

Introduction to Liturgical Readings for November 2020

Theme: Words with Power

I'm not sure how many people now remember Lenny Bruce. It would be inadequate to call him merely a stand up comic. He was such a pioneer in front of the microphone during the 1950's and 60's – a bit outrageous one might say but – funny in a satirical way! Actually being Jewish he might be registered among the prophets or social critics who tend to rise out of that tradition. Any way I want to start this presentation with a routine he did way back then.

A Lenny Bruce character enters a drug store and takes a stool at the soda fountain and leans on the counter. Suddenly behind the counter there appears a huge figure wearing a fez and middle- eastern attire. The Lenny character is surprised; asks *who are you?* The figure replies, waving his arms, *I am a genie just out of the bottle – and you have three wishes. I'll make you whatever you want.* So the Lenny character responds: *Make me a malt!* And the genie says: *You're a malt!*

It's funny, of course – but very much in line with the opening verses of the *Book of Genesis* where God says: *Let there be light! And there was light!* The very word had an effect. The very word changed darkness into light. And such changes, simply *spoken*, make their way all the way through the first chapter of Genesis.

Let the earth bring forth vegetation . . . and so it happened.

Let there be lights in the . . . sky . . . and so it happened.

Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature . . . and so it happened . . .

See, I give you every seed-bearing plant . . . and every tree . . . and so it happened . . .

As soon as God spoke the words, the things he named came out of his mouth – they materialized - irreversibly. The uttered word was an event, not just sound, but a happening that endured.

The words were what the scholar Northrop Frye calls “Words with Power”. Words are more than just a collection of consonants and vowels . . . they possess a kind of vitality, dynamism – even when just lying there silent on a page. They only need a pair of human lungs to give them voice, release their power. Like in one of my dreams – looking upon the opening page of the central prayer of the Mass - upon which, even as I was *about* to speak, the letters turned into flowers row by row

before my eyes – like an illuminated manuscript - alive, colorful, leaving me at a loss as to what to read, what to say, full of wonder.

Language comes in different shapes and colors

We are so used to language that we take it for granted. But we use it in several ways.

Descriptive

We use it to *describe* things as in *That tree is an oak tree* or *The earth circles the sun* or *The coronavirus originated in China*. We tell it like it is. Indeed, science speaks in mathematics to insure the factuality of what it says; that it's not speaking fantasy.

Conceptual

Or we use language to *speculate about things* – not so much to describe them in everyday terms but in purer words or concepts – philosophically. We use terms like nature, substance, being, existence, essence, cause, effect, abstract language that attempts to transcend every day talk . . . in search of ideas that are clearer than our imagination allows. For the philosopher *There's nothing . . . more intoxicating than the infinity of possibilities*.

Rhetorical

Or we use language to motivate as by way of *political* rhetoric as in Franklin D. Roosevelt's inaugural address: . . . *let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself* - . . . Unlike descriptive and speculative speech, rhetorical speech tends to take liberties, exaggerates, may say anything to deceive as much as to inform – anything that may win a vote or sell a house or charge up a football team. We are subjected to it every time a commercial interrupts what we are watching on TV.

But there is also something about such rhetorical speech that smacks of poetry's own liberty to reach beyond factual and abstract ways of speech in a seductive way.

Poetic

Poetry itself – honest poetry – is then our fourth manner of speech – whereby we ponder out of a deeper sense of things, not repressing but releasing our sentiments about things, what we feel – as in *Blessings on thee, little man, Barefoot boy, with cheek of tan!* / . . . *With the sunshine on thy face, / Through thy torn brim's jaunty grace; From my heart I give thee joy, - / I was once a barefoot boy!* (It's a kind of speech that evokes emotion, even tears . . . the sentiment of the poet becomes yours – right then and there.) Even as the Lenny character became at once – a Malt.

Or listen to Hamlet in the first verses of Shakespeare I was required to memorize back in high school: *O, that this too too solid flesh would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! / Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God! / How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, / Seem to me all the uses of this world! / Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden, / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely . . .* Maybe you feel like that upon reading the morning newspaper every day? Hopeless, thinking Idaho, Montana – mistakenly, as if that would change things.

The Origin of Language

Where does language come from? You could say that other living creatures have a language – the growling of a lion, the tweeting of the birds, the mooing of a cow, the barking of a dog – and those sounds convey a meaning if only that a bark means: get off my property. But as human beings we speak with an almost infinitely wider and deeper range of meaning – indeed we speak the world around us into an order that serves our needs and even probes boundlessly beyond what we see into the mysteries that remain. We can't shut up.

One could say we acquire language from our elders; that we are taught the language we speak – that's how we get it. We are taught the alphabet, then put letters together into words, then read sentences like: *This is a dog / See the dog run*, until we are well on our way to becoming maybe another Shakespeare or at least a journalist.

Deeper than that

But deep thinkers – especially if they are German – trace our capacity for language to our very origin as human beings. If we agree that as human beings we have arisen from some creative source along with everything else that exists, then that creative source itself must also be the prehistoric source of our ability to speak, our gift of language. Speech and thought are of the essence of human nature to *begin* with. The source of our unique capacity to name and organize and relate things, proclaim things, praise things, sing meaningfully . . . Language comes to us from our very roots in God – it's not an invention of our own. It's a miracle of nature.

Our lost reverence for language

Evidence of human reverence for language seems to lie in ancient times – and the location of its reverent use. Today, as secularized people, educated to prefer science over make believe, we don't go to some temple, some sanctuary of some God, to Delphi, or Canterbury. We resort to statistics; we consult with the Rand Corporation or Center for Disease Control or universities to get valid answers to

things past, present and future. We conduct polls, track percentages. Polls make up much of the news of the day.

Not so in ancient times. If you wanted to know what was what on a national or even on a personal level, you went to the local Temple of whatever divine power you revered – and consulted cult prophets: oracles, seers . . . not only to learn but to *effect* the outcome of whatever you requested, to actually turn somebody into a Malt. Such consultation runs all through our Hebrew Bible. In the *Books of Samuel* characters are consulting ordained temple prophets the way we consult cell phones today – to know what’s happening or going to happen – for words prosaic or sublime. For instance, the *Book of Isaiah* records King Ahaz’s refusal to consult God in a crisis. God, through the prophet, speaks words of more profundity than even the prophet realizes: about a young woman conceiving a son whose name will be Emmanuel.

Not as much today

But in our modern, secularized world – where religion is more of a side show than influential in the running of things – deep thinkers have observed that language at every level of society has been reduced to chatter, jargon, mere talk – indeed talk-a-thons every day on TV – breathlessly, as though - were we to stop talking, advertising, ranting - the world would fall apart – it would be like our globe losing its ozone layer due to the excess of what we call “hot air”.

Forgetfulness

Yet there are still modern prophets who plead with us to settle down, focus on the more vital questions, discuss why we exist, where we come from other than the dust of the earth . . . what’s life seriously about – what makes us fundamentally human . . . in other words, all the things that our own Judeo-Christian tradition values so much – even if we its members are forgetful of such questions. Such forgetfulness can be dangerous. Language gets debased, turned into an assault weapon, becomes toxic. Listen to how a critic describes the rhetoric of modern politics: such bluster deliberately attempts to put our consciousness to sleep, become hypnotized, reduced to a whirlpool of boring clichés. What often issues from such language is a monster called “the mob”.

The language even of religion can become debased – become a dead language no longer understood or influential – standardized.

The recovery of literature, of Sacred Scripture

In the context of such defusing of language there has arisen of late a new respect for the more graphic, imaginative language of stories, parables, drama as well as serious poems. I mean look at the Gospels. Talk about “You’re a Malt.” Miracles abound in Scripture - and what’s a miracle but the immediate effect of a spoken word.

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The Gospel of Luke 4:31 says of Jesus: *people were astonished at his teaching because he spoke words with power.* There was something about what this un-ordained carpenter from an insignificant town called Nazareth was proclaiming that struck home - the essence of which is to be found in his parables and preaching like the Sermon on the Mount - that woke people up.

Like those words of St. Paul in his *Letter to the Romans* - words (within the context of a Jesuit’s lecture) resonant with the teaching of Jesus himself - that changed me *on the spot* in a classroom in Rome 62 years ago - about which I have often spoken. Those words were: *No human being will be justified . . . by observing the law, for through the law comes consciousness of sin. The law does not save; it condemns.* Which said to me as it has said to many: *Rolling that boulder of guilt up a hill every day only to have it roll back down again and again - is over! God is a God of understanding and sheer grace, not judgment.*

And Paul goes on to say, thanks to the intervention in history of this Jesus, we *have peace with God and access to this grace in which we stand.* . . . He also says we now have *parrhesia*, the Greek word for freedom of speech. We need no longer be tongue-tied with fear; we are free to converse, to engage *intimately* with God and the whole of creation, to become poetic in thought and discourse. This is what the New Testament means by freedom of speech - a virtue so needed in a world where argumentation - often so blind and bitter - dominates our speech.

The effect? Having heard all that, “I became a Malt” - I was no longer simply the person I was when I entered that classroom. Immediate change occurred due to the magic of those words with power. They hit home, became resonant ever since, ever audible even now. They touched upon something that was stifling me - unconsciously - since my childhood. All the energy that went into rolling that boulder of guilt up that hill over and over again came back to me for better use - like: becoming relaxed, released, grateful and graceful even as God is graceful.

All those miracle stories in the Gospels were designed to illustrate the *suddenness of that healing*, that release, that widening of consciousness I felt that day and ever since then.

Stories of immediate effect from a word spoken by Jesus.

A paralytic is lowered to a space in front of Jesus who says: *I say to you, rise, pick up your mat and go home*. And he rose, picked up his mat at once (as I did that very moment) and went away. Then we have a man with a withered hand and Jesus says, after an exchange with the legalist Pharisees: *Stretch out your hand* and his hand became alive and flexible (as I did that very moment in Rome). And then we have the little girl who died and he takes her by the hand and says: *Talitha koum, Little girl, I say to you, arise!* The girl arose immediately (as I did). Then in Luke's Gospel we meet the blind beggar of Jericho to whom Jesus says, *Recover your sight* and immediately he recovered his sight (as I did – so much became clearer in a moment). Or Jesus is awakened in a boat by a storm at sea and rises and muzzles the wind and the waves saying; *Quiet! Be still! and the wind ceased and there was great calm* (as came over me that very day in Rome).

What was that song that made Doris Day famous, that begins; *You sigh, the song begins / You speak and I hear violins / it's magic . . .?*

An application to a couple of the liturgical readings for November

2nd Sunday of November:

1st reading: *Wisdom 6:12-16*

Which begins; *Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom, and she is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her. . .*

Now the secret is not just to listen from afar but to let the words envelop, penetrate your imagination, absorb you. Place yourself in the attitude of the poet. Experience the text as a call for *you* to awake out of your obsession with twitter and the idle talk that make of the limited lives we lead a waste of time, of missed opportunities to Be.

Become alert to the very Source of all Being – Wisdom - feminine, maternal, seductive. She is not far off, can easily be discovered, indeed is sitting at your gate eager to make herself known to you, rising with the sun every morning – who forever makes her rounds . . . ready to appear to you in ways you least expect – out of a solicitude for you that is eternal, a solicitude that is contagious enough to make of *you* a person ever solicitous for others, for our world, and therefore fully alive.

Psalm reading: Ps 63: 2-8

Emerging from that experience of this Sunday's first reading, you are now ripe to make the prayer of today's psalm your own. Make it so: *My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord, my God . . . for you, for the meaning you bring to me. My flesh, my soul thirsts like the earth, parched, lifeless, without water.* And so I gaze toward you, look for you everywhere in this world, which is a holy place, pulsating with your power and brightness. I lift up my hands and acknowledge your presence everywhere – existence as a banquet nourishes my soul. Even during the hours of the night – upon my bed; even during the darkness that broods over a confused world, I am somehow awake to your nearness.

Gospel reading: Matthew 25: 1-13

Moving on to the Gospel of this Sunday of November, again, don't just read or relate to the story from afar – *become* the parable. Become the five wise *and* five foolish virgins. Like: I anticipate a wedding, a festal moment, my discovery that the world makes sense, that a God of grace is at the core and origin of it. It's not all nonsense but can be festive if known in depth. There is a part of me that waits enthusiastically to discover this – oiled up as it were. But there is a drag in my make up that is sleepy with a kind of despair, no reserve of faith, hope . . . Nevertheless (and maybe later than I'd like) I hear a shout! A wake-up call, a change in my make up. A party is about to start, awareness, energy, life a Eucharist ever more . . . That *reluctant* part of me *even begins* to wake up - - - but whether it does or not – the me that is well oiled, capable of being lit up is off to the banquet rather than end up missing out on discovering what life is all about.

[Obviously this is something that you can't do in the limited time and movement of the actual liturgy. But it is something you can do by preparing for the readings, engaging with them before you attend the liturgy . . . and an ideal practice for those who still attend those small Christian community meetings.]

One more example

Given time constraints let's immerse ourselves in the Gospel reading for the 3rd Sunday in November

Matthew 25: 14-30

Here we have the parable of the talents (a word that has for us a double meaning) entrusted by an absent rich man to three servants – the idea to invest the talents and increase the rich man's wealth.

As I immerse myself in the flow of this story I become *each* of the servants - - I accept responsibility for the talents I am given. Or do I. Frankly, based on my own biography, I started out reluctant to take responsibility for anything unless somebody forced me – be it my father or mother or a classroom nun or the parish priest or society in general.

I say, unless some collective super-ego hung over me talking guilt and consequences one minute but also don't stick your neck out the next. Low profile was my way of surviving – because you could get hurt otherwise. So I start out this parable as the *third* fellow with the one talent who buries it – indeed feeling that I wasn't as talented as others to begin with.

But as time went on – and thanks to the constant intrusion of that Lady Wisdom we experienced above (and a few kind mentors) – evidence of what talents I actually had began to be manifest – much to my surprise – and with them, a greater sense of responsibility – a readiness to take risks, to cultivate what I had into a richer sense of who and where and why I am – along with a richer sense of other people as gifted in their own – sometimes unconscious – ways . . .

I learned the lesson that to everyone who *has*, more will be given. That's how God's world works. And I learned that otherwise, if I doubt the gift of my existence to the point of escapism, distractions all the time – I would only wind up wailing and gnashing my teeth. And who wants to live that way?

Postscript: by Dylan Thomas: *Notes on the art of poetry*
(You could say it is simply a poem about this gift called language.)

I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on
in the world between the covers of books,
such sandstorms and ice blasts of words . . . ,
such staggering peace, such enormous laughter,
such and so many blinding bright lights . . . ,
splashing all over the pages
in a million bits and pieces
all of which were words, words, words,
and each of which were alive forever . . .

