

Liturgical Readings for October 2016 – Cycle C

Introduction: From pre-figuration to trans-figuration

One reason Holy Scripture seems to have a shallow impact upon peoples' lives has been the tendency over so many centuries (really two thousand years) for Scripture's content to be taken *literally*, as factual or prosaic as opposed to symphonic – as in Handel's *Messiah* with its *Hallelujah Chorus*. For instance, if Exodus describes the Israelites processing dry shod through the Red Sea between walls of water to escape Pharaoh's chariots, that's the way it *actually* was – a divine suspension of nature's laws, front page journalism. What else *could* it be?

Or as an alternative and truer reading, that passage through the Red Sea could be a literary device to underscore the more true, profound, revolutionary, migratory force of the moment, a moment in history that ushered the Israelites into the promised land of their ultimate destiny. In other words, the opening of the sea could be a metaphorical dramatization of an actual wetback crossing from slavery to a new, monotheistic vision and experience of life – in other words, to radical freedom, transcendence, a future.

I guess a literal reading of Scripture was bound to happen what with Scripture's being translated and dispersed among so many nations, losing touch with the spiritual climate of its origin. Familiarity with the original nature of the writing, its environment, its "holiness", its highly imaginative way of presenting things was lost. Perusing biblical events and people as matters of fact, verifiable instead of enhanced encounters capable of present as much as past personal impact, became a habit. The writing was forgotten as poetry, as drama, dynamically metaphorical in intent and as such offering us passage into a sphere of reality well beyond being a collection of mute relics housed within a Smithsonian Institute.

(attached chart illustrates transition from ordinary speech to realm of metaphor)

Transfiguration	World/meaningful
	metaphorical sphere
Tower of Ivory	House of Gold
Morning Star	Angelic bread
The Inn on the road to Emmaus	Prayer: a man well dressed
Night: the stop of busy fools	the Zacchaeus Tree
	Immortal diamond

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Prefiguration	literal
"factual"	realm of objects
things	
prosaic	
hearsay	a carpenter's son
Mary of Nazareth	12 hours of darkness
Prayer = petition	Newton's Sleep
	an environment (not a World)
	numbers

It became valued as evidence useful in proving things instead of revelation, *an unveiling of things* that made the biblical character Job reply to God after one such revelation: *I have spoken but did not understand; things too marvelous for me, which I did not know . . . By hearsay* (literally, one dimensionally) *I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you.*

It's no wonder that the Bible became enshrined on parlor tables wherein family baptisms and weddings were inscribed – a revered compendium of family and biblical data, a closed book.

What is a metaphor? A transit from one world of speech to another.

We speak in metaphors all the time without thinking about it. We name sports teams Giants, Seahawks, Eagles, Indians, Sharks . . . which literally speaking they are not. We speak of it raining cats and dogs, of night falling, of someone simmering down, of there being a tide in the affairs of men.

What we are doing is taking a thing, be it the members of a sporting team or the weather, or one's anger, or the vagaries of human politics and giving these things a different name that widens their scope, releases them from what they literally are, what they factually are, to become something more alive, wider in scope – suggestive of infinite possibilities, a bigger "world view" than even science can find; let's call it a *mythological* world. – with mythological not meaning false (as modern academics might say) but dynamically true.

I've been reading Denis Donoghue's small volume titled *Metaphor* – a thorough study of the term defined as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase itself denoting *one* thing is used in the place of another to *suggest a likeness, and yet also an otherness*, between them – the otherness being the wider space or horizon conferred upon the thing by the metaphor.

Metaphor in its original Greek means transfer or transport – in other words a metaphor like our saying we live in a *house of language* translates the language we speak into a house, a dwelling, a domicile outside of which, beyond its range there is an unknown universe – as unfamiliar to us as our world is to a lady bug. The metaphor of a house (that we live in the house of language) is startling in that in one sense it reveals how closed in we are, how inarticulate, how there is so much more to know, to discover, to learn how to say – which is maybe why philosophers and saints, and yes scientists, too, build windows into our house of language to reveal how much more there is to reality. Metaphors are the windows poets build to release our confinement to "just the facts, ma'am".

Familiar metaphors

Let's consider the metaphors we know. Donoghue recalls his Irish Catholic childhood and the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. James Joyce himself speaks of it in his *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* – where, as Donoghue notes, Mrs. Riordan didn't want Stephen Dedalus to play with Eileen "because Eileen was a Protestant and the Protestants used to make fun of the Litany of the Blessed Virgin" . . . "Tower of Ivory, they used to say, *House of Gold!* How could a woman be a tower of ivory or a house of gold?"

And what about Mary's being also the Ark of the Covenant (carrying the presence of God), the Gate of Heaven, the Morning Star, the Star of the Sea? How could a person be all of those things? Factually, literally speaking, in ordinary talk she is none of those things. She was what she was, a Jewish girl of Nazareth, subject to male dominance, a non-entity. Yet our drive to speak in metaphors reveals our sense that there is more out there beyond our literal speech, our literal lives, our name, rank and the last four digits of our Social Security number, that our tongues, our imaginations, our faith try to reach for. And given the Gospel narrative in which Mary is embedded, we sense there is more to her than people think – and we utter a litany of metaphors, we call her the Mystical Rose.

Indeed, if you consult Wikipedia you will find some bare facts about Jesus: that he was born in Bethlehem in the province of Judea in 4 BC , was a citizen of Nazareth within the tetrarchy of Herod; his parents were a carpenter named Joseph and his young wife Mary. Period.

Not so with the Gospel that breaks into a more comprehensive account of his birth; how on the night of Jesus' birth in a stable shepherds guarding their sheep were terror-struck by the brilliant appearance of an angel telling them of the birth of a king and where to find him and suddenly a

great company of angels appeared singing: *Glory to God and peace on earth.* Only in this poetic way can the *true* story of Jesus' birth be told!

The Eucharist

St. Thomas Aquinas addressed Christ in one of his hymns, saying: *Devoutly I adore You, concealed divinity / who under these figures (of bread and wine) truly lie hidden. / My heart subjects itself entirely to you, / for, contemplating you, it wholly faints away.* Under these figures — under or behind or within the actual bread and wine there lies present a banquet world of grace, divine hospitality, divine self giving — the realm of the really real, ever widening, ever deep, ever eternal. The Eucharist from beginning to end is a metaphorical (or call it sacramental) procedure whereby bread and wine pass from their literal sense into a taste of grace everlasting. We pass, consuming the now transcendent bread and wine, from a meaningless existence to fullness of being.

To reinforce the sense of all this:

Prayer is defined in the dictionary as a *personal communication or petition addressed to a deity in the form of supplication, adoration, praise, etc.* But the 17th century Anglican poet George Herbert's poem called "Prayer (1)" speaks of prayer by way of a series of metaphors (quoted by Denis Donoghue) that bring out more magically the manifold and marvelous nature of human prayer:

Prayer the Churches banquet,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul of paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth:
A kind of tune, which all things heare and fear;
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well dressed,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the starres heard, the souls blood,
The land of spices, something understood.

Donoghue says "The attributions are strange to the subject, free of likeness to it [e.g. prayer described as a man well dressed] . . . There is no subordination. Each . . . term is independent of its companion; none of them is privileged. The metaphorical force of each phrase is designed to change the way we have thought about prayer and to have us *live in that change*, longer than for the moment. No syntactical articulation is needed. It is enough that the poet utters these phrases; he does not expect them to be refuted or even opposed."

Or listen to Henry Vaughan's poem called "The Night" — also quoted by Donoghue. Now again, Night has been defined as *the time from dusk to dawn when no sunlight is visible.* As plain as that. But listen to the poet:

Dear night! this world's defeat;
The stop to busy fools; cares check and curb;
The day of Spirits, my soul's calm retreat
Which none disturb!
The hours to which high Heaven doth chime.

God's silent, searching flight
His still, soft call;
His knocking time; the soul's dumb watch,
When Spirits their fair kindred catch.

Does not such language carry us far beyond a literal, clock driven twelve hours of darkness into a holier world?

Having said all this I want to see if we can hear the Gospel readings of October in such a way that they convey us ever more truly into a world less of the letter more of the spirit.

October 2nd – 27th Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 17: 5-10

Let's divide this short text into two parts.

First part: In the opening two verses the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, their trust in him and his message. And Jesus assures them: *If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this sycamore tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.* [Another version of this saying is the familiar: *Amen, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt . . . but believes . . . , it shall be done for him.*]

Are such statements to be taken literally? A lot of people are initially shocked by such deeds and shake their heads over the impossibility of such performances. You get hooked on the far-fetched nature, the literalness of the images and can't shake it.

But we are all familiar with figures of speech, with hyperbole, extravagant ways of saying things. You could say such speech, poetic speech, is what defines us as human beings (remember how the first thing Adam did was to name all the animals – made of all his living cohabitants a veritable Litany).

Uprooting a tenaciously rooted tree or elevating a huge mountain and transporting them away is sheer hyperbole, meant to startle you – and the sycamore tree and mountain are metaphors of how stuck we are in place, unable to move beyond where we are planted, weighed down as if by granite, once fluid, now solid volcanic overflow. As such they prevent our passage from where and what we are in a literal way. Yet they are also gateway metaphors able to orient us into what Martin Foss calls “the metaphorical sphere” – out of a mere environment, a collection of objective facts into a *World, a place of meaning*. As Foss says, “‘World’ stands out as the great secret of existence and its source of wonder.” It’s that realm where Mary becomes a House of Gold, the Morning Star; that realm where Jesus becomes the Word made flesh, the Way, the Truth, Life itself; the “World” the Gospels see not as a scattering of transient political boundaries, equations made up of x’s and y’s but as the Kingdom of God.

So if we read the sycamore tree or the mountain as figures of speech, challenging our ordinary, literal mindedness, orienting us toward the revelation of a new world, a truer way of being; if the deeply rooted tree reveals how deeply entangled we are in our prejudices, our crabbiness, how obsessed we are with the news of the day so that we can’t free ourselves from grabbing the morning paper or checking in on MSNBC – or what’s worse, disrespecting different creeds, races, ethnic groups; then the deeply rooted sycamore image begins to make sense as a bind that needs to be unearthed and dumped into the deep blue sea so that we may recover our spiritual mobility, recover our sense of the breadth and depths of reality.

And what about the mountain? How does the mountain as a metaphor reveal what blocks our access to a new way of being?

Did we not begin to be weighed down even as children by much bad guidance, threats intended to repress more than our naughtiness? Have we not been weighed down by the ideologies of our culture, our tribe, our interpretations of history, by so much scholarship? Why do the centuries old sins of my fathers still make me grind my teeth? I could go through so many things in my own upbringing; even seminary training that grew into a mountain of ignorance and scruples that froze me in space. But I’ll let St. Paul make my point.

Listen to how St. Paul in his *Letter to the Philippians* (thanks to his Damascus Road experience) felt as if not a mountain then at least a vast landfill, had been lifted off his back: *If anyone thinks to base his claims on externals, I could make a stronger case for myself; circumcised on my eighth day, Israelite by race, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born and bred; in my attitude to the law, a Pharisee; in pious zeal, a persecutor of the church; in legal rectitude, faultless. But all such assets I have written off because of Christ. I would say more: I count everything sheer loss, because all is far outweighed by the gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I did in fact lose everything. I count it so much garbage, for the sake of gaining Christ and finding myself incorporate in him, with no righteousness of my own, no legal rectitude, [no longer anxious before God] but the righteousness which comes from faith in Christ . . . All I care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings . . .*

So, see, deeply rooted entanglement, the weight of constant worry – sycamore trees and mountains can be moved; indeed their effect upon us motivates us all the more to cross over into the meaningful sphere of God – *the land of spices, something understood.*

Second part: The saying about faith's ability to uproot whatever ties us down, traps us in space and time, is followed by a brief parable. If we remain under the influence of St. Paul (of whom St. Luke was a companion) we might read this parable in relation to Pharisaism, the weight of its complexity, legalism and scrupulosity.

The Pharisee worked hard at keeping even the minute requirements of the Law of Moses and its derivatives. Moreover he expected others to measure up to his perfect obedience. He will plow and look after the sheep – in other words perform the works required of him by the Law (the way some novices in my day ostentatiously did, even to following the linoleum's right and left angles laid down to preserve the monastery's hardwood floors, never daring to cut corners. And of course he will expect divine favor and the envy of his fellow novices over his exact virtue, his strict adherence to not only the letter but the minutiae of the Law).

But in this (very Pauline) parable he will not be congratulated on such obsessive behavior. The master will not do him any favors like give him a night off and prepaid dinner at some expensive restaurant. Rather the master will say: *Hey, what's so special that you expect favors from me for the work you have done. So you kept the Law! Am I supposed to thank you, reward you for doing what you were told to do? Rather than expect affirmation, when you have done every thing you were told to do, you should simply say: "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."* In other words *You're just a beginner when it comes to the truly generous, hyperbolic, gracious being that results from knowing and miming God as exuberant Love.*

The parable seems to illustrate what Paul says in Romans: *For no human being can be justified in the sight of God for having kept the Law: Law brings only consciousness of sin.* But the Gospel's revelation of God as a God of absolute grace has the power to lift one upon a tidal wave of such grace, such love to levels of heroic, hyperbolic graciousness – miraculously – beyond what sinners, even Pharisees, could imagine. And where can that grace be found? Within the sanctuary of today's Eucharist – at which God dies for us again and again – and at which you are indeed welcome to dine as your ticket into that realm that can best be defined by metaphors.

October 9th – 28th Sunday Ordinary Time Gospel Reading: Luke 17: 11-19

We spoke in our introduction of how metaphors, Gospel parables and episodes (like today's miracle story about the cleansing of ten lepers) widen, expand our vision, our sense of reality, our capacity to breathe fresher air – as when the poet describes prayer as *the heart in pilgrimage*. In this part of Luke's Gospel we have Jesus leading us on a pilgrimage toward Jerusalem, toward the boundary of Pharisaical and Roman imperialist literalism beyond which true vision, true being, true health begins, beyond which we rise with Christ from the deadliness of monotony - or as William Blake might say: beyond *single vision* as in his verse:

Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me:
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And threefold in soft Beulah's night
And twofold always, may God us keep
From single vision and Newton's sleep!

En route Jesus meets ten lepers (people who have an itch, which we all do in one way or another), one a Samaritan, whose presence no doubt makes the nine Jewish lepers feel superior by comparison (that seems to be the way our world works). The ten live in isolation, quarantined. (Do not different ethnicities, races, even individuals, put themselves under some kind of quarantine, keeping to their own kind, avoiding strangers, even as we pass individuals in some supermarket as if we might catch something?) Jesus tells them to go get a formal declaration of

their cure at the Temple in Jerusalem (a kind of clinic as much as a place of worship) – knowing that their cure will happen even as they leave his presence.

Only the Samaritan returns to thank Jesus; only he, beyond being cured of his physical disease, crossed a line into the realm of God, of grace, of transformation. He comes alive! He cries out in loud voice, *hupestrepse meta phones megales* (as do great poets). He prostrates himself at the feet of Jesus, thanking him (the word used is *eucharistion*). The others were physically healed but chose to be satisfied with only physical health. This saddens Jesus. At any rate he says to the physically and soulfully cured Samaritan something that brightens Jesus' own horizon: *Anastas, Rise and go*. Of course he came to say the same to all of us.

October 16th – 29th Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 18: 1-18

Here we have a parable, an extended metaphor or figure of speech which we must allow ourselves to experience. It's a situation in which a widow (extremely marginal, extremely vulnerable, written off by society, possibly even by relatives, a drag upon the resources of the younger generation) who is also ignored by the courts of law. The judge assigned to her case, her validated claims of, say, elder neglect by someone, maybe her family, couldn't care less when her case is settled, some award made. He had served in courts too long to be in a hurry, to feel any sympathy for people; his own comfort came first.

But this woman, rated as low priority, wouldn't let up. She would not be ignored, put down, forgotten. She pestered the judge constantly (maybe at choice times, like when he was climbing into bed after a hard day). Finally, the judge concludes: "Schedule her case for tomorrow, first thing in the morning. Let's settle it lest she begin to get violent and embarrass me in public." Jewish humor? I can imagine Harvey Korman or Sid Caesar thinking up a skit around this issue with either one of them or Mel Brooks playing the judge and Madeline Kahn, the widow.

But again the figure of speech opens us up to the realm of God, the wider world of divine grace (in which St. Paul exulted). True, it dares initially to cast God, the Judge, the Author of laws, the God of the Pharisees, as not wanting to be bothered, as viewing the widow as insignificant, not worth his time. It's an almost blasphemous image of God as mainly juridical, wearing a blindfold to keep things impersonal. (I think I remember that kind of God; that was a big part of the mountain they put on my back.)

But the widow defies that image; she demands justice; she demands even more: she demands attention, consideration; she demands being taken personally; she demands that God – the Judge – become personal, caring about her case, that he become grace, that he become love. It's as if she is pleading for a God of grace in place of an indifferent, distant, self-absorbed potentate, hiding within an inner sanctum.

The widow as such (and Jesus as her ventriloquist) encourages us not to be shy but to *demand* a world of grace (and of course justice); not just to hope for but to *demand* acknowledgement of our radical worth from the day of our birth. Something true God would willingly and enthusiastically do if we ourselves and our teachers and the literal, paranoid world we live in were not so *closed* to his symphonic Word, his stories, parables, proverbs, the narrative drama of his poets, the good news, the "World" of the Morning Star and the Mystical Rose and the Bread of Life and the Inn on the Road to Emmaus where sudden surprises take place.

October 23rd – 30th Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 18: 9 – 14

Another brief but perfect parable, an extended scene within a temple. A Pharisee, quite content with his conformity to the Law, stands in isolation (egocentric) from anyone else. "God," he says, "I'm so grateful that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, people like this compromised Jew who works for the Roman Empire. I fast twice a week, give a tenth of all I earn." You can imagine him taking out his examination of conscience notebook with a weekly total of the virtues practiced – and you can imagine God staring at him blankly and wondering: "Is this for real?" On the other hand the ostracized publican stands off, not even raising his eyes to heaven – sorrowful, hardly expecting praise, longing only for forgiveness.

Which of the two is closer to: *The milkie way, the bird of Paradise, Church-bells beyond the stars . . . The land of spices, something understood.*

I think the Pharisee is so caught up in this competitive world, subject to a superego that even perfection could not satisfy, more depersonalized by the literal law than by getting to know Christ personally, that he can't see past himself. "Only when I'm faultless – only then can I say: therefore I am." But from God's point of view – you already ARE – and are as important to God as the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son.

October 30th – 31st Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 19:1-10

This episode about the tax collector Zacchaeus is recorded by Luke as an actual event during Jesus' passage through Jericho en route to Jerusalem and his arrest. So it is not a parable. But that doesn't prevent us from taking an actual event like this and interpreting it as a parable. As such we enter the event as Zacchaeus and the key thing about the narrative is *that Zacchaeus, being too short to see Jesus, runs ahead and climbs a tree to catch sight of Jesus when he arrives.* What does that mean? Zacchaeus is trying to see Jesus and eventually *all things* from a better vantage point!

Until now he has been collecting taxes, adding and subtracting, working under the oversight of the totalitarian Roman Empire and amid the disdain of his Jewish countrymen who see him as a traitor. And even though it pays off in impersonal cash and houses, material possessions, something is missing. Maybe it's this Jesus and what he has to offer. But Zacchaeus is too short, having lived a constricted, bureaucratic life. So he runs ahead to where? He advances from his literal, material, prosaic way of seeing things toward that frontier we've been talking about where metaphor raises our stature, widens our range of perception, catches the attention of Christ who says: "Zacchaeus . . . I must house with you today."

Henceforth Zacchaeus will be at home in a realm where again Mary as a Tower of Ivory, a House of Gold is the only way to see her; where bread and wine become panis angelicus (the bread of angels), where a transformed Zacchaeus may even say of himself what Gerard Manley Hopkins said of himself at the close of one of his most marvelous poems: *Enough! The Resurrection, / A heart's- clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection. / Across my foundering deck shone / A beacon, an eternal beam. . . / In a flash, at a trumpet's crash, / I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and / This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond.*

Welcome to the world of living metaphor – transformation.