

Liturgy Readings for Sundays of February 2017 – Cycle A

Introduction: *Learning Latin*

When I entered a minor seminary (one designed to provide a high school education to boys destined to become priests some day) I was exposed to semester after semester of training in Latin declensions, conjugations, irregular nouns, adjectives and verbs, syntax - plus exposure to Latin classics – up to a point! - for it seems we only dabbled in the works of Caesar, Cicero, Virgil, Titus Livy and hardly surveyed the poetry of people like Horace, Ovid, Plautus and the rest.

We ended up with much grammar and little experience of the culture of Rome. We knew how to dissect but rarely digest the discourse of the classics. This could have been due to our teachers not having a real grasp on the language – you know, one step ahead of the students. Actually Latin was used to discipline our English, to improve it grammatically - not as a language, which in itself could open up a whole new world.

Idem and Ipse

Nevertheless, when I run into the words *idem* and *ipse* singled out by literary scholars today, I know what they mean. *Idem* is an indefinite adjective that means: the *same*, as in “He’s the same old fellow I’ve always known.” *Ipse* is a similar adjective but meaning *oneself* as in “When are you going to stop hiding from people and be your true self?” Or as, when asked who’s going to bell the cat, I might declare, “Me, myself, and I.” Ego ipse!

Idem

You could say that the adjective *idem* (indicating sameness) applies to the whole of nature: plants, rocks, stars, the moon, animals, the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky in that they are what they are. Even though animal life may evolve and landscapes change they remain the same. There seems to be no self-*ipse*-consciousness there. For instance we may impose personalities upon cartoon cats or penguins and avoid lions and alligators as evil beings – but they remain what they are, animals with basic instincts, impersonal, predictable in their behavior, limited to sounds, not words. They are always what they are – *idem*, the same. King Lear in his suffering may have thought the same of mankind when in the storm he laments: *Is man no more than this? Consider him well . . . Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but . . . a poor bare, forked animal. . .*

Indeed you could say with recent scholars that society actually likes to

reduce human beings to a kind of sameness for management purposes – it makes things (people reduced to things) easier to handle. Social Security numbers, credit card numbers, four digit passwords – all make for easier record keeping, identification, greater objectivity, which isn't a bad thing. Such a propensity for sameness carries over into religious life – as when we went through a clothing ritual upon entering a religious order, we took off our varied secular outfits and put on a habit – resulting in our all looking alike, individuality submerged – even gestures prescribed, the same rule for all.

Prescribed Sameness

Even when it comes to morality, we are early on confronted with prescriptions, pre-written norms of behavior (like the 10 commandments and other behavioral codes, rubrics) designed to insure, let's say, a least common denominator of social normality or performance, a sameness of civility, a sameness of behavioral expectations. For me it began when our classroom nuns had our grades get into line to reenter the school after a recess of chaos in the schoolyard. Anyone not behaving the same (*idem*), anyone behaving "out of line" was sent to the office.

But then -

There you have it – we human beings do have this capacity to behave or think "out of line" – to be also an *ipse*, a self, oneself – selfhood being our potential for initiative. As scholars of language say, there are situations when *ipse* (oneself) seems to rule over *idem* (the same old me) - *for example, moments when we want to enact changes in our lives . . . In these situations . . . our ipse seems to become uncoupled from sameness . . . [and] inaugurates something completely new in our life.*

The Sermon on the Mount: an illustration

Working within those options (*idem and ipse*; being the same but also becoming different) we might say that the Torah (the Law) of the Hebrew Testament *prescribed, ritualized, coded*, how we should adhere to God, fit the mold, become the same – while the Gospels, especially Matthew, would have us break into new territory – as when elsewhere Jesus says of the prescribed, coded spatial set up of the Jewish Temple: "Do you not see all these things (including the barriers between men and women, priests and laity, Jews and Gentiles) ? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."

While not denying the value of being the same (*idem*) as prescribed (simply institutionalized), the Sermon on the Mount challenges us to undergo change, to live one's life as a narrative wherein our ownmost possibilities may unfold – for example: “*You have heard that it was said (prescribed), You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good. For if you love those who love you . . . do not the pagans do the same?*”

In other words, you can behave the same (*idem*) as the “normal” world expects, stay within its limits or you can become your true self (*ipse*), namely a child of God whose love extends way beyond the limits of civility and certainly beyond meanness of heart. To be fully human as is Christ, normative practice must be put through a sieve to emerge for instance like the Virgin Mary of the Gospel full of grace, full of faith in the impossible, pregnant with Christ, no longer worriedly looking back over your accounts but alert to the summons of one horizon after another – living a life that's ever new, becoming a new being, becoming a new star, discovering that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

The Sieve – the narrative self

And what is this sieve your *idem* must enter? Students of human language would say: the narratives, the parables, the Gospel, the poems issuing from human language that invite you not just to read or hear them in a flat, museum sort of way but to be taken into them – and let them do their thing, to begin to experience your own life as adopting a plot, revealing a pathway through one deepening revelation, one unveiling after another – forever more – a life that's interesting to say the least, a life that's meaningful no matter what modern purveyors of doubt may say.

Language: short hand or conveyor belt?

People often define language simply as a tool, as conventional signs, sounds or marks that help us communicate and organize our mutual survival. But since the mid 20th century language has been seen by language scholars as a conveyor belt, a kind of discourse that *moves* us, that can *carry us into a world* that we only come to recognize as we let the storytellers (the composers of Genesis, the Court History of David, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the tales of Chaucer, Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Huckleberry Finn, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*) – as we let the poetry, drama, humor, tragedy, the

music of language awaken us to who and what and where and why we really are.

You remember the essay I did for January 8th – Joyce Kilmer’s poem: *Prayer of a Soldier in France* – how Kilmer raised his actual experience on a muddy, painful march to the front in World War I into a sharing of the story of Christ’s Passion – thereby redefining what was really going on and who he really was, another Christ laying down his life to save a world.

The Roman Road

Or take Kenneth Graham’s charming account of an English rural boy who lives near what the region calls The Knight’s Road and sometimes The Pilgrim’s Way.

It’s an ancient road dating back to the Roman occupation of Britain. He had once heard that all roads lead to Rome and he suspected this was one of them “that ran right down the middle of England until it reached the coast, and then began again in France . . . and so on undeviating, through city and vineyard, right from the misty Highlands to the Eternal City.”

He tried to imagine what it would be like . . . the Coliseum.

And then he happened upon an artist at work by the roadside. He hesitated to bother him, so he squatted down on the grass absorbing passionately every detail. “Fine afternoon we’re having,” said the artist. “Going far today?” “No, I’m not going any farther than this,” replied the boy; “I was thinking of going on to Rome but I’ve put it off.” “Pleasant place, Rome,” the artist murmured. “You haven’t been to Rome, have you?” said the boy. “Rather! I live there.” This was too much! The boy’s chin dropped. There he was talking to a man who lived in Rome. Speech was out of the question.

The boy then exacts information. “And have you been to other places?” And then they speculate on who has been to such places, Lancelot and Arthur, Crusoe, “and all the nice men in the stories who didn’t get to marry the Princess.”

As the artist gathers his things to depart he takes the hand of the boy and says, “I’ve enjoyed our conversation very much. That was an interesting subject you started, and we haven’t half exhausted it. We shall meet again, I hope.” “Of course we shall,” replied the boy (surprised that there should be any doubt about it}.

“In Rome, perhaps?” said the artist. “Yes, in Rome,” said the boy. “Or else,” said the artist, “in that other city – when we’ve found our way there. And I’ll look out for you, and you’ll sing out as soon as you see me. And we’ll go down the street arm-in-arm, and into all the shops, and then I’ll choose my house, and you’ll choose your house, and we’ll live there like princes and good fellows.”

The tale ends with the boy saying: ‘The Knights’ Road! How it always brought consolation!’

Reaction

As you encounter even this abbreviation of Kenneth Graham’s story, did you feel your self being drawn into it? Was it an experience and not just a recitation? If you were to linger in such language, to surrender to it, to such art as to a seduction, a call (as felt by the prophets), does your life begin to take on meaning, interest, a valid destiny, adventure, associations; do you sense that it almost physically, emotionally lifts you out of a static existence and envelops you like an atmosphere, carrying you into a more compelling sense of Being, of what life is really about? Scripture should be experienced in a similar way – as a world opening before you in which your ever truer self appears like a second coming of Christ – a Knights’ Road.

The Readings: *This little light of mine. I’m gonna let it shine . . . Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

February 5th – 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Isaiah 58:7-30

This chapter begins by condemning *formal* rather than genuine religion. People observe prescribed fasts in order to win God’s blessings. And the prophet complains: On your fast days you nevertheless go about business as usual; it’s all a show, no genuine regrets; you still drive all your laborers; you fast but continue to quarrel and fight – it’s all superficial observance, an appearance of fasting – yet you remain the same as always. Same rituals, same contradictory behavior.

But if you share your bread with the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, get real, change from *idem* to *ipse* – to real selves, *then your light shall break forth like the dawn.*

At Christmas we welcome the birth of Christ – the new Sunshine, the Light of the world. And today’s readings reveal us to be the rays of that Sun –

each of us an extension of its radiance. It's not just Christ but it's *your light* that shall contribute to the dawning of this year – *this little light of mine, I'm gonna let shine*. I myself, the dawning of my true self, generous self may now bring warmth, daylight and new life to the year to come, the gloom of the world giving way to high noon.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:13-16

This passage underscores the quote from Isaiah. You could say that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount extends over several chapters like a grand sunrise, a dawn wherein we are challenged to transition from being *idem*, the same old, same old person we have been, living a monotonously prescribed life, within familiar limits to becoming hyperbolically good, gracious, boundless, alive. As in today's reading: becoming the salt of the earth, flavorful, adding flavor to human existence, to nature itself. For if salt lose its flavor, what use is it – the same old blandness, bland beings, more mineral than human.

As rays of the Sunrise of Christ, the Light of the world, you too are called to enlighten the world around you, not darken it as does the deadly, ever-repeatable news of the day. A lamp must be seen, lit if it is to be of any use; placed on a lampstand, not quenched. So let your light, your new luminosity, shine among others that they may see . . . see what it means to be good, catch something in your speech, your bearing, your generosity, your mercy, your joy, that reflects the glory of very God.

February 12th, 19th, 26th - 6th, 7th, 8th Sundays in Ordinary Time *Gospel Readings: Matthew 5:17-37; 5: 38-48; 6:24-34*

“The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death, light has arisen.” With these words from the prophet Isaiah Matthew's Gospel leads us out of winter darkness, deadly darkness into a story, a narrative that will change your character, endow you with a true self – *ipseity*, a transformation. And even as Peter and Andrew, James and John (back on January 22nd) left the monotony, the sameness day after day of casting and mending their nets, we are called to follow Jesus up a mountain and listen to what he has to say.

The Sermon on the Mount *contrasts* the behavior required of Israel since its long ago covenant or pact with God at Mt. Sinai, a behavioral sameness that confirms their identity as Israelites – contrasts this with the excess, the versatility, the imaginative, creative ways of seeing and thinking and doing characteristic of the world into which Christ would call us – from the *idem*

limit, the sameness of elementary school to the *magnanimity* of one's true and expanding *ipse*, one's true self, reflective of the bountifulness, the very nature of God and Christ. And so we seat ourselves to listen.

Matthew 5:17-37: Jesus supports the elementary maxims of the Torah, the Law of Moses. The same holds firm, not one stroke should be abolished; people are always beginners, the letter of the law keeps one's head above water.

[What bothers me is it seems the Church chose to concentrate on that goal, to keep people treading water – on the assumption that that's all you might expect of human beings. Emphasis was laid on minimal goodness as a universal goal. The challenge of the Sermon on the Mount was muted – as the merciful! thing to do. And so a sameness of believers across the board emerged – uniformity – like “get me to the church on time.”]

So Jesus says, “If that's as far as you want to go: to live by the book, to paint by the numbers, leave this narrative; go back to the comfortably familiar, the *idem* status of existence. But: *unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.* You will not know your full story. This story, this journey is not for you.

Once you learned that you shall not kill; you will be liable to judgment. But I say to you, to be even angry with your neighbor is enough to bring you to court . . . and to call him an imbecile is enough to take you to a Supreme Court hearing . . . and if you dare call someone a fool, it's off to hell with you. Notice, your own destiny gets relatively worse, the worse you treat your neighbor. Semitic hyperbole designed to shake you up.

Once you were told not to commit adultery and you felt justified in stoning an adulterer to death – or at least the woman involved. Just look at yourselves, how shallowly you judge! Don't you realize that just sizing a woman up is doing violence to her – you owe her more than that – supreme respect.

Better to dismember yourself than let your eye or hands or whatever (like your tongue) violate another. Again Semitic hyperbole – meaning, be extremely respectful to everyone you meet and everything you handle – be as caring as your Creator cares for you.

You have been taught to deal out the same as you are dealt. For instance: You shall love your neighbor (OK) but hate your enemy. In other words, get even, quid pro quo. But within this narrative you will begin to learn: love your enemies, pray for those who give you trouble so that you may arrive at an ipseity far **beyond the “commonplace you”** you are; **that you may be like God who makes his sun to rise on everybody**, bad and good, and makes his rain to fall on everybody, the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you – there’s nothing extraordinary about that, nothing different, it’s the same old, same old. And if you are friendly with relatives, what’s unusual, what’s different, what’s excessive about that. Be as big as God; and discover **how big he really is** – day after day for the whole of your life here and hereafter.

[Luke’s Gospel instead of perfect says *be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.*]

The effect of each narrative – from idem to ipse

Just to illustrate the transformation opened up to you by way of language, the narrative and poetic process, remember again the January 22nd five verse episode about the *call of the first disciples* – settled into the sameness of their fishing boats, chores, cycle – idem. Along comes Jesus and summons them to follow him, indeed to enter into **the larger narrative of the Gospel itself** – and they are compelled immediately to change – to advance from anonymity, from presenting their backs to the world and becoming forever memorable figures in the redemption of the world – each an ipse.

The Samaritan Woman

In this episode from John’s Gospel we meet a Samaritan woman stuck in being marginal, caught up in chores like fetching water, passed around among many husbands over the course of her life, indistinguishable, nameless. The well of Jacob is seen as just that, a source of water on a regular basis, repeatable over and over again – even as her life is doled out bucket by bucket. Even though she knows her well is deep, she has no energy to plumb its depths.

She abides within the prejudices of her tribe – Samaritan versus Jew; within the split of her religious world, Jerusalem versus Mt. Gerizim; within the accepted boundaries of her sex, female versus male. In how many ways does her routine way of acting and thinking reveal something of yourself – how much the *same* are you as the “world” around you – going around in circles.

And then there is this encounter within the narrative of you and Jesus – you, so much like the Samaritan woman, ever idem, ever the same. And Jesus draws you into your potential to be YOU, yourself, ipse, releasing a living spring within you that makes you refreshing, genuine, communicative. Evoking a potential in you that does not lie buried, untapped; that overflows from depths unfathomable – clear, clean, alive – no longer vacant-minded and stagnant.

To read that story as about another person who lived long ago and not to take the whole narrative upon yourself like a garment is to miss opportunity after opportunity to become the self God calls you to be, to become. And the Gospels are full of such sacramental (not just verbal) happenings. And great literature as whole (and I don't mean famous) presents you with so many ways to re-figure yourself as an ipse – indeed so much more than an idem.

Poems too can be an experience, a re-description of your own life, a lure – as in who's fishing for whom.

Poet As Fisherman
by James A. Emanuel

I fish for words
 to say what I fish for,
 half-catch sometimes.

I have caught little pan fish flashing sunlight
 (yellow perch, crappies, blue-gills),
 lighthearted reeled them in,
 filed them on stringers on the shore.
 A nice mess, we called them,
 and ate with our fingers, laughing.

Once, dreaming of fish in far-off waters,
 I hooked a two-foot carp in Michigan,
 on nylon line so fine
 a fellow-fisher shook his head:
 "He'll break it, sure; he'll roll on it and get away."

A quarter-hour it took to bring him in;
 back-and-forth toward my net,
 syllable by syllable I let him have his way
 till he lay flopping on the grass—
 beside no other, himself enough in size:
 he fed the three of us (each differently)
 new strategies of hook, leader, line, and rod.

Working well, I am a deep-water man,
 a "Daredevil" silver wobbler
 my lure for lake trout in midsummer.

Oh, I have tried the moon, thermometers—
 the bait and time and place all by the rule—
 fishing for the masterpiece,
 the imperial muskellunge in Minnesota,
 the peerless pike in Canada.
 I have propped a well-thumbed book
 against the butt of my favorite rod
 and fished from my heart.

Yet, for my labors,
 all I have to show
 are tactics, lore—
 so little I know
 of that pea-sized brain I am casting for,
 to think it could swim
 with the phantom-words
 that lure me to this shore.

(James Emanuel (born June 15, 1921 – September 28, 2013) was an African American poet and scholar from Alliance, Nebraska. Emanuel, who is ranked by some critics as one of the best and most neglected poets of the 20th century, published more than 300 poems, 13 individual books, an influential anthology of African American literature, an autobiography, and more. He is also credited with creating a new literary genre, jazz-and-blues haiku, often read with musical accompaniment.)