

Liturgical Readings for September 2019 – Cycle C

Introduction: *Narration: the essence of speech*

Human discourse, the way we speak, takes on different characteristics. For instance, there is what we call **conceptual discourse** – the kind philosophers speak - that turns the irritable, gracious, vocal, creative God of our biblical tradition into a composite of three persons who are substantially one. No metaphors allowed, no figuration in the sense of having shape or likeness to anything. [That would be idolatry.] Or such conceptual discourse would declare a house to be essentially a combination of matter and form – about as abstract as you can get. Unsoiled by imagination, uninvolved in any plot.

Then we have **descriptive discourse** by which we express things objectively, as they appear, how they differ, how they are used and so forth. For instance a house is presented as a building that serves as living quarters for people. It may be constructed in different styles: colonial, Cape Cod, Victorian, ranch, cottage, town house . . . gabled or flat roofed, tiled or shingled . . . Descriptive discourse offers you – in a way – a mental picture, a *literal* display of a house – but again uninvolved in any plot – just as it is – as in a dictionary.

As such, descriptive discourse may blend into **expository** discourse, laying out the logic of the house's arrangement as in a blueprint, its measurements, its molecular make-up.

Narration or Story Telling

But if we shift to **narrative, figurative discourse**, the dynamics change; if we let our imagination influence our perception of a house, we allow ourselves to be carried into a world other than the “literal” world. For instance the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* is described as – yes – having seven gables and located in a New England town. But he goes on to speak of its having a great human heart, with a life of its own, and full of rich and somber reminiscences. It even has a meditative look, suggesting it had secrets to keep, concealing the collective consciousness of a single family. Aside from being merely a household, it is haunted, its residents like ghosts, their hearts dungeons. To move from the sepulchral darkness of this old house to the sunlight of the street is to discover the hubbub of commerce, the town's environment. The street becomes a mighty river of life – from which the house becomes a refuge.

Obviously when an object like this house is translated into narrative, figurative or metaphorical discourse, the plot of a story, the stage of a drama, it takes on a kind of vitality you won't find in a frozen photo or blueprint. Hawthorne's story or narrative lifts it out of a mere objectivity, things to be taken factually, and plunges it into the flow of time and change and a widening and deepening of the consciousness not only of the inhabitants of the house but of the reader as well. As readers we are

swept along in a way that changes not only our perception of things but our lives as well. We have entered a world possibly more real than the literal, everyday one. Narratives, metaphors, become sacramental, transformative – moral in some way or other.

But if literature – novels, parables, the wanderings of a nomad like Abraham, the building of an ark to escape a flood, a short story by Flannery O'Connor – sweeps us into a fluid kind of experience, *where* do such narratives convey us – hopefully not just back to Kansas!

A plot intends something . . .

Last month I walked you through an experience I had in which, after decades of retaining a recurring fragment of a memory, I finally was exposed to a 1930's short film that restored the whole context of that fragment. From fretfully pondering the why and wherefore of a single piece of a puzzle, suddenly the whole episode arose before me – making myself “whole” again in a momentary, exciting way. And I began to think – that's what life, what figuration, imaging, drama, parables, narratives are all about - - helping us **to plot a path to somewhere significant** [that's what Shakespeare does in five Acts] . . . to converge piece by piece toward closures that promise to lead to further closures or chapters illuminating one's way toward an ultimate – yet never final – experience of fulfillment or – in a tragedy – toward a *longing* for fulfillment. And the band plays on.

This is the insight (and I think a valid one) of many relatively recent interpreters in the field of language and literature – including biblical literature. Our Western world's tendency over the past has been trying by various methods to make things “hold still”, emerge as unquestionable facts – but things don't hold still.

That said, I want to put you through a quiz. I'm going to lay out a few excerpts from literature and challenge you to tell me what they have in common.

Fezziwig:

Dickens's Christmas Carol certainly starts off with a somber old Scrooge, isolated in his cold apartment, eating his gruel, irritated at the thought of people being joyful – the world cold outside, Bob Cratchit's family poor and ailing during an Industrial Revolution. But immediately we are carried into a metaphorical realm - signals of an alternative destiny – Fezziwig. He is a businessman for whom Scrooge apprenticed as a young man, owner of a workhouse – but for him Christmas is a time of festival. He wants room, space to maneuver, room to dance, to be! *Clear away! There was nothing they wouldn't have cleared away, or couldn't have cleared away, with old Fezziwig looking on. It was done in a minute. Every movable was packed off, as if it were dismissed from public life for evermore, the floor swept and watered, the lamps were trimmed, fuel was heaped upon the fire, the warehouse was as snug, and warm and dry, and bright a ball-room, as you would desire to see upon a winter's night.*

A Room with a View:

E.M. Forster's imagination places us in the city of Florence many years ago at a British tourist Pensione – so British in its interior décor and cuisine, that its residents might as well be back in England. Yet young Lucy Honeychurch is excited to be in Italy – too excited for her chaperone, Miss Bartlett, who wants to shield her from this foreign environment as much as possible. Miss Bartlett [somewhat inconsistently] is upset, however, since she reserved rooms with a view and has been assigned rooms facing a backyard. But not to worry, for a father and son who have rooms with a view offer them to the two ladies. After some resistance (to such grace) Miss Bartlett concedes to move into the rooms with a view. But immediately she runs about closing all the shutters to Lucy's room – and checking the door locks. Miss Bartlett is all security and propriety. But Lucy (whose name means light) could not be restrained. She flung wide open the windows of her room and leaned out into the sunshine to take in *the beautiful hills, the marble churches, . . . the crowded trams and somersaulting children . . . life, world, people, Italy.*

From the Gospel of Mark:

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm . . . ?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him . . .

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

The Grapes of Wrath:

John Steinbeck's classic account of the Okie migration of the 1930's associates the story's hero Tom Joad with an ex-preacher named Casey who sees in this exodus to California more than a quest for jobs. He sees it as one more human quest for justice, for lives more human than the economics of the time allowed. He articulates the deeper meaning of such migrations . . . at the cost of his life. Already in California, in conversation with Tom, he ponders, "Well – s'pose all these here folks . . . can't get no jobs out here." Tom replies, "I'm jus' puttin' one foot in front a the other . . . This here bearing went out . . . Now she's out an' we'll fix her . . . that's the only

goddamn thing in this world I got on my mind.” Uncle John is of the same mind: “We’re agoin’ there, ain’t we? None of this talk is gonna keep us from goin’ there. When we get there, we’ll get there. When we get a job we’ll work, and when we don’t get a job we’ll set on our tail. This here talk ain’t gonna do no good no way.”

But Casey’s appraisal elevates events to a higher pitch; he narrates, envisions a drama; there’s a design, a plot to all this. *They’s stuff goin’ on and they’s folks doin’ things. Them people layin’ one foot down in front of the other, they ain’t thinkin’ where they’re goin’ . . . but they’re all layin’ ‘em down in the same direction . . . An’ if ya listen, you’ll hear a movin’, an’ a sneakin’, an’ a rustlin’, an’ – an’ a res’lessness. They’s stuff still goin’ on that the folks doin’ it don’t know nothin’ about – yet. They’s gonna come somepin outa all these folks goin’ wes’ – out all their farms lef’ lonely. They’s gonna come a thing that’s gonna change the whole country.*

A Curtain of Rain:

Every day one summer it rained a little. But on this particular day the daily ration of rain had not come. As late as five o’clock the sun was still ablaze; everything seemed metallically hot. Women of this small Mississippi town sat by their windows fanning themselves. Only Mrs. Larkin remained active, spending all her time working her garden despite the warmth. Thus Eudora Welty begins one of her best stories.

Mrs. Larkin’s husband had died accidentally a year before – and since then she retreated into her garden working it not so much to bring out its beauty but to beat away at the ground aimlessly, planting every kind of flower, chopping away. People said she never spoke – eyes dull, bewildered. With her was a boy named Jamey, bent down, wearing a faraway smile, whistling. Aggravated as she was, Mrs. Larkin began to raise her hoe – in silent anger to strike this dark angel and his music, his dream, this ridiculous universe.

In that moment, writes Eudora, *the rain came . . . Sighing, Mrs. Larkin lowered the hoe . . . She stood still where she was, close to Jamey, and listened to the rain falling. It was so gentle. It was so full – the sound of the end of waiting . . . One by one, as the rain reached them, all the individual little plants shone out, and then the branching vines. The pear tree gave a soft rushing noise, like the wings of a bird alighting . . . Then as if it had swelled and broken over a levee, tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body. It has come, she thought senselessly . . . against that which was inexhaustible there was no defense.*

Mrs. Larkin fainted. Jamey ran and crouched beside her. In a beseeching voice he called her name, “Miss Lark! Miss Lark!” until she stirred.

Belonging:

Along with literature, history engages in narrative discourse. That goes for personal history as well. Some time ago a classmate of my sister in Philadelphia called to tell me she had a photo I might like to have. It was of a group of thirty-one Resurrection parish altar boys (ranging from the 6th to the 8th grade) taken on a picnic in the

summer of 1939. I remembered it well, but I couldn't remember a picture being taken. So I said, "Yes, send me a copy." Now I attended Resurrection parochial school for only three semesters. Actually, my elementary school experience reads like a litany: St. Cyril's, St. Ludwig's, King of Peace, then back to St. Ludwig's, then Resurrection, and finally St. Matthew's. Six schools in eight years. The reason? Mainly economic. And so I had to go through the ritual of being introduced as the odd man out to the skeptical gaze of about fifty other children as "Geoffrey, who will be joining us - and I want you all to make him feel at home." At that remark the look on the boys' faces changed to one of latent sadism - initiation in the schoolyard - already experienced several times before. The result? Along with the many moves of my family during that period, in my later years I could never quite get over a sense of unresolved distance between myself and whatever group I might associate with. I retained a feeling of always being on the outside looking in.

Within a week a manila envelope arrived addressed in Mary Jane's still liquid Palmer script. I opened it and there we all were, laughing, arranged in three rows, standing, sitting, or squatting - the Nolan brothers, Kelley, Murphy, Corkery, Turco, the Vearling brothers, Tomlinson, Callahan. Some had tattered baseball mits; some were in undershirts, or no shirts at all, hair mussed. And there indeed was I in the front row, second from the right, smiling, too, flanked by my friends, Bill Miller and Joe Whylic (now dead these many years).

And as I looked at my eleven year old face, it seemed to be saying to me, the viewer, "What are you doing out there all by yourself? Why do you continue to suffer the illusion you didn't belong? Can't you see you were very much in the picture? Don't you remember how, amid all the moves your parents made, it was you who insisted on going to a school named Saint Somebody?"

What do such narratives have in common?

Well, what all narratives do, be they stories or plays or even history (which is also seen as literature), is take clock time or seasonal time, the mere revolving of the stars and planets, time as merely static in a here today gone tomorrow way and make such time linear, meaningful - translate time into happenings, events that make time say something intelligible, even inspiring or tragic, never indifferent - like clock time. This capacity to do so is what makes us human beings, the voice of creation.

Relative to the items I have narrated above, they place us into a sequence of time that leads **from**

1. an isolated or closed environment **to** a ballroom
2. a shuttered, locked enclosure **to** a piazza in Florence
3. enforced allegiance to tribal taboos and prejudice **to** a solidarity, a wider sense of family, *these are my brother and sister and mother . . .*
4. skepticism **to** a conviction that *They's gonna come a thing that's gonna change the whole country.*

5. a sense of futility **to** an experience of rain upon *a pear tree giving off a soft rushing noise like the sound of a bird alighting*
6. feelings of inferiority, being odd man out **to** discovering oneself to be part of something “catholic”.

Traditionally we say our storybook begins like that of Genesis 1:2 where it says *In the beginning . . . the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss.* Timeless, raw material – until words began to form, language, a narrative begun . . . *Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light . . .* Unexpected things happen, are verbalized, a story unfolds. This is what makes us human. So it is with every *narrative* (not concepts) composed by writers, poets, historians . . . contributing to an end of ignorance, the end of waiting, a destiny before us, events accruing behind us propelling us forward – never ending endings that are fresh beginnings. Our human discovery of time as not just cosmic, seasonal, sun up and sun down but meaningful, historical, fascinating, often uncanny, even entertaining, making you want to read, to listen. Grace in the shape of time, time no longer just duration but experience.

As with William Blake again: *Infinity in a grain of sand, Eternity in an hour.* Or as Hamlet has said:

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

The Readings

September 15th – 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Gospel Reading: Luke 15: 1-32

It has been said that stories, narrative writings re-describe reality. Whereas straight talk “tells it like it is”, a novel, a parable, a poem raise reality toward a clearer vision of things from the depth of our imagination and from deeper still. Regarding the parable of the prodigal son (more aptly titled the parable of the prodigal father) we have our usual polarizations: youth versus age, a foolish youth versus a wiser elder brother, a sinner versus a Pharisee.

And as usual it’s the younger, inexperienced character who demands “what’s mine” to do with as he pleases, to live it up far from home, while the older brother keeps his nose to the grindstone - like a Pharisee who prides himself on his adherence to schedules and rules. Both operate under the dominance of a Law – one to breach it and the other to stand fast by it – righteously. Such is reality, such is Society as displayed down through the ages. Split.

Except in this story a reality that is really real is displayed. The younger, rebellious son, having exhausted himself and his wherewithal in wild living – until he is living in a pig sty – realizes he needs to go home and admit his foolishness, his sinful ways and accept servitude as his destiny – become normal, subject to norms, to merited punishment. Meanwhile the older son, the Pharisee smiles his contempt for the

juvenile character – refuses to trust his return, his conversion. Again, such is reality as we so often witness it.

Until we break into *the world of the text*, the reality laid out for us in the behavior of the father. He transcends both sons. He has always been looking toward the horizon – for his younger son’s return. Seeing him a long way off, he runs to him, embraces him, kisses him. He brushes away all apologies of the younger son, dresses him up, convokes a banquet – expense is no matter – calls for music, dancing *because this son of mine was dead and he has come to life again.*

And as regards his Pharisaical son – whose “virtuous” life seems to have made him only angry, unhappy, hypercritical – to him this father also says: *My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours . . . now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again.* Join the party – enter the kingdom of God. The difference? The father lives in a state of grace – universal grace: the world of the text.

Beyond the phony reality of us versus them, sinners versus the righteous, the dominion of Law splitting us into good guys and bad guys worthy of reward or damnation - - there is this other really real universe of mutual grace and a gracious God whose reign Jesus came to inaugurate.

September 22nd – 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C
Gospel Reading: Luke 16:1-13

John the Baptist was a strict Jewish reformer. That’s evident in his response to tax collectors in his audience. He stood by the Law of Moses: *Stop collecting more than what is prescribed and if you lend money to my people . . . you must not be like a money lender; you must not demand interest . . . Do not exact interest in advance or accrued interest . . .* Now that’s a tough law to observe when charging interest seems to have been the ok thing to do since God knows when.

But accountants learned how to get around that law. An alternative way to acquire a profit from their loans was to hide within the documented loan amount a *gratuity* to be made when the loan came due. And that’s the case in today’s parable. A rich man’s accountant or agent has been mismanaging the rich man’s property. He is about to be fired. How will he live?

He immediately calls in full payment of the loans he made – but minus the attached gratuity. So if the loan was for 5000 shekels, the lendee could deduct the 10% (500 shekels) hidden gratuity from his payment. This would of course gain the accountant the good graces of the lendees – and his rich master might even be amused and admire the accountant’s shrewd generosity to insure his own future employment.

Which leads to the turning point. If worldly men can use money dishonestly to make friends – to bribe, invest in certain stocks, to donate their money to insure the election of crooked leaders, to keep a military-industrial complex content, . . . to keep wages as an existence level to the delight of employers . . . how much more must a good man invest what he has in the well being of others, the cure of ills, the quest for peace . . . and so on. In other words, help create a world of hyperbolic generosity in place of greed – the world of the text opened up to us in a subtle way by this parable?

September 29th – 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C
Gospel Reading: Luke 16:1-13

Here we have another story of thought-provoking import. A rich man with a fine wardrobe, an estate, dines sumptuously day after day. (Interpreters have suggested he is a Sadducee, a member of that Jewish, conservative priestly party that did not share the belief of the Pharisees in life after death. This life was it and then it's off to a region of shadows if anywhere.) He lives in contrast to a beggar named Lazarus who starves outside the rich man's gate – covered with sores – pestered by dogs. And of course he dies but is carried off to the bosom of Abraham – an alternative that surprises the rich man when he also dies.

Noticing this, the rich man – from far off – is suffering so much from heat and thirst that he asks Abraham to have Lazarus mete out a drop of water to cool his tongue. Abraham says the gap between the Sadducee and Lazarus is too great to allow passage from one side to the other – like a Grand Canyon. So the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his brothers who are still alive to alert them to the reality of Abraham's bosom.

And here we phase into the world of the text – and the possibility that people may never enter it. For the world of the text opens up into a resurrection, a widening of horizons beyond a funeral! A place where dining as a metaphor also takes place. Abraham says in effect: sending Lazarus back will do no good. You and your brothers are familiar with the writings of Moses (who led an exodus out of a land of tombs called Egypt) and with the poetry of the prophets. If they –like you- have been so dense as to not detect the very direction of the literature of their tradition, they will remain too hardheaded to listen to anyone who says he has risen from the dead.

Even as today, back then people despaired of proof, of evidence that there is more to life than – ultimately – emptiness. Whereas the evidence lies in the uncanny dynamics of a life that unfolds even as it decays – a phenomenon to which stories, parables, the human imagination, our very hope of waking up in the morning, testify.

The Props Assist The House
by Emily Dickinson

The Props assist the House
Until the House is built
And then the Props withdraw
And adequate, erect,
The House support itself
And cease to recollect
The Augur and the Carpenter –
Just such a retrospect
Hath the perfected Life –
A Past of Plank and Nail
And slowness – then the scaffolds drop
Affirming it a Soul –