a sigh, exhaustion that he retrieves his preferred Gospel, as he says in chapter 13 – in effect – *But let me show you a still more excellent way. It's a small matter whether I speak in tongues, human or angelic or speak prophecies or by a mere word move mountains or give away everything I own – just to show off. If I do not have love, I'm all noise, I'm nothing*.

And then he launches into a cadence in which we might say he uses Love to define *his* God: *God is patient, God is kind . . . God is not rude . . . not quick tempered, does not brood over injury . . . does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth . . . bears all things . . . hopes all things, endures all things . . . God never fails . . . when I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man,* [when I discovered grace] *I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face - wide-awake and laughing-like softly to ourselves.*

So let's pass on to the liturgical readings of May

The Gospel readings for May are short passages from John's Gospel. The first readings, however, give us a chance to read excerpts from Luke's *Acts of the Apostles* – which offers an incentive to read through *the whole of that interesting, dramatic book*.

It offers a good illustration of what we talked about in the April readings – about Tradition amounting to a *crossing of one horizon after another, never static, always cumulative, reaching into a wider and deeper understanding of what life and world mean* – unconfined to the familiar as final compared to now and tomorrow. It's about *growth* in the deepest, root sense of the word - as *green* – alive!

Acts starts off with Pentecost, the Jewish celebration of Israel's reception of the Torah, the Law at Mt. Sinai. Luke makes it the occasion for the descent of the very author of the Law, the Holy Spirit, upon the Christian community as a new, universal Israel. And this occurs at a time when the Jews from all the known world are gathered in Jerusalem – as something of an eventual tide launched upon the world of the good news of Christ. The event is followed by Peter's cure of a lame man outside the Temple gate, who leaps up and follows him, jumping and cheering – a living metaphor of how this new movement will revive the lame condition of Judaism and the world at large.

We behold the once timid Peter now standing up before a Temple inquisition, talking back and somehow escaping their imprisonment – not only once but later still when even more securely chained – miraculously. Something is breaking loose in the world. We see a diaspora Jew named Stephen (indicative of a wider, more worldly Hellenistic background) declaring a radical change within Judaism – then stoned to death but only for the text to reveal a conservative fellow named Saul supporting his death – who himself is knocked to the ground by some overwhelming change of heart on the road to Damascus. We see the deacon Philip gathering followers in Samaria (off base to Jews) and even baptizing an Ethiopian courtier traveling to his homeland.

Horizons spreading, advancing. Peter, still conservative enough to adhere to the dietary laws of his past, is challenged to visit the extended family of a Gentile

centurion – a voice telling him not the declare unclean anything that God has made – and he witnesses the Holy Spirit descending upon these foreigners as well.

Soon Paul is sailing off to Cyprus and Asia Minor to preach at Jewish synagogues – with much success and much (sometimes violent) resistance. He makes three such journeys, including a crossing over into Macedonia and Greece. Again, horizons crossed into ever new environments. Reaction by some Jerusalem Christians to restrain Peter and Paul are dealt with. Paul himself confronts Peter for staying clear of Gentile Christians – even after his reception of that centurion's family – and Paul wins the approval of the Jerusalem leadership to thin out the compliance of Gentiles to things like circumcision, old customs that would make of the Christian church a sect within Judaism. Paul even dares to bring a Gentile into the forbidden precincts of Jerusalem's Temple . . . For Paul no horizon is final. Trespassing is desirable. This leads to his arrest and journey, under guard, to Rome for an imperial judgment – while all the while he is contemplating a subsequent journey to Spain!

And then there are the prison breaks, those experienced by Peter and those by Paul – metaphors of a vitality in the Gospel that cannot be contained by the harshest restraints.

The Spirit behind the Tradition is one of irrepressible reanimation - the unfolding of new insights, fresh being, an endless advance that always takes you - home . . .

May 5th – Third Sunday of Easter - John 21:1-19

I just want to focus on this lead-in Gospel to the Easter Season this year. And again we shall not simply interpret it in terms of what it already says – off the surface. We shall not stand outside it and view it as if it hangs on a wall framed and flat upon a canvas. We shall step into it and *experience* what it says.

Like Simon Peter along with other disciples we live the life we have been living – lowering nets into the unknown, thinking, calculating, anticipating, wondering – and coming up with nothing. A voice calls out to me: *Have you caught on to anything after all these years of existence?* I answer, *Not really – not anything of substance; maybe a lot of seaweed . . .* The voice then seems to say: *Maybe you're casting your net in water too shallow, no depth. Cast it over the right side of your boat.* And, by God, my net comes close to bursting with the weight of what I find – the weight of serious biblical study, of literature, of the wisdom of others who have fished these waters, netted so much understanding of what existence is all about.

And then that voice becomes visible. Out of this life of often turbulent waters, depths unfathomable yet teeming with truth things begin to clear up. I see a shoreline, a horizon upon which Christ from the other side of finality beckons. He has prepared a breakfast (at which I may break my long hunger for truth, for something really real). *Come and have breakfast* he says; *share in my eucharist.*

Then comes the intimate moment. Three times my host asks me if I love him (as in that reversal of Peter's earlier denying Christ three times out of a reluctance to live deep and true). And this time I get that most difficult of words out: I love you. To which my host says: *So now go and tell others what can happen to them as well as you. Feed my sheep.*

Post Script:
I add a poem I providentially came upon written by a woman named Carol Penner, experienced Mennonite pastor and now associate professor of theology at Conrad Grebel College, the University of Waterloo in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

Jesus makes breakfast: a poem about John 21:1-14

I could smell that charcoal fire a long way off,
while we were still rowing far from shore.
As we got closer I could smell the fish cooking,
I imagined I could hear it sizzling.
When you're hungry, your mind works that way.

When the man by the fire asked us about our catch,
we held up the empty nets.
And his advice to throw the nets in once more
is something we might have ignored,
except for the smell of cooking fish…
this guy must know something about catching fish!

The catch took our breath away;
never in my life have we pulled so many in one heave.
I was concentrating on the catch,
but John wasn't even paying attention,
he was staring at the shore
as if his life depended on it.
Then he clutched my shoulder, crying
"It is the Lord!"

Suddenly, everything came into focus,
the man, the catch, the voice;
and nothing could stop me,
I had to be with the Master.

There were no words at breakfast,
beyond, "Pass the fish,"
or "I'll have a bit more bread."
We sat there, eating our fill,
basking in the sunrise.
We didn't have to say anything.
Jesus just smiled and served.