

Liturgical (Selected) Readings – October 2019

Narrative Identity – *Becoming a Who instead of a What*

Last time we met I spoke of the pre-eminence of narrative discourse, story telling, as our means of learning the truth about ourselves and about the source and direction of our lives. In contrast to abstract discourse (as in philosophy) and descriptive discourse (simply explaining things as they are – cause and effect, characteristics, qualities, information), narrative discourse by the use of a plot, images, metaphors, including emotion, carries us off into the flow of life, stage upon stage, crisis upon crisis, toward some *developing* sense of who we really are and whither time seems to direct us -- toward a more personal, more radical understanding of our world and ourselves. *In the beginning was the parable . . .*

The Berenstain Bears

Since then I read an article by Henry Venema, currently [I think] an associate professor of philosophy at Brandon University in Canada, in which he leads off by describing the effect of books about the Berenstain Bears (a family of bears who live in a tree-house) upon his daughter. Personally I never knew of this series of children's books when my sons were growing up. Venema mentions that on evenings his daughter never tired of hearing them over and over again.

Each new book brought on a transformation of her world. He might drift off to sleep but she would elbow him to finish a story, bring it to completion. Her ever-expanding imagination wanted some narrative closure. Not some kind of *logical* closure as would be expected of problems dished out in elementary school – such as *Mary has 24 marbles which is 8 fewer than Paul has. How many marbles does Paul have?* with the expectation of clear answers, no loose ends - one thing the direct, verifiable consequence of another.

As Venema puts it (influenced by Paul Ricoeur) narratives appeal to and transform our imagination, refigure our world of experience. Rather than logic, his daughter wanted to *experience* the story's closure, *the joy, the surprise of its resolution* or even its sadness if there is no closure; if the story ends tragically she may want to cry. Venema goes on to say: *reading [stories, plots] opens my world to endless possibilities, to variations of myself. I can imagine myself as a character within a story because I too am a character within my own story. I can identify with narrative characters because my identity is inherently narrative in structure.*

Finding one's own narrative identity

Let me repeat what Henry Venema just said in relation to one's own personal transformation as derivative from reading narratives: *I can imagine myself as a character within a story because I too am a character within my own story.*

I have tried to convince you of that over the past two months showing how certain incidents recounted out of my past have spoken to me later in life, awakening me to

a deeper, wider context and understanding of my life journey by way of the incidents themselves. There was the one about that fragment of memory I retained in which I witness the sudden death of a person struck by a truck, its brakes off, gliding down a hill to collide with her car. And I wondered whether that was a dream or actual memory. And how many years later a 1930's film rerun revealed the very same incident, seen by me when I was about four years old – and how that rerun released me of my long confusion – showing me the *whole picture* of which the incident was but a piece. The closure experienced was a kind of psychological closure for me, even theological in so far as it confirmed my faith in the incidents of one's life leading to some conclusion, a compelling conclusion – things coming together someday, a sense of destiny.

Then I recounted that moment when a childhood friend sent me a group picture of parish altar boys taken when I was eleven years old – and of how, having been moved from school to school over 8 years of elementary education, I always felt like odd man out – until I was confronted by myself in playful association with those other boys – relaxed, smiling, friend to them all – that I was after all not an odd man out but clearly in the picture then – and probably even where I reside now. And I felt a sense of homecoming – a sense of belonging to my world in terms theological as much as psychological.

Let me narrate another such experience – in retrospect:

When I was twelve years old and a mere tenderfoot boy scout, our troop went on a weekend trip to Treasure Island – a Boy Scout lodge situated in the middle of the Delaware River, just a few miles above the place where George Washington crossed to surprise the Hessians at Trenton.

We were a mixture of Catholic and Protestant boys – and it being Sunday we Catholics rose early and walked several miles to attend Mass in Frenchtown, New Jersey – to avoid committing a mortal sin! It was a wintry day, snow on the ground.

Later when we were getting ready to leave the island, being a tenderfoot scout, relatively new, I was taken aside by the older scouts and mentors and sent off to fetch an urgently needed bucket of steam. So I naively went off, wandering through the forest landscape, finding nothing. So I returned to tell them so. “No matter,” they said. “We don't need it now. What we need are some skyhooks.” So off I went again up along the shore of the island. After about a half hour I came upon a narrow pier and decided to look beneath it. And *there* they were, twelve skyhooks tightly tied to an iron bar. [Being a city boy I didn't realize they were canoe anchors.] I returned just as the last boat was leaving and said to my mentors, “I found the skyhooks but I couldn't cut them loose.” They eyed me curiously and told me to get into the boat.

Of course later the veteran scouts clued me in to the joke. And I spent subsequent years retaining a sense of stupidity at my falling for it. Where the heck was my mind? Buckets of steam, skyhooks! Until I grew into the wider history of my times

[as that incident grew in my memory] – of how such jokes were – even unconsciously to the perpetrators – modern ways to relieve our minds of fables, myths, creeds whose rational, empirical foundations were nil – tendencies of an obsolete sense of reality. No skyhooks, no buckets of steam . . . therefore no angels, no heaven, no miracles, no God; images being bankrupt, no world, no self beyond mere matter, ultimate emptiness as far as the desires of our hearts are concerned, indeed hearts don't desire, they just pump.

But the resonance of my memory about that moment in my life led ultimately to my pitying the tricksters – who even then, when I said I had indeed found the skyhooks but couldn't cut them loose, staggered almost imperceptibly for a moment, lost their footing – and then recollecting themselves, told me to get into the boat . . . which boat (as a metaphor) took me not simply to the western shore of the Delaware River but to where I am today – launched even back then into the value of metaphor as maybe truer than fact.

As in the Book of the prophet Amos: The Lord asked, "What do you see, Amos?" And he answered, *A basket of over ripe fruit*. And the LORD said to him: *The kingdom of Israel has come to an end*. [It *IS* a basket of over ripe fruit – ready to rot.]

Cumulation and Culmination

Now these are only three incidents – narrated now – in my life. And our tendency – in the rush of everydayness – makes us forget the link they retain. Our memories trail behind us, each in some kind of isolation. They lose their momentum and stay *put* at this or that moment of our lives. We can call them up – but more like items out of a filing cabinet.

We do the same when we turn to the literature of the Bible – we isolate a story, say like that about Ruth or the Tower of Babel or the raising of Jairus's daughter. Of the Gospel material scholars refer to episodes as pericopes (from the Greek *peri* and *koptein*) – in other words as cutouts – episodes that can be detached and placed on the slide of a microscope. We experience this approach to Scripture at every Eucharist where a piece of the Old Testament and of a Gospel is read – within a few minutes – in isolation from the flow of the text to which they belong. The parking lot takes preference over our in depth comprehension and transformation.

In other words we forget the continuity of one episode after another, of one experience in our lives with experiences prior to and after that one experience. We fail to see that all our experiences are part of a plot; they accumulate and culminate as we progress, that we are in a *flow* of experiences that aim somewhere. We side-track ourselves. Failing to notice their cumulative effect, we forget our experiences. Our past becomes but the wake of a ship, fading into oblivion.

Let's look more closely

Just looking at those three narratives of that short span of time when I was a boy, the more I review them the more they illuminate what was happening back then and has been happening ever since – in subsequent experiences.

In the one about the fragment of my memory of a freak accident and my subsequent understanding of it in the rerun of the whole film on TV, I was delivered out of a kind of ignorance, bewilderment, an event without beginning and meaning – just a random but disturbing event. Once I recovered the whole story I felt redeemed, I *felt* something, I actually stood up and said: *This is it!* It wasn't that I now knew something in a more factual way. It was a kind of resolution. The horizon of my memory, my mind had widened, took in more space, more time – lifted me out of my being lost in space and time. Isn't that what the whole Bible story and other dramas and novels and poems try to do – widen our grasp of who we are, what existence is all about, deliver us from being lost in time and space?

Or take the photo of us parish altar boys. Having attended so many schools so early in my life I had been living, as I said, feeling myself a passing stranger in whatever situation I was in. No sooner was I in high school than I wanted to leave to enter a Franciscan order way up in New York (as a more affirmative or safer environment than where I was). I never graduated with my class. Always kept a low profile – in fact, I first requested admission to become a lay brother in the order, feeling not up to the education required of a priest. If it weren't for my old eighth grade teacher reproving me for even thinking of being a lay brother – I might be buried today in Graymoor's old cemetery among the brothers I later knew. And then many years later, having by then resigned the priesthood and retreated from a budding academic career to become lost in the crowd – among other things - that group picture arrived out of my past and showed me to be “one of the guys” – already a legitimate face amid a band of brothers, a qualified member of the human race, this globe my home.

So once again the episode seems to be about coming out of the shadows – whatever their cultural cause may have been – stepping into the light of self appreciation, the courage to recognize one's worth, whatever skills one had, one's solidarity with his world, and join that procession Flannery O'Connor narrates in her story called “Revelation”: *There was only a purple streak in the sky . . . like an extension of a highway . . . Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven.*

And now the one about the bucket of steam

Lost in time and space. And somebody tells me to look for a bucket of steam or some skyhooks – and I go off through a wintry landscape looking for such illusions – taking their word for it. Again a bewildered kid who doesn't know very much within the small periphery of his mind.

And then the shock. The laughter of the others, my feeling foolish, a lesser being than the brighter fellows around me. Except my own naivete won the day. It was

they who were bewildered. I had said something that made me feel – without knowing why – that I was one up on them. They weren't laughing anymore. "I found the skyhooks but I couldn't cut them loose." Who was pulling whose leg? I was on the verge of my eventually – over time - arriving at the horizon of metaphorical vision (about which they knew nothing) as the trump card to arrogant rationalism – and this event in my life remains a milestone along that path.

Scripture

The literature of our biblical tradition is all about continuity, the accumulation of experiences, a projected culmination – like the river the prophet Ezekiel saw flowing from the new Temple of Jerusalem, shallow at first but soon reaching to Ezekiel's knees, then his waist and becoming so deep as to compel him to swim . . . as the river flowed on to empty into the Dead Sea to refresh its polluted waters – a river teeming with every kind of living creature, on whose bank every kind of fruit tree will grow; their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail . . . whose leaves are medicinal . . . That's how the incidents of your life, your dreams accumulate and deepen on their way to sweetening this world of ours.

In medias res (starting from the middle of the story)

The Old Testament really begins with the story of Israel's Exodus from slavery in Egypt – liberation, the discovery of human and divine transcendence, humanity not just one more species of animal life, dominated by nature, but rather the conductor of a cosmic symphony. It's only then that the compilers of the Old Testament reconnect us with the time *before* the Exodus, they write their book backwards – to show it as an exodus out of earlier moments of redemption. We start with creation in Genesis – a world emerges out of chaotic water summoned by a command: Let there be light. Even the Adam story, which begins in a desert, has to do with water, life, fluidity emerging by way of rivers creating an oasis – which is what our globe *is* amid the galaxies of our universe.

Then regression sets in, Cain kills Abel – but this is followed by a laconic remark: the birth of Seth at whose time people began to invoke the Lord by name. To be followed by regression, a return to chaos, a universal flood – but out of which an Ark, a seedling, containing a remnant of humanity and all the animals two by two – a recovery of existence . . . incremental, cumulating experiences . . . pulling away from non-existence and unconsciousness – and then a deluge of another kind, totalitarianism, everyone speaking the same language, uniformity, arrogance, "top of the world, ma!"

[An amusing parallel to this Babel confusion is an episode from *The House of the Seven Gables* wherein Hepzibah Pyncheon, a nervous old woman who resides in that house with her morose brother Clifford, brooding under the weight of the past, both avoiding contact with the outside world, ventures to open a modest shop in her basement to be stocked with random items – like gingerbreads and apples and beans and a box of marbles for children. She does so nervously but necessarily otherwise she might starve. And everything has to be orderly; under control; even

allowing access to that outside world is worrisome. And what happens? She spills a box of marbles all over the shop floor so that this elderly woman must go down on her knees to re-collect these absconding entities that defy her grasp. Like her world falling apart just as she had suspected – except that at that moment a young cousin named Phoebe, meaning radiance, knocks on the ancient door, who will contribute to Hepzibah and her brother’s exodus from the gloom of their old mansion and their history.]

Just as the confusion of Babel leads to the arrival of Abraham, a wandering Aramean – wandering and old and childless . . . yet told to advance “to the fertile land I will show you and far from being childless, you and your Sarah shall be the source of offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky.”

We could go on – but what the literature does is show a flow of maturation from age to age – pivoting on the Exodus as a central feature – and on through the history of Israel – like the experiences of your life – advancing, deepening our understanding of ourselves and our world – *in narrative form* – not philosophical. Leading to the prophets who in hard times recall and project the momentum; leading to the New Testament and the progression of the story of Christ from one episode to another, one miracle, one hyperbole after another – even to a resurrection from the dead – Jesus becoming an authentic Who (Who do people say that I am?) – even as we are to become a Who! instead of a what.

If you want to know who you are, who you are becoming, pause to study your own narrative, pay attention to events that moved you, and study your biblical narrative, and read the stories of your heritage – the profound ones.

The Eucharist

And the continuity is upheld sacramentally in our Eucharist – liturgically – whereby the banquets of Egypt’s Passover and the banquets of the parables and the table fellowship of Jesus and the Last Supper before his death and the dinner at Emmaus after his resurrection all accumulate – in the Eucharist – recounting during the liturgy of the Word episodes out of this long gestation of real history – which if fully understood should become a frequent recharge and orientation toward the narrative of your own life – your own narrative identity – the real you, gestating still.

All of which the hymns of Israel celebrate and remind us as in Psalm 95: *Oh, that today you would hear his voice: Harden not your hearts . . .*

The readings for October – Cycle C

I’m just going to touch upon a couple or three to show how they link to the trend I have been presenting.

You and I often become frustrated with life not conforming to our design – which emphasizes comfort, no pain, clear sailing. And so we identify with the prophet

Habakkuk on the first Sunday of October: *How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen! . . . Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and clamorous discord.* And what does the Lord answer? Something about time as grace inevitable: *Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late. The rash one has no integrity; but the just one, because of his faith, shall live.* And so I have written the vision down in these notes – and don't forget to pick up a copy.

And then in Luke 17, first Sunday of October we hear: *If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you.*" Indeed if I had any faith at the age when those experiences I mentioned occurred – it was but the size of a mustard seed. But it has grown to a much greater maturity ever since and moved mountains of negativity and doubt.

And as for the story of Naaman the Syrian in the first reading for October 13th – if you read the whole story, Naaman was insulted when the prophet Elisha told him to rid himself of leprosy by bathing in the Jordan. "Bathe in that filthy river? God forbid!" he said. Immerse myself in the river of time as if it might revive my real self – God forbid. What I want to do is stop the world – I want to get off." But he did immerse himself in this fluid life element called time – and he came to the surface with the skin of a newborn infant.

And as for the Gospel parable at the end of October about the *Pharisee and the tax collector*, let me elaborate a bit. Back in seminary days this parable had a bad effect. It was the tax collector's **posture** - the fact that he took his place in the back of the Temple and did not even raise his eyes to heaven and beat his breast and acknowledged that he was a sinner – unworthy of entry into that sacred place. **And this became our model of piety:** cast your eyes down (or roll them up to a distant heaven), beat your breast, grovel – translate them into the characteristics of sanctity and if that arouses envy among your confreres, well it can't be helped, not everybody can be a saint.

But in what way is such posturing any different from that of the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not like the rest of men?

No – in keeping with the constant emphasis of Jesus and later of Saint Paul - the key elements in this story are the contrast between the Law and Mercy (Grace). The Pharisee expressed the confidence of his sect in his ability to keep the Law of Moses and all its corollaries – to the crossing of the t's and dotting of the i's . . . resulting in a report card that was all A's. Whereas Jesus requires that people exceed the letter of the law – that they expand with mercy even as they experience God as mercy. And Paul claims the Law is actually ineffective, that there is no Pharisee who can make the claim of the one in this parable – for the Law brings only

consciousness of our failure to keep it – that it's the influx, the discovery of God's being merciful, sheer Grace, that raises us to an excess of goodness and mercy.

In other words the parable pivots on Law versus Mercy as in the tax collector's words: O God, be merciful to me a sinner. Experiencing mercy, his righteousness will be based on his being merciful, too – to an excess. The Pharisee has locked himself into an illusion of perfection equivalent to a straight jacket – or a shroud. There is no front seat or back seat to which people are assigned – there is only intimacy with our Source of Being at every breath we take.

The Holy Scriptures II

by George Herbert – 1593-1633 (died at age 39)

Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
 And the configurations of their glory!
 Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,
 But all the constellations of the story.

This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
 Unto a third, . . . :
 Then as dispersed herbs do watch a potion,
 These three make up some Christian's destiny:

Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
 And comments on thee: for in ev'ry thing
 Thy words do find me out, and parallels bring,
 And in another make me understood.

Stars are poor books, and oftentimes do miss:
 This book of stars lights to eternal bliss.