

Liturgical Readings for October, 2018 Cycle B

Far away places / With strange sounding names / Faraway over the sea / Those faraway places / With strange sounding names / Are calling, calling me // Going to China / or maybe Siam / I want to see for myself / Those faraway places / I've been reading about / In a book that I took from a shelf. . .

It seems a common thing among us human beings to long for horizons to cross. All these cruises older people take nowadays. How many stories and even actual adventures have to do with reaching beyond what we see and know - accounts of explorations even up to our modern quest to visit the moon and outer space in general. In story form we do it all the time in episodes of Star Trek and movies like Star Wars. Remember the theme:

These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise . . . to explore strange new worlds . . . To boldly go where no man has gone before!

It's like life is seen as a series of concentric perimeters – at least as we look back over our past – that we had to cross – always to be confronted by another horizon – say a job offer or a person whose influence turns us in a new direction or an event like Vatican II that deposits us into a revised liturgy and Church. All of this bespeaks change, desirable change if we are bored within our current horizon, if we need a fresh landscape to stimulate our curiosity, open up a future other than our past.

But we also age and what could be interpreted as progress in our earlier years can give way to a kind of “been there, done that” as routine takes over. We bog down – de-energized. Crossing horizons, change takes effort and we lean toward a settling down into what's familiar and secure – less demanding.

And yet tomorrow is always another day, in other words we can't let go of advancing somehow technically or by way of our imagination – to visit Siam or invade France or freeze to death in Antarctica or submerge with Jules Verne to the bottom of the sea, so that modern philosophers look for **the why of all this**. There must be some **more radical need** than what travel agencies or economics promote, something we are looking for but can't seem to find as individuals and as human kind. And the really deep thinkers conclude: **we are unconsciously driven by our forgetfulness of Being (with a capital B).**

Especially in these our modern times we feel lost and lonely among the endless beings with a small b (birds, bees, flowers, hills, clouds, barbers, dancers, planets, stars, chairs, rockets, butterflies, microbes) that surround us; no longer aware of our being linked to that Being (with a capital B) which unites all such beings as their common Source – which Source a theologian will call the Breath of God that hovered over the dark waters of Genesis and said: Let there be light.

Forgetful of our origin, fragmented in such a way that the space between you and me and a humming bird and between Samaria and Jerusalem might take light years to traverse (that's how far away we are from each other) even though we think we might measure the distance in inches, yards or miles . . . Such forgetfulness is what drives us to cross horizons in every which direction, to find out what we have forgotten - to return to, to

remember the Whence, the Source, the Origin which even now still unites all beings (with s small b) (whether we are conscious of it or not) - as a cosmic family always at home but never knowing it.

And so, according to philosophers and theologians, sooner or later our momentum flags; horizons tend to weary us, travel, be it physical or metaphysical, promises only exhaustion. We meet what scholars have called our limits or limit situations of which two have been identified.

On the one hand: we discover we have a life threatening disease. Or we suffer the loss of someone without whom there can be no tomorrow. Or we reach the limits of our rational ability to explain things – we run out of answers. Or we can no longer bear the hollowness of the daily news or even of entertainment that we once prized. The old songs go flat. The wine goes sour. The charm of places we have known seems gone.

Or as David Tracy puts it: *We begin to experience the everyday . . . world, as suddenly unreal: petty, strange, foreign . . .* We neither feel at home as we did before nor expectant of any future. All the meanings that we have taken for granted seem to have given way to a dead end – as expressed in the sick joke told during the great Flu epidemic of 1918: *I opened the window and influenza.*

[Are we living in such a political moment even now, stymied, wondering what has happened to the familiarity, the continuity of our institutions – secular and sacred? Are we up against a wall in more ways than one?]

On the other hand, more positively speaking: there are *limit* situations that *leave us suddenly and unexpectedly awake*, surprised, speechless as having arrived somewhere we never intended, again like Keats's conquistador upon a peak in Darien seeing the vast Pacific for the first time or Keats himself upon opening Chapman's translation of Homer - or again as David Tracy puts it:

. . . we all find, however momentarily, that we can and do transcend our usual lacklustre selves and our usual everyday worlds to touch upon a dimension of experience which cannot be stated adequately in the language of ordinary, everyday experience. Authentic love, both erotic and agapic, puts us in touch with a reality whose power we cannot deny . . . While its power lasts, we experience the rest of our lives as somehow shadowy. The 'real world' no longer seems real. We find ourselves affirming the reality of ecstatic experience, [and this is the startling thing about such a horizon, we experience it] not as something merely decided upon by us. In all such authentic moments of ecstasy, we experience a reality simply given, gifted, happened.

I might add: graced.

For example:

It's like the fellow who **stumbles upon a treasure hidden** in a field or **sights a pearl** of great price. In both cases the individual is left confronting a future unexpected and suddenly electrifying. The region into which we have stumbled has taken the initiative; the experience takes **us** by the hand, it speaks to **us** poetically and if we do not recoil we may begin to *live* poetically as is the manner of whoever or whatever took us by the hand, and not just prosaically, myopically thereafter.

It's like that experience I had during a lecture in Rome in 1958, which I have mentioned before, which was triggered by one loaded word: **access** in chapter five of Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, whereby you might say the hand of a once remote God reached out of his Holy of Holies and drew me into an intimacy I could hardly trust though so deeply desired – a word that in its context became a wide open gateway into a convinced and ever unfolding understanding of what grace and God are all about – a turning point from which happily I have never recovered.

It's like having lived amid rumors of angels only at last to experience an angelic visitation such as Luke portrays in his Annunciation to Mary – leaving you pregnant with so absolute a sense of liberation despite one's remaining like the risen Lazarus, still somewhat bound by the frayed winding sheets in which he had been buried.

It's like, after so many borders crossed, one arrives at a future that turns out to be the home of which I have spoken above, **the house of Being with a capital B** within which we human beings and the universe originated so long ago – **become present again**, ever in a kind of Advent toward us – an experience exhibited in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, who is surprised he is being embraced by his father **even before he can begin** to apologize for leaving home, even before he can begin to apologize as he had learned so often to do for even existing.

It's like that passage in Dickens's story *Great Expectations* in which a stout lawyer from London shows up Joe Gargery's blacksmith forge and says with a kind of finality, even authority, *I am the bearer of an offer to relieve you of this young fellow, your apprentice [Pip]. . . And the communication I have got to make is, that he has great expectations . . . that he will come into a handsome property, that he be immediately removed from his present sphere of life and from this place, and be brought up as a gentleman – in a word, as a young fellow of great expectations.* Later regarding that evening Pip mused: *I put my light out, and crept into bed; and it was an uneasy bed now, and I never slept the old sound sleep in it any more.*

Or it's like a poem by Kathy Evans called *Today in Juvy* where she worked with juvenile inmates, cultivating among them a taste for poetry. Until one day a boy named Marcel offers to recite his own creation – about the anguish he and his girl friend felt over the loss of an infant child. And he expects ridicule from these tough dudes, saying *Now, I know you're gonna want to laugh / when I sing my poem / and I'll just ask you brothers / to wait . . . By the time he finished . . . the brothers in the back wanted to sing too . . . I swear the whole class was stunned / . . . the guards by the door, . . . the police officer in blue, / the nurse who dispensed small pale pills in dixie cups, / the poetry teacher, who was all of a sudden / just one of them . . . with Marcel / and the brothers up in Juvy / because sometimes a poem / just wants to be sung.*

Or finally, it's like that poem about the experience of absolute grace written by Emily Dickinson:

*'Hope' is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

*And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird
That keeps so many warm –*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of Me.*

Exodus

Such border crossings or limit situations can hardly be news to us who have inherited our biblical tradition. Abraham, a nomad who bounces from one oasis to another, is suddenly summoned to “go to the land I will show you”. A promised land flowing with milk and honey.

Then the sons of Jacob, up against a famine, choose to live – eventually as slaves - within the limits of Egypt until the fugitive Moses, inspecting a desert tree on fire senses a voice summoning him and his Israelite people to cross a water barrier and desert in quest of again a promised land. And when the Israelites fall into the habit of their neighbors and set boundaries to their terrain and adopt stable, not fluid, institutions – a state and a church and laws setting limits within limits within limits – a winged being touches the lips of Isaiah while the Lord says, *Whom shall I send?* And Isaiah says *Here I am, send me.* Then a young Jeremiah hears a voice saying *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a poet to the nations . . . see I place my words in your mouth.*

And during their later captivity in ancient Babylon these same Jews hear prophets saying:

Arise, shake off the dust, sit enthroned . . . ; Loose the bonds from your neck, captive daughter Zion! For thus says the LORD: For nothing you were sold, [so also] without money [without any need for a pay-off or ransom,] you shall be redeemed [free of charge].

And all of this followed by the constant New Testament refrain of *Come, follow me.*

The Autumn Gospel Readings:

One can trace the theme outlined above of limit situations **in the ecstatic sense** throughout these chapters of Mark.

For instance, going back to chapter 8 Jesus tells his disciples to beware of the leaven, the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod and they conclude they must be out of bread. And Jesus complains of how hardened, how limited their hearts, their imaginations must be **because he has just turned five loaves of bread into enough to feed five thousand people, with some left over – something he did again later.** And they still don't understand! In other words they are stuck within the familiar boundaries of human expectation, the yeast of Pharisees (Law) and politics while he has been leading them across their limit situation into an experience of fullness of life.

And to draw them into such a realm **he next takes a blind man** who only wanted a touch of what Jesus was about – and Jesus, taking him out of his usual dim environment (as Father Lyonnet in Rome took me out of my shallow pietism) asked: **Do you see anything? And the man replied, I see people looking like trees and walking.** And that's all we ever see – things distorted, unclear, final in all their superficiality. And Jesus touches him a second time – and he saw clearly – distinctly – everything for what it really is **as emerging out of Being with a capital B.**

And then he tests his disciples again: **What does opinion say about me?** What do the rabbis say, the merchants, the philosophers, the entertainers say . . . And they come up short every time – just **like the blind fellow who saw things blurred.** And who do you say I am? And by golly their vision has passed ever so interestingly beyond the limit condition that stymies them – **You are the Anointed.** But not far enough because Jesus adds to their perception: Because I am Anointed, christened, I will appear as an alien, deportable, a dead man.. And Peter bridles at that revelation; **you mean to cross into where you stand, within the really real, one has somehow to die?** Yes, but again death carries a double meaning like everything else beyond your logic. It can translate into someone very alive.

The October Gospel Readings: Mark 10: 2 ff. ; 10:17 ff. ; 10:35 ff. ; 10: 45ff.

This theme of limit situations, of horizons that reach out to us, draw us out of limit situations that fail to fulfill our deepest needs – continues through this month.

In Mark 10: 2 ff. Pharisees confront Jesus with the boundaries of their Law. They ask him about divorce – which their law allows in certain cases. Jesus is recorded as holding marriage to be indissoluble – the two become one flesh. Or that is what Mark's early church held. Later, Matthew allows an exception. Things loosen up and loose ends suggest that legal limits need not be hard and fast.

But where the mind of Jesus comes through clearly is in his taking children and saying the realm beyond the limit situations we meet, the realm of surprise and ecstasy **requires the fertile imagination, the readiness for wonder that children are quick to experience from the first buttercup they see to the fairy tales and stained glass windows of Jesus walking on the waters . . .** Such an openness to all that consoles, promises, truly embraces us is the only thing required.

In Mark 10: 17 ff. A young man comes up to Jesus to ask what he must do to experience eternal, fullness of life. Jesus first alerts him to the Law, the standard commandments of his creed – has he reached that standard or target or limit? He says yes. Jesus says, Well then all you have to do is embrace an ethic of excess, of overflow, of abundance - live beyond the limits of the Law – live abundantly, give of yourself as God gives – full of

grace. In other words Jesus reaches out to him from where Jesus himself stands – and sadly, arriving at fullness of life becomes less interesting to this young man, less comfortable than the complacency he really wants.

In Mark 10: 35 ff. The disciples James and John misunderstand where Jesus would invite them. They want to advance beyond the boundaries they have known – that of working class fishermen. They see in Jesus a promise of upward mobility – a topmost rank within an institution like other institutions, security, a lifetime job on say a Supreme Court, or rank of Cardinal, the highest available short of becoming a Pope. Jesus invites them to drink the cup he will drink, the magic potion of authentic love as made present to us in the Eucharist, to take a plunge into in the vast Pacific of authentic Being whereby there is so much more of you to give than token blessings.

In Mark 10:46 ff. All of the boundary or limit encounters which are presented to us liturgically at every Mass are summed up in this episode where again we meet a blind man, a man stuck in place, bound by horizons familiar and impenetrable, who cries out to Jesus – in a kind of desperation to see more than the passing crowd. He asks for pity. Jesus stops. His disciples say Get up (rise from the roadside, get into the flow of life) - Jesus is calling you, grace is reaching out to you. Then he throws away his cloak, unburdens himself, reveals himself, springs up – alive, no longer sedentary, passively begging for a handout. The limit situation, the horizon at which he has stopped, dead in his tracks, opens up. He received his sight – his vision of a wider, deeper world of Being with a capital B – and followed Jesus on his way – mobility, vitality, one transparent horizon after another.

Closure:

Whatever limits or boundaries we cross, driven by our forgetfulness of Being with a capital B, it's grace that guides us. Crossing is not just our doing, an exercise of our will power. It's like the man on the flying trapeze. He swings back and forth on one trapeze and then lets go, except just as he is about to fall into an abyss, another trapeze comes toward him – to catch and thrill the crowd. That saving trapeze, whatever it might be – an event, a person, a passage in a book, a sunset – didn't just happen to be there; it was sent by the very Source of our Being – often depicted as an angel or the sound of music or Jesus himself reaching out as he did to Peter as Peter was about to sink into a sea.

One of the more effective statements about the nature of this grace that graces us is made by General Lorens Lowenhielm in the story *Babette's Feast*. In his youth the future general had visited a coastal village where two pious sisters presided over an austere sect - and he partook of their tasteless fare yet was charmed by the sister named Martine. But events and her puritanism kept them apart – and his life went its worldly way until he is invited in his retired years to dine again with the now aged sect but this time at a dinner prepared by the French refugee Babette – as delightful as any you could get in Paris. And Lorens and Martine, uninhibited by Babette's eucharist, are able to rekindle a now mature and deep affection after all without regrets. So that when it came time to deliver a toast at the close of the meal, Lorens offers a commentary on the biblical Psalm 85: 10: *Mercy and Truth have met together*. Here is what he says:

Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. Man, in his weakness and shortsightedness believes he must make choices in this life. He trembles at the risks he takes . . .

*But no! **Our** choice is of no importance. There comes a time when our eyes are opened and we come to realize that mercy is infinite. We need only await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude. Mercy imposes no conditions. And lo! Everything we have chosen has been granted to us. And everything we rejected has also been granted. Yes, we even get back what we rejected. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.*

In other words the ultimate truth worth knowing is Mercy; all the other truths you may learn through science or philosophy or any other means and all the things you may achieve in life fall short of the one divine thing we all need to know: which is Mercy, Grace. The ultimate justice we shall ever find is Merciful – when justice evolves into Mercy, when Grace is our ultimate choice – when that kiss occurs, we shall have peace, we shall have bliss.