

Liturgical Readings for September 2018 – Cycle B

Introduction: Tell Walter I said hey . . .

There is that scene in the *Book of Exodus* where God appears to Moses and sends him on a mission to Egypt to free his people. And Moses responds: *If I go to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is his name? what do I tell them? God replied to Moses: I am who I am . . . tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.*

And now imagine Rene Descartes, the 17th century father of our modern world, dashing in from the wings to interrupt God’s dialogue with Moses by shouting, *I think, therefore I am!* Note the accentuation. And in effect he means, because I think, because I can reason and calculate I have become the subject of whatever sentences shall be written from this day forth. I shall decipher nature, I shall control and unravel nature by way of my science and technology. And I shall view the world around me with an insatiable appetite as an array of *objects* passive to my thought, my analysis, touch, indeed, my grip: trees, rocks, oceans, clouds, people, gas, animals, vegetation . . . all shall be the *object* of my investigation, control and use. And so we have Highway 12 to say nothing of Manhattan and lethal projectiles and a loss of faith.

Yet during the past century philosophers and theologians have questioned the authority of Descartes’ Age of Reason. Thinking is not confined to calculation, to the stretch of mathematical measurements, to evidence in a strictly objective way – like knowing the number of light years away a star may be or that it is mainly composed of hydrogen and helium. No! Thinking means to be *thoughtful* – and thoughtful individuals have been trying to teach us that we are not the subject with a capital S who defines and engineers the mere, mindless objects which share our place in this universe.

Indeed, thoughtful people turn the sentence around and declare that we human beings are ourselves objects which nature in all its detail addresses, speaks to us, touches us in ways (as artists well know) that can change, even improve our existence – like trees, rocks, oceans, clouds, animals, still life, events of nature, events of every kind like a snow storm at night in Thomas Mann’s book *The Magic Mountain* or a candle flickering before a shrine in some cathedral (it’s trying to tell *you* something). Which brings to mind John Henry Newman’s *Lead, Kindly Light* upon his seeing a ship’s light while becalmed upon the Mediterranean Sea:

*Lead, Kindly Light, amidst the encircling gloom, / Lead Thou me on! /
The night is dark, and I am far from home, / Lead Thou me on! . . .*

Things?

What we just call “things” actually fashion us as did the whole ambience of Corlies Street where I grew up. Books, poems, music, compositions often inspired by writers’ sensitivity to nature’s resonance can make us more human than reason alone. Indeed a

rigidly rational person can evolve into a martinet, a tyrant, like a religious superior I have known.

And the ear whereby we catch the voice, the call of all the objects around us?_You might call it our imagination – which no doubt may have compelled Christopher Columbus to board a ship named the Santa Maria to cross horizons unknown. Imagination – which made the boy Samuel to say_in the night, *Speak Lord for your servant is listening*. Imagination - which the Age of Reason shortchanged as misleading and left things like the Bible irrelevant, farfetched, mere fantasy.

Among the many theologians/philosophers who would advise us to shut up and allow ourselves to be spoken to by the whole chorus of beings and events around us is **David Tracy**. He is a 78 year old priest/theologian on the faculty of the University of Chicago's Divinity School – a prestigious status. He holds the chair of Catholic Studies and has written many a book and article within the higher regions of theology and hermeneutics (or literary interpretation). I refer here to his 1975 publication: *Blessed Rage for Order; The New Pluralism*. It's scholarly; its Table of Contents would compel you to return the book to the shelf. But there's one section that glows in which he focuses on these things called books, books of literature by which our culture confronts us.

We tend to treat books of literature as objects, as we do tableware. A member of my old religious order once worked in a high- class bookstore in New York and recalled how a customer would come in and ask for twenty feet of “red”. In other words, he was decorating the library of his new mansion and wanted twenty feet of “red” bound books to match a color scheme. He never intended to read them. They were like wallpaper. And often *we also* read a book as a flat paged text – literally, off the surface, like the birth narrative of Jesus – not realizing it is as deep as the night sky, the distance between the stars requiring ages of space travel in every direction.

So here's what Tracy has to say about literature:

A variety of disciplines cite sufficient evidence to suggest that a near consensus has emerged on the human need for more than conceptual analysis for understanding human existence. More positively, human beings need story, symbol, image, myth and fiction to disclose to their imaginations some genuinely new possibilities for existence; possibilities which conceptual analysis . . . cannot adequately provide.

Fictions do not operate to help us escape reality, but to redescribe our human reality in such disclosive terms that we return to the “everyday” - reoriented to life's real – if forgotten or sometimes never even imagined – possibilities. The greatest works of fiction . . . do not simply describe our lives as a merely journalistic or merely photographic account might. Rather, by describing the authentic possibilities of human existence . . . fictions open our minds, our imaginations, and our hearts to newly authentic and clearly transformative possible modes of being-in-the-world.

I couldn't have said it better myself – and I have said something similar often during these monthly sessions. **Fiction is about the facts of life** – is therefore more factual than mere fact. Fiction presents us with an illuminated manuscript such as the Celtic monks produced in copying – say – the Gospel of Mark. Fiction is factuality underscored and highlighted by the human imagination – our marvelous way of unveiling what's really real. It opens doors. It's not a closed book.

Or, as **Ulrich Simon** has said in his short book *Story and Faith: I . . . believe that the narrative* [the story, epic, poem - biblical and otherwise] *is the basis of our culture and that without it we shall surrender to the repetitive clichés of mass media or to the chaotic flashes and meaningless signals of discontinuous sights* [rapid, subliminal commercial images?]. *The narrative* [the prolonged story, parable, legend, myth], *and the faith associated with it, stands in direct opposition to cybernetic control and irrational, psychedelic jabs on our senses.*

Contrary to our modern tendency to see ourselves as the subject who can know and control the world of objects around us, we are ourselves the object of books, stories, legends . . . that can make us repent of our modernist arrogance and emerge from our tombs – perhaps to see and hear what trees, rocks, a sunrise, a beggar have to say to us.

For instance:

Take for example the episode in **Luke's Gospel, chapter 5**, in which Jesus meets us – you and me - with Simon Peter while he's mending his nets alongside a lakeshore. Don't just view the episode from the shore. Step into the boat, bring with you all the problems you're involved in – like washing, repairing your nets, demands that entangle you day after day – the seeming futility, monotony of life. Then hear Jesus say, *Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.* (And you know right away he's not speaking to you about fishing.) And you let out your usual whine: *Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing . . .* [and I'm 90 years old] *but if you insist I will lower the nets.* And from nowhere and seemingly nothing at all, you feel the weight of so many fish, so much insight, faith, hope, wonder that you need to share that weight with others – enough to sink you all into another dimension of reality. And you are forced to declare yourself not worthy of such a transformation of your being – *Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,* [I ain't got the capacity for this much discovery, this much change, this much life . . .] to which Jesus replies, *Don't be afraid; there is so much more to come.*

Richard Brautigan

Or take what I consider to be an equally inspired poem by Richard Brautigan (who ultimately and sadly couldn't quite sort out the significance of his gift). A friend sent me the poem many years ago and it hit home. Its title is *Your Catfish Friend* and seems fitting to use after that story about Simon Peter's (and your) fishing expedition. It goes:

*If I were to live my life
in catfish forms
in scaffolds of skin and whiskers*

*at the bottom of a pond
 and you were to come by
 one evening
 when the moon was shining
 down into my dark home
 and stand there at the edge
 of my affection
 and think, "It's beautiful
 here by this pond. I wish
 somebody loved me."
I'd love you and be your catfish
 friend and drive such lonely
 thoughts from your mind
 and suddenly you would be
 at peace,
 and ask yourself, "I wonder
 if there are any catfish
 in this pond? It seems like
 a perfect place for them."*

All it takes to make that experience your own – amid any loneliness you feel – is to read its closing lines as – to quote: *I wonder if there is any grace, any God, any Christ (whose symbol is a fish) in this pond, this universe? It seems like a perfect place for them.* The poem then becomes the commencement of an act of faith, quite theological.

Jacob and Rilke

Or moving over to the Book of Genesis, to that moment when Jacob, returning with his new family, braces himself to meet the possible vengeance of his older brother Esau. And there you are, making sure your family is safe and yourself sleeping out alone during the night when out of the dark you are assaulted by some powerful wrestler (by this biblical text) – and you struggle to survive his chinlocks and leg hooks and clawholds and full nelsons until the sun begins to rise; and you find yourself in some way dislocated not just socket wise but consciously reset. And the wrestler leaves you with a new name – a new sense of being – and you sense you have just met God face to face.

Which should set you up to make of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's experience of the same match as your own, who afterward confessed:

*Who we choose to fight is so tiny! [daily irritants]
 What fights with us is so great! . . .
 I mean the angel, who appeared
 to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:
 when the wrestler's sinews
 grew long like metal strings,
 he felt them under his fingers
 like chords of deep music. [That's about you!]*

*Whoever was beaten by this Angel . . .
 went away proud and strengthened
 and great from that harsh hand,
 that kneaded him as if to change his shape.
 Winning does not tempt that man.
 This is how he grows: by being defeated decisively,
 by constantly greater beings. [Again, that's about you!]*

Scout

Or become the scene in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* to find out how God would redeem, restore, restructure our world of lethal polarizations. It begins with Atticus Finch taking his post outside the town jailhouse where his client Tom Robinson is confined, charged wrongly with assault upon a white woman. Inevitably a lynch mob forms in front of the jail and warns Atticus away. In the meantime Atticus's six-year old daughter nicknamed Scout arrives with her brother and a friend [she is the presence of something divine?]. Atticus tells them to go home – but they linger. Tension builds up. A poor farmer named Mr. Cunningham, a client dependent on Atticus, seems to speak for the crowd. Someone growls, *You got fifteen seconds to get 'em* (the children; allegorically speaking, the presence of God?) *outa here*.

And here Scout speaks up, addressing Mr. Cunningham, shifting the level of discourse, telling him of how his son Walter is her schoolmate, a nice boy who had dinner with the Finches one day and how she and the boy had a fight at school and she won but they were good friends now. She asks him to say hey to Walter for her. Mr. Cunningham finds himself transported into a new dimension. He squats down and takes Scout by both shoulders and says, "I'll tell him you said hey, little lady." He then stood up (risen from the dead) and led the mob back to their cars. Crisis resolved. Miracle story.

Being Scout, you may find yourself coming down to earth out of the fog of politics, bringing the disguises, the caricatures of everyday life back to what's really real: mutual concern, the kind of caring that, among all those crowds he walked among, Christ always notices the lame person, the blind man, the woman about to be stoned, indeed your forgotten self . . . through gracious eyes, empowered vision. You are Scout or you can be. It takes that freshness of a child (as Christ says) to see past the distrust promoted by the news of the day. Or you could be Mr. Cunningham by the end of the process.

Jean Valjean

Switching to what doors have to say, there is a theme of doors in Victor Hugo's classic *Les Miserables*. It begins when Jean Valjean, released after 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread, finds all doors closed to him as an ex convict until an old woman asks him, "Have you knocked at that one [pointing to the house next to the cathedral] . . . Then do." It's the local bishop's house where Jean is given food and a place to sleep yet in his desperation can't resist stealing the bishop's silver plate. When caught and returned to face the bishop, the bishop says Jean hadn't stolen the plate; it was a gift from

the bishop. Knock on a door and be stunned by a revelation of grace! Get up in the morning and be surprised.

But by force of habit Jean later steals a 40 franc coin and is pursued by Inspector Javert. Jean changes his name to Monsieur Madeleine and becomes a conscientious mayor; he also learns that someone else has been arrested for his petty crime of long ago and is to go on trial in such and such a town.

What to do? He attends the trial. As a public figure he is ushered into the judge's chamber; he is told the door with the brass knob leads directly into the courtroom. Once again he stood before a door behind which truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, graciousness, in a word, Christ awaited him. He hesitated, backed away, retreated down a corridor, paused, returned to the judge's chamber. *Suddenly, and without knowing how it happened, he found himself standing at the door. He seized the handle with a convulsive movement and the door opened. He was in the courtroom.* In the mildest of voices he said, *Gentlemen of the jury, you must acquit the accused. I must request the court to order my arrest. I am the man you are looking for. I am Jean Valjean.* And indeed he was – the *authentic* Jean Valjean – become Christ-like in his being and in placing himself in the very place where Christ stood (on behalf of the human race before Pontius Pilate) – a redeemer.

Life is a series of doors through which we are challenged to pass toward to ever deeper levels of *human being*. And often the door confronting you is a narrative, a story, a spacious work of art, a parable – or it could be a beautiful elm tree or a still life of apples and oranges.

The Gospel Readings for September, 2018 = Cycle B

The drama of St. Mark

The selections from the Gospel of Mark this month are taken from chapters 7 to 9, leading up to the arrest of Jesus and efforts of the authorities – Temple and political – to thwart his inauguration of God's reign of grace and freedom, which the standard authorities can only see as anarchy.

Prior to this section – through chapters 1 to 6 - Mark offers us a **crescendo of liberation** – Jesus striding into Galilee performing deeds of mercy, grace, justice – each of which illustrates what he wants to do for each of us – relieve us of our feeling like outsiders, unwanted, from demonic possession, paralysis, from being bound up like Gulliver by numberless petty rules that only exhaust one's capacity for real virtue and insight. By chapters 4 and 5 that positive crescendo **breaks all bounds**: he quiets a storm at sea reflective of the storms we create like World Wars; he drives a legion of swine into the sea that reflects the herd mentality that makes people go crazy and self destructive; he raises a girl from that ultimate thing that would scare us: death.

But by chapter 6 we are alerted to the commencement of a **counter crescendo of opposition**, beginning from Jesus' own home town where doubt and envy creep in: *Is he*

not the carpenter? Don't we know all there is to know about him . . . ? *And they took offense at him.*

September 2nd: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 Jesus and the Pharisees

This episode makes me feel the walls closing in. The maintenance men who are used to viewing God as a judge, legislator and punisher of vice tend to view Christ's Logic of Superabundance – as displayed in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount - as more than ordinary people can handle. And out of a kind of misguided mercy toward our weakness and knowing that we are indeed a bundle of bad vibes such as Jesus himself lists in this episode: evil thoughts, theft, licentiousness, greed, etc., these Pharisees and scribes would legislate many a *manageable* behavior to at least create the illusion that we are among the righteous while others are not. External behaviors like washing one's hands ritually, purifying cups, jugs, kettles . . . and among other things avoiding people unclean in whatever ways, avoiding certain foods. As I recall it they tend to anticipate that Cartesian world – where measure, number, quantity take the place of quality, where things can be added up.

They mathematize religion, fixed formulae, how many times, to what degree. Say five Hail Mary's or ten Our Fathers or mea culpa three times. Perhaps a last judgment in which – as in exams – you can be rated 40 or 60 or 70 or maybe even 90% worthy of heaven based on your recording angel. Formulae: Joe Shea and I attend a bible breakfast on Saturdays and Joe was asked to say grace and fumbled at spontaneity and I, in my impatience to get started, said to Joe, "Bless us, O Lord, and . . ." And off we went to the races together reciting "and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord. Amen." Piety made efficient.

In the course of this episode I experience my enclosure within a wall or barbed circuit of bells designed to keep me always on guard, unable to break into spontaneous being, the wider range of a girl named Scout or a felon named Jean Valjean. While I hear Jesus reminding me of the words of the poet Isaiah: *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts* – while Christ addresses my monitors: *You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition.*" And somehow I leave this reading emancipated, breathing a bit more freely than before, my imagination unbridled as far as graciousness is concerned. Not everything has to be done by the book.

September 9th: Mark 7: 31-37 The Cure of a Deaf Man with a Speech Impediment

Why must every venue, be it a breakfast café or lobby or film or any public place in general provide background music – if it can be called music. Often it's a lot of clashing and screaming that's unintelligible. Why do we cultivate deafness and deliberately unintelligible lyrics?

And yet, as I look back upon a long life I have to admit that I spent long decades of time deaf to so much discourse or speech, so many signals of the Holy Spirit – in events, in authors, in the very stuff of our tradition that was itself muted somehow. Until eventually events led up to Jesus clearly appearing upon my scene – taking me off to Rome

somewhere – and putting his finger into my ears, spitting, touching my tongue, releasing it from all fear of being wrong, unorthodox - saying *Be opened*. And I heard what many of my teachers, my tradition were actually saying, often without their realizing it themselves, and found myself teaching with an enthusiasm that overcame all diffidence that I might have had before . . . It happens – and it can happen to you if you more than listen to, if you rather wear, for instance, this episode as a garment; put it on, allow Christ to touch your ears, touch your tongue – as by way of each liturgy of the Word and subsequent Eucharist.

September 16th: Mark 9: 30-37 Who do you say that I am?

Last Sunday's cure of that deaf fellow with his speech impediment is played out again this Sunday in relation to the apostle Peter. He and the others have been with Jesus a good while now, heard him speaking, saw his healings – and so Jesus tests their understanding. *Who do people say that I am?* And he finds out they are all stutterers still – can only articulate: *John the Baptist, Elijah, this prophet or that prophet . . .* To which Jesus says, *No, no – but who do you say I am – you whom I assume have been listening and observing my way of being?* And Peter's tongue comes loose: *You are the Anointed One – the human being, the royalty we have been waiting for.* And Jesus says in effect, even as Thomas More says in effect at the climax of his trial in *A Man for All Seasons*: *Yes and because I am the Anointed divinely human being the world has been waiting for, I am a dead man. For the powers that be and have been and will be cannot tolerate so human, so merciful, so truly just a human being. They haven't the stomach for it.* [Like that lynch mob outside Macomb's jail.]

And here is where Peter confirms that he is still deaf. What he hears when he hears Christ Gospel is political change, the good old days of David and Solomon – a portfolio, no more fishing, no more leaky boats – but an office and secretary. Still deaf – but not deaf to the world!

We can profess our faith in Christ, his Gospel, the theology of St. Paul, the history of salvation, the sacraments . . . but may we not remain deaf to their depth of meaning? May we not remain mute because we don't take the time to find out what our tradition is all about? This episode is about you and me and our need for an eye, ear and throat appointment.

September 23rd: Mark 9:30-37 If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be last of all and the servant of all.

A corollary to the preceding text. Clambering to be first or higher than others, possessed of a hierarchical mentality perpetuates envy, conflict, politics as usual, a dead end. Rather take Scout – the child – simple, transparent.

September 30th: Numbers 11:25d-29 (first reading) *Would that all the Lord's people were prophets (poets)*

I choose this first reading for today because it gives me a chance to expose you to the fire, the enthusiasm of the English poet William Blake whom I prize deeply. This moment in our Hebrew Testament occurs while the Israelites are still wandering famished

in the desert. So God will nourish them with manna and quail. It also tells of God's lightening Moses' burden by appointing seventy elders to share his responsibility. Of course for them to be leaders they must be inspired, enthusiastic about their role and Israel's destiny. But on the day when the Spirit came upon them, two were missing who had been left in the camp. Nevertheless the Spirit came upon them too. Joshua complained as if they were outside the range of God's Spirit – but Moses rebuked him saying: *Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets* – inspired.

Back around 1804 to 1808 Blake wrote a long poem titled *Milton* (building upon John Milton's work). Blake as an isolated prophet bemoaned the modernity that had dispelled the Gospel's hold on Britain in favor of reason and science as more perceptive than faith, as per example new versions of the Gospels that kept the maxims but deleted the miracles. In other words turned stars into galactic wheels or mills – silent, distant, no story to be told. Some people think this view of reality drove a man like Blake crazy. Listen to his introduction to his poem *Milton: Rouse up, O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court and the University, who would . . . for ever depress Mental and prolong Corporeal War. Painters! On you I call. Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers . . . We do not want either Greek or Roman Models [Plato, Aristotle . . .] if we are but just and true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever in Jesus our Lord.*

And then he breaks into his famous hymn *Jerusalem*:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!*

*And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land.*

Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets! [Poets]