

Liturgy Readings for May 2017 Gospels - 2017 – Cycle A

Introduction

The Forty Days

The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1909-1988) wrote a short (and to my mind his finest) work, *A Theology of History*, in which he speaks of the forty days between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus (Acts 3:3), which Jesus spent with his disciples – as an interval of *real* time in contrast to what von Balthasar calls clock or fallen time, time dominated by death, in which we usually spend our days. In other words, when Jesus came out of his tomb he brought with him an infusion of time (and space) more ample than we can imagine, breathing space, time no longer hurried but relaxed, receptive, engaging, everlasting.

To quote von Balthasar: *The first truth about the risen Christ's time . . . is that his time is not divorced or estranged from our time, but is in an ordinary, straightforward way continuous with it. . . . What this episode (the Emmaus meeting) reveals is not the immutable relationship [a standing still] of an eternal present . . . to the successive moments of mutable time, but the eternal allowing itself to be drawn into time and going along with it in genuine relationship.*

Proust

In this he sounds like Marcel Proust in his masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time* who senses that ordinarily we live in time as in a *narrow corridor of habit* – like an endless hotel corridor with no doors or windows. As we grow up we slip into a zone of customs, of limited expectations, limited vision, every thing objectified, designed by generations before us and around us. History as we experience it, the news of the day, the institutions that set the deadlines, the goals, the cycle of “facts” that tell the same old story, “The New York Times” - such dictate the range of this space, tend to close it ideologically, mathematically – and we settle into it with no transparency to see through its walls into the realm now inhabited by the risen and liturgical Christ – spacious, marvelous in every way.

Take for example that resurrection scene that closes John's Gospel. The disciples were fishing off the shore of the Sea of Galilee as dawn arose. Jesus was standing on the shore but the disciples did not realize it was Jesus. Jesus said to them: *Children* (not his usual way of addressing them, something special, affectionate, spacious about it), *have you caught anything to eat? Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something.* [Which could be a way of saying: Look more deeply; break out of your **habit** of seeing – *they had been fishing all night and had caught nothing* - and you will find something.]

And they found more than they could imagine, more than they could handle. Indeed one disciple exclaimed: *It is the Lord!* So startled was Simon Peter that he dove into the deep and swam to shore – to that shore, the realm of reality upon which Jesus

had prepared for them a Eucharist to break their fast, to break them out of their narrowness of vision and existence.

The Magic Lantern

In his story *In Search of Lost Time* Marcel Proust offers us many a similar breakout of our habitual enclosure. He tells of how, as he was growing up, the narrow corridor of French aristocratic/bourgeois confinement would suddenly open up upon a vision, an experience of reality in all its fine points, a universe of mesmerizing detail beyond the reach of the opaque walls of his environment. He compared the change to the effect of a magic lantern projected in the evening upon the all too familiar walls of his childhood bedroom. The lantern had been given to him by his grandaunt, depicting through illuminated slides the kidnapping of Genevieve de Brabant by a mounted character name Golo.

Suddenly, on what were familiar curtains, along came the mounted Golo, issuing from a little forest and advancing by leaps and bounds toward Genevieve's castle. Then there appeared her yellow castle and Genevieve wearing blue.

If the lantern were moved I could still distinguish Golo's horse advancing across the window curtains and swelling out with their curves and diving into their folds. The body of Golo himself . . . overcame all material obstacles . . . embodying it in himself: the door handle, for instance, over which, adapting itself at once, would float invincibly his red cloak or his pale face, never losing its nobility or its melancholy, never showing any sign of trouble at such a transubstantiation . . . But I cannot express the discomfort I felt at such an intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of my room than of myself. The anesthetic effect of custom being destroyed, I would begin to think and to feel very melancholy things. The door handle of my room, which was different to me from all the door handles in the world, inasmuch as it seemed to open of its own accord and without my having to turn it, so unconscious had its manipulation become; [he had taken it for granted] – lo and behold, it was now an astral body for Golo.

Emmaus

How that episode echoes the experience of the disciple Cleopas and his companion in Luke's Gospel, when, troubled as they were by the recent execution of Jesus, a stranger approaches, educates them regarding the ancient story of the Exodus, then agrees to dine with them at a roadside inn. And while he was with them he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them - - - and as if the walls of their dining space had given way, as their eyes were opened, they too, like the disciples on the shore of Galilee, saw who he was. The realm which habitual time and space had closed off gave way; wider, deeper, real time and space broke in upon them (like the veil of the Temple being torn from top to bottom) and the stranger became recognizable. They saw the Lord, their hearts burned within them as he opened up not only their eyes but their very being – before the old corridor closed in upon them again.

A petite madeleine and tea

Proust describes such experiences many times in his work of five volumes. You are all familiar with the episode when as a jaded young adult Marcel tastes a petite madeleine dipped in tea – how it opened up all the memorable detail of the village of Combray, where he first tasted a similar morsel given him by his Aunt Leonie; carried him back to a remembrance of that earlier transfigured time and place which the walls of later habit had since concealed.

Vinteuil's Sonata

And then there was Monsieur Swann's awakening to a phrase of music by the composer Vinteuil (Cesar Franck?) whose *slow and rhythmical movement . . . led him here, there, everywhere, toward a state of happiness, noble, unintelligible . . . And then, suddenly, having reached a certain point from which he was to follow it, after pausing for a moment, abruptly it changed its direction, and in a fresh movement, more rapid, multiform, melancholy, incessant, sweet, it bore him off with it towards a vista of joys unknown. Then it vanished.* Even as Luke says at the close of the Emmaus episode: *Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight.* He didn't vanish; he's where we want to be.

A train stop

It was with much anxiety that the adolescent Marcel in Proust's novel boarded a train in Paris and set off on his first journey to the seaside resort of Balbec. He was a boy who depended on a familiar environment and predictable routine to feel secure (in other words a corridor of time and space in which to live - or like a narrow railroad coach on a track). And so he spent a peaceful night in his compartment and awoke to see the sunrise through the pale square of his window. Notice how at this stop his train, his corridor of being, has windows!

Slowly the train came to a temporary stop at a little station amid mountains and Marcel caught sight of a tall girl emerging from a house and climbing a path bathed by the slanting rays of the sun. She was approaching the station carrying a jar of milk. In her valley from which the rest of the world was hidden by these heights, she must never see anyone save in these trains, which stopped for a moment only. She passed down the line of windows, offering coffee and milk to a few awakened passengers. Flushed with the glow of morning, her face was rosier than the sky.

Marcel goes on to recall, *I felt in seeing her that desire to live which is reborn in us whenever we become conscious anew of beauty and happiness.* Normally his routine way of life would have insulated him from noticing anything or anyone beautiful – but here at a remote train stop situated in a strange landscape his insulation had given way. He was open to the impact of this event. He was ready to get off the train of habit and spend the rest of his life with this lovely apparition. He signaled her to bring him some coffee.

I called to her . . . She retraced her steps. I could not take my eyes from her face which grew larger as she approached, like a sun . . . dazzling you with its blaze of red and

gold. She fastened on me her penetrating gaze, but doors were being closed and the train had begun to move. I saw her leave the station and go down the hill to her home; it was broad daylight now; I was speeding away from the dawn. Or you could say he was contained within his usual coach or corridor, compelled to listen to the same old clickety clack of wheels relentlessly dragging him through not real time but just one day after another, clock time, fallen time.

Still he says he retained something: *this encounter gave a tonality to all I saw, introduced me as an actor upon the stage of an unknown and infinitely more interesting universe . . . from which to emerge now would be, as it were, to die to myself.* The walls around him were becoming transparent.

The Gospel of John

The Sundays of May expose us to long, somewhat rambling discourses addressed by Jesus to his disciples seemingly prior to but actually from beyond his Good Friday demise. In other words, in these readings Jesus speaks from a post-resurrection stance; he is already the risen Jesus – which is why the Church locates them after Easter.

The Synoptic Forecast: When will he return?

Some time after the latter part of the first century (beginning from around 60 or 70 AD) the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke were composed to perpetuate the memory of Jesus among his believers and orient them toward *his second coming at the end of history*. They were composed of remembered incidents and sayings (like the Sermon on the Mount) from the life of Jesus, especially an account of his death and resurrection. For the most part the evangelists had a common (multiple) source of such material; items used to instruct new believers or as the basis for homilies, in other words as sacramental words designed to infuse a comprehension, even an experience of the Good News. As such these three Gospels became the handbook of the Christian faith. We call them the *synoptic* Gospels because, were you to lay them open side by side they would appear and sound very much the same.

In their sense of the future they looked forward to the general apocalyptic vision found in so many contemporary Jewish books (often fantastic) forecasting the end of the world, a day of judgment to come. In other words these Gospels and even early New Testament letters looked *forward* to Jesus returning on the clouds, surrounded by heavenly hosts, calling together the human race – living and dead – and judging it according to God's standards, some vindicated and others condemned. The climax of history would be juridical, a courtroom scene – sheep separated from the goats. For example:

Mark 13

But in those days . . . the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and

glory, and then he will send out the angels and gather [his] elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky.

Matthew 31

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

The other Gospel: realized eschatology

But what about the *fourth Gospel of John* from which May's Gospel readings are drawn? John's writing comes across as unique. Scholars think it especially takes a different path regarding the return of the risen Jesus – something called *realized eschatology*, which is a way of saying: *the end of the world, the return of the risen Christ, your own resurrection and entrance into glory is already happening – now, every day, if you are attuned to experience such arrivals of Christ, even as Mary Magdalene did near his tomb and - I would dare say - even as Marcel (maybe unwittingly) did when he tasted that petite madeleine.*

Somewhere off in Asia Minor, among the followers of the apostle John (it is assumed or believed) this different interpretation of Jesus' coming grew – more of a mystical quality than juridical, not so much as a climactic event that will conclude the history of the world amid smoke and hosts of angels but as an arrival much more subtle *and occurring here, there and everywhere and at any moment of a believer's life, ordinary time infused with the real time of Christ.* Instead of a future or even imminent event hanging over us this sense of the "descent" of the risen Christ suggests you don't have to wait for the end of history to be taken up into the reality of God and God's world and life, to be dragged out the closed corridor in which you while away your life.

Event – in a worthier sense of the word

The world ends for you, Christ touches you the way he touched for instance the man born blind in John's Gospel, at moments when you least expect, moments of surprise, insights like those Proustian moments described above, like "eureka" moments, of recall, involuntary memory, sacramentally – in moments when you know for a fact that something has changed or grounded your life forever. And the more you become awake to such events (even past events to which you awaken many years later) the more you will grow like a branch upon a vine, organically, from within, the more you will emerge into a spaciousness interminable, the realm

of God, a realm of grace that surpasses the realm of retribution out of which the capitals of the world operate. Grace is the only way to describe it.

As the prologue to John's Gospel says: *And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth (reality).* While the Synoptic Gospels line up many an episode, miracle, healing, word of wisdom in brief descriptions, John elaborates on only seven incidents which he calls *signs* of how Jesus anticipates his arrival, his interventions in glory even now, today, every day, surprises often with a slow fuse.

To put it simply you could say that the second coming of Christ in glory as envisioned by the Synoptic Gospels is made in John to coincide with his first. He has already arrived. As John's prologue says: *The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him.*

Cana

At the marriage feast of Cana, a festival embarrassed by a shortage of wine like Israel itself run short of its prophetic vision, Jesus fills six ceremonial jars with 180 gallons of water and changes it into wine. Failing resources, imminent embarrassment, the end of the party are all reversed. Now instead of no stimulus, no merriment, no vitality, the scene breaks open, overflows, and becomes an event to remember. As the text says, . . . *and so he revealed, unveiled his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him.* The glory that the synoptics expected to see upon his second coming is happening in John's Gospel, at the very beginning of his *first* coming.

Samaria

A Samaritan woman lives her life hauling water from a cistern, stale water and she burdened by the memory of five failed marriages and now mere cohabitation with another fellow. She lives in a bad mood. She sees a Jew by the cistern. She clings to a sectarian identity. She doesn't see Jesus – until he begins to open her up by asking for a drink! In other words he has tapped on her wall and she bristles, she firms up her Samaritan corridor of mere existence [she builds a wall along the Rio Grande] with justifications she has been taught by prior brainwashed Samaritans. And now her walls become slowly transparent, the figure of Jesus takes on an attraction. *Believe me, woman, the hour is coming and is now here when true worshipers will worship . . . in Spirit and truth.* She dodges the "now here" to postpone any imminent settling of their argument, saying: *I know that the Messiah is coming . . . and when he comes, he will tell us everything.* Jesus says to her, *I am he, the one who is speaking to you.* Christ comes tapping on our corridor walls even now, even today – if we have ears to hear, eyes to see. Such is John's timing of the many, immediate second comings of the risen Jesus, seen as *events* in our lives.

Lazarus

Nor does Lazarus, recently dead, have to wait for a distant second coming of Christ to rise from the dead, from his tomb, his cave, his corridor of habit, more dead than alive. While even his sisters are alive Jesus has the gravestone taken away and says, *Lazarus, come forth*. A person's resurrection made current even before Jesus himself is buried - to rise again. According to the fourth Gospel the end of whatever subterranean chamber or corridor you inhabit can happen any day.

Tapping on walls

Speaking of tapping on walls . . . there is that other scene in Proust when again as a boy he felt menaced by the strangeness of a hotel room in Balbec by the sea. He writes: *Then my grandmother came in, and to the expansion of my constricted heart opened at once an infinity of space*. He goes on to say, *'I threw myself into (her) arms and pressed my lips to her face as though I were gaining access to that immense heart which she opened to me.'* And she gently responded, *'You just tap on the wall if you need me during the night. I'm just on the other side and the partition is quite thin.'* Who can miss the eloquence of God himself in that simple remark? Later the next morning this same grandmother opens the hotel dining room window to let in a breeze that sent menus, newspapers, hats and veils flying.

And I think back to the day, during my high school's promotion of vocations when at age fourteen I picked up a brown pamphlet from one of the display tables and found myself fixated on a cloister scene of Franciscan friars somewhere in upstate New York . . . and found myself outside the corridor I inhabited at that moment; and *when Simon Peter arrived . . . , he went into the tomb and saw [my] burial clothes there . . .*

The May Gospel Discourses

May 7 - Fourth Easter: John 10: 1 - 10 - The Good Shepherd

Then they threw him [the man born blind] out.

When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered and said, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he." John 9:35-37

Today's Gospel introduces the metaphor of a sheepfold to describe *the community of Christ* living within that other metaphor we used describing our every day world as *a narrow corridor of habit*, a zone of custom, sealed shut, of limited expectations, myopic, everything objectified, time experienced as the news of the day, of language gone stale, of behavior become indifferent to ethics, dangerous, but always with the "best of excuses."

Within such a corridor, such a world, the Church offers us a fold, a safe zone within which the Spirit of Christ, the Paraclete, keeps alive our faith, hope and desire for a wider existence. But even this sheepfold can be the target of thieves who can undermine, shake the faith, hope and love cultivated within the fold; strangers may infiltrate – in sheep’s clothing.

It’s Jesus, who has already risen from the grave, beyond the confines of this life defined as a windowless, perpetual corridor of forgetfulness, who describes himself as the gate, *the way out, who as the Good Shepherd speaks in often subtle ways, subtle experiences (as when I picked up that pamphlet) in a voice that we sheep begin slowly to understand*, who knows each of us by name – who leads us out into the wider reality of a gracious God, a gracious universe, green pastures, beside still waters – a life more abundant, where metaphor is the *lingua franca*.

Or I could put it this way: he gets us off the crowded bus based on an incident when my younger son Philip – only 6 years old – stood down on the inside step of the bus’ front door as it pulled up to our stop and simultaneously, as the bus door sprang open, shouted “Open Sesame”. And a laugh of universal delight broke out among the weary home-from-work passengers.

May 14 - Fifth Sunday Easter: John 14:1-14

On the eve of the Passion Jesus tells his disciples don’t be troubled. “Trust me.” He is going to leave their corridor of habit, the day-to-day tomb they mistake for fullness of life and bestow upon them the power to sojourn, settle, dwell (meaning also: ponder) within the boundless neighborhood of the real world. – *And you know the way to the place I’m going*. Thomas says, *We don’t know where you are going; you mean there is some place other than this one we are so used to we don’t even notice it? And how can we know how to get there?* Jesus says, *I just told you I am the gateway into that spacious world. I am also the truth, the revelation of everything concealed behind every wall you build, every prejudice you cling to, the real face of your neighbor, even of your current enemy.*

Jesus then mentions the Father, the Source of all being and Philip says *That will do it! Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied*. But even now – during his first coming – Jesus says, *Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has already seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? We are all here together. You can’t divide us up into a future and past, an inside and outside. Even as the Father is simply present always, so I am – in the days to come and even today, day by day. Even as I have been present at Cana and in Samaria and at the grave of Lazarus – even as I was present when 6 year old Philip shouted “Open Sesame” and Marcel’s grandmother told him to tap on his wall. Such are the works of my Father who, with me, is always here and now. Get used to it, bask in it, be my presence yourself.”*

May 21 - Sixth Sunday Easter: John 14: 15- 21

I will not leave you orphans; I'll be just like Marcel's grandmother, just on the other side of the wall, the corridor that entombs you. I will come to you in so many ways: sacramentally, by way of the Spirit, in the Breath of God that constantly breathes the universe into astonishing being, in your dreams, events as transient as your sudden engagement with a paragraph in a book or scene in a film. Are you experiencing a severe trial of any kind? An Advocate, the Paraclete will take his place beside you – and not only a Paraclete but *on that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.*

Or to put it another way: wherever there is Love, there is God: Father, Son and Paraclete Or wherever there is a 14 year old picking up a pamphlet about the thirteenth century there is Love; or a village girl delivering coffee and milk to the transients on a paused train, there is Love; or whenever a grandmother tells an anxious boy just to tap on the wall and she will come to him, there is Love, or a Samaritan woman hears someone ask for a drink of water, there is Love; or the mother of Jesus says at a wedding “they have no wine,” there is Love or the maker of the world says “And I if I be lifted up will draw all things to myself” there is the potent Love we hide from within our corridors of habitual security, our forgetfulness of Being.

May 28 - Seventh Sunday Easter: John 17: 1-11

This chapter of John ends the Last Supper discourse with Jesus delivering a summary of what he has done to draw the world out of its corridor of habitual and blind enclosure into the spaciousness and graciousness of God's way of being – and how some have heard his voice and stepped into reality as God creates it and others have not, who maintain habits of mind and conduct (often behind the name of “orthodoxy”). He speaks of his departure, his exiting this domain of fallen time, this dead end, to open a gateway beyond mere death, to real life, real beauty or to put it another way: to the discovery of creation as you have never noticed it before.

He has given them signs, miracles of the glory, the radiance of what lies beyond the shortsightedness of Pharisaism and materialism and nihilism. He wishes that those who follow him out into the sunshine of his resurrected world may be as united as he and the Father are one – “I in them and you in me . . . that the love with which you, Father, loved me may be in them and I in them.”

And so this forty day intrusion of real time and real space into clock time and unconscious habit does not close but continues to reveal how the risen Jesus, indeed the whole Trinity, abides with us, dwells among us, shows up on unscheduled occasions – for instance to get a reluctant Peter to speak the vernacular of God's world, which is to say, “I love you.”

Sometimes it takes a popular song to sum things up as in:

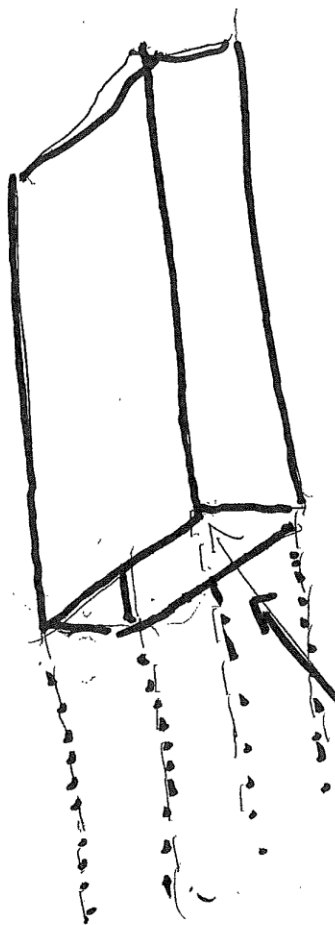
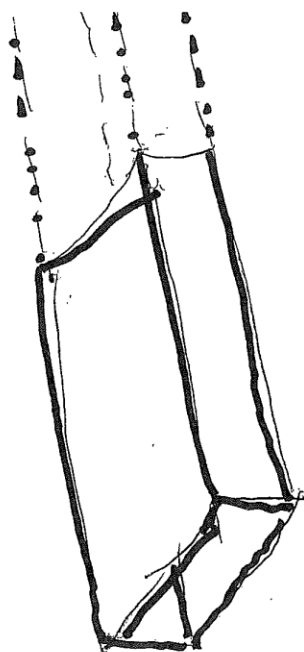
I have often walked down this street before
But the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before
All at once am I several stories high
Knowing I'm on the street where you live.

Are there lilac trees in the heart of town?
Can you hear a lark in any other part of town?

And oh, the towering feeling just to know somehow you are near
The overpowering feeling that any second you may suddenly appear

People stop and stare, they don't bother me
For there's nowhere else on earth that I would rather be
Let the time go by, I won't care if I
Can be here on the street where you live

CREATION
REAL TIME
FORTY DAYS



CLOCK
TIME
HABIT
CORRIDOR