

Liturgy Readings for the Sundays of March 2017 – Lent
Cycle A

Introduction: *Finding your narrative self*

To quote what I said in the introduction to last month's liturgical readings, language scholars view language not just as a collection of signs and sounds and structures by which we organize and control the world we live in – of which you could say the dictionary is our tool kit, but *as a conveyor belt* that carries us, moves us into a *meaningful* world (you could call it a world of texts); into an *experience* of the truth of things, that makes of life a constant dialogue with what it means to BE in an ever deeper sense. It's as though Being (or the Word or Spirit of God), as the constant initiator of this dialogue, would draw us out of the dense forest of our environment into *clearings* that open us up to rays of light for enough time to entice us to pursue this everlasting dialogue into even wider clearings . . . *un-concealments* of what's true.

Or I was happy to discover the metaphor of the sieve to designate specifically the language of literature, storytellers as the medium through which we read our way into revelations of what it is to truly BE, to growth in being, closer to the source of all being. If you remember I walked you through Kenneth Grahame's short story *The Roman Road* – an orchestration of words that clarifies the truth that we are “on our way”, that every day with the help of art, imagination, metaphor, we probe our way toward a destination, a story that is incrementally, comprehensively YOU.

The Lenten readings of Cycle A offer us – out of the Gospel of John – some of the best, most effective linguistic conveyor belts that can advance you miles from where you are today – to clearings that are concentric, one widening beyond the other: from the story of Christ's temptation to the Mount of the Transfiguration to a well in Samaria to the cure of a man born blind toward the raising of a dead man to life.

But as a lead-in to these Lenten readings I want to put you through a sieve from within our Christian tradition, though secularized enough to attract the post-Christian taste of modern minds.

I refer to Jane Austen's novel Mansfield Park – set in the early 1800's.

This novel summons you to experience the arrival of Fanny Price at the country estate (Mansfield Park) of Sir Thomas Bertram. Fanny is the poor 10 year old niece of Lady Bertram, cousin of the family's two daughters (Maria 13 and Julia 12) and two older brothers (Tom 17 and Edmund 16), who live as aristocrats – comfortably, secure, and feeling a bit superior to this newcomer. Indeed, the family condescends to Fanny, actually takes her in to serve rather than assume equality. Fanny will be useful and quiet and thankful and humble. So she is welcome but with strings attached and she recognizes this and accepts it.

'Should her disposition be really bad,' said Sir Thomas, 'we must not, for our own children's sake, continue her in the family; but there is no reason to expect so great an evil. We shall probably see much to wish altered in her, and must prepare ourselves for gross ignorance, some

meanness of opinions, and very distressing vulgarity of manner; but these are not incurable faults; nor, I trust, can she be dangerous for her associates. . . . 'I hope she will not tease my poor pug,' said Lady Bertram . . . 'There will be some difficulty to our way . . . ' observed Sir Thomas, 'as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up: how to preserve in the minds of our daughters the consciousness of what they are, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss Bertram. I should wish to see them very good friends and would, on no account, authorize in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals.'

As time goes on she does experience friendship from Edmund, the younger of the Bertram brothers, who is destined for the Anglican ministry, *who began to find her an interesting object. He talked to her more, and from all that she said, was convinced of her having an affectionate heart, and a strong desire of doing right; and he could perceive her to be farther entitled to attention, by great sensibility of her situation, and great timidity. He had never knowingly given her pain, but he now felt that she required more positive kindness, and with that view endeavoured, in the first place, to lessen her fears of them all, and gave her especially a great deal of good advice as to playing with Maria and Julia and being as merry as possible.*

From this day Fanny grew more comfortable. She felt that she had a friend and the kindness of her cousin Edmund gave her better spirits with everybody else. The place became less strange, the people less formidable . . . The little rusticities and awkwardnesses which had at first made grievous inroads on the tranquility of all (and not the least herself) necessarily wore away and she was no longer materially afraid to appear before her uncle . . .

As her appearance and spirits improved, Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris [his sister-in-law] thought with greater satisfaction of their benevolent plan [to take her in]; and it was pretty soon decided between them that though far from clever, she showed a tractable disposition, and seemed likely to give them little trouble.

Already within the first couple of chapters clearances unfold regarding the half-baked way of being, the reluctance to Be that leaves the human race forever quoting Shakespeare's *To be or not to be*. The Bertrams are willing to take in Fanny, but only up to a point – because of her utility and as a way of congratulating themselves on how generous they are (even though Sir Bertram seems in some way to be connected to the slave trade in the West Indies). It's a fragile generosity – ready to send her packing at the least embarrassment over her presence. But also something else begins to clear up – the nature of Edmund, compassionate, helpful, seeing her as *interesting, possessed of an affectionate heart, entitled to attention*.

Application

Can you see *your own* experience of life in just these few lines – not just that of Fanny but of Edmund and – yes – even the condescension of the Bertram adults as well? Can you feel it? Is this story in manifold ways – YOU?

Take into account only the anxieties felt by Fanny Price. My parents moved so often during my elementary school days that I was introduced five times in mid-semester before classrooms, to be sized up by the boys, frowned upon by the girls – ultimately to receive their verdict in the schoolyard during recess.

What is it that makes us doubt our worth in a world that's geared to be impersonal at best as we leave the comfort of our nursery? Competing for jobs, for anything, carries with it the risk of rejection, learning to handle rejection . . . as in the lyric:

Nothing's impossible I have found,
For when my chin is on the ground,
I pick myself up,
Dust myself off,
Start All over again.

Town and Country

As the girls and adolescent brothers grow into young adults, a wealthy brother and sister, Henry and Mary Crawford, settle in their community. Henry and Mary are from London and represent city ways, meaning ways much looser than those of the rural society of which Fanny is now a part. Henry and Mary are modern, have forsaken pious ways, liberal in their attitude toward tradition.

On a visit to the old estate of Maria Bertram's fiancé they all tour the house – including the household chapel. The fiancé's mother proudly describes the chapel: *'It is a handsome chapel, and formerly was in constant use both morning and evening. Prayers were always read in it by the domestic chaplain, within the memory of many; but the late Mr. Rushworth left it off.'*

'Every generation has its improvements,' said Miss Crawford, with a smile, to Edmund. . . . 'It is a pity,' cried Fanny, 'that the custom should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with one's ideas of what such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer is fine!'

"Very fine indeed!" said Miss Crawford, laughing. 'It must do the heads of the family a great deal of good to force all the poor housemaids and footmen to leave business and pleasure and say their prayers here twice a day, while they are inventing excuses themselves for staying away. . . . At any rate it is safer to leave people to their own devices on such subjects. Everybody likes to go their own way – to choose their own time and manner of devotion. [The American War of Independence is still within recent memory!] The obligation of attendance, the formality, the restraint, the length of time - altogether it is a formidable thing . . . and if the good people who used to kneel and gape in that gallery could have foreseen that the time would ever come when men and women might lie another ten minutes in bed, when they woke with a headache, without danger of reprobation because chapel was missed, they would have jumped with joy and envy. Can't you imagine with what unwilling feelings the former belles of the house . . . did many a

time repair to this chapel? The young Mrs. Eleanors and Mrs. Bridgets – starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different – especially if the poor chaplain were not worth looking at – and in those days, I fancy parsons were very inferior even to what they are now.

For a few moments she was unanswered. Fanny colored and looked at Edmund, but felt too angry for speech; and he needed a little recollection before he could say, . . . ‘Do you think the minds . . . which are indulged in wanderings in a chapel, would be more collected in a closet?’ Miss Cashman is soon shocked to find that Edmund will one day be ordained: ‘Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing.’

Amid growing awareness of the negative, critical, soulless values exhibited by the Cashmans, Fanny’s values emerge more *clearly*, her very being becomes more luminous.

Life as theatre

Again under the influence of the Cashmans – while Sir Bertram is far away on business in the West Indies, they and others decide to stage a play at the Bertram home. It’s very much a metaphor: life as theatre, play acting, a show in the sense of “all show/no substance”. Henry as instigator is described as “a great actor” – in the sense of “an act”, not for real, never himself but playing one part or another. They are going to set up a make believe world, escapism, being “somebody else”. Life becomes following a script, learning your lines. Is public life in general all an Act, playing political roles, unreal? Edmund yields to the temptation but Fanny is incapable of acting, i.e. she can only be herself as she emerges from the forest of this world oriented to things that are true, not just an “act”.

The Shrubbery

In the course of Fanny’s residence in the neighborhood of Mansfield Park she visits the local parsonage with Mary Cashman – the city girl. After waiting for some rain to pass Fanny stops to relax with Mary Chapman in the “shrubbery”, an open area with shrubs and trees and a winding path – made to appear randomly planted – even as undeveloped nature itself would appear.

Fanny says: *Every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty. [Catch the double meaning here: is Fanny talking about herself?] Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow along the upper side of the field, never thought of as any thing, or capable of becoming any thing; and now it is converted into a walk, and it would be difficult to say whether most valuable as a convenience or as an ornament; and perhaps in another three years we may be forgetting – almost forgetting what it was before. How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!”*

Note that Miss Crawford is untouched and inattentive, has nothing to say. Fanny continues: *I must admire the taste Mrs. Grant has shown in all this. There is such a quiet simplicity in the*

plan of the walk! – not too much attempted!” The evergreen! – How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen! how astonishing the variety of nature! – In some countries we know the tree that sheds its leaf is the variety, but that does not make it the less amazing that the same soil and the same sun should nurture plants differing in the first rule and law of their existence. You will think me rhapsodizing, but when I am out of doors, especially when I am sitting out of doors, I am very apt to get into this sort of wondering strain. One cannot fix one’s eyes on the commonest natural production without finding food for a rambling fancy.”

What does Jane Austen describe metaphorically but the mysterious process whereby Being (or God’s summoning Spirit) draws us into the deeper, clearer reaches of what it means to *be*, to *become*, *develop*. As Fanny says, “*There is such a quiet simplicity to the plan of the walk! – not too much attempted!*” As one commentator notes: the creator of the shrubbery *recognized the inherent potential for “improvement” in something that may not have seemed to have much potential at all . . . Out of this apparent “nothing” she has made a garden walk that is both useful and beautiful.*

Translate these citations into your life – from an apparent nothing through episode after episode, contact after contact – you learn what it means to really Be as well as all that can abort your Being – like the untrue, off target, mindless behavior of other characters in the narrative. There is, of course, a happy ending. Fanny and Edmund get married.

So let’s move on to similar excursions through the narratives the Gospels of March and see what we pick up in terms of our own transformation.

The March Readings – 2017

March 5th – First Sunday of Lent – Cycle A

Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

The text laid out before us is brief. Each of us is invited by the call of the Spirit, the call of *what it means to Be*, to imagine the world we live in as a wilderness full of trials. In our introduction we just experienced Fanny Price’s similar summons into such a wilderness of stymied individuals – not for real; of landed gentlemen who somehow have a prosperous relationship to far away slaves, the power to turn nature, people into bread in the sense of personal wealth – which does not relieve a deeper-lying hunger, a fundamental insecurity, that leaves them, for example, nervous about the impact of a penniless, uneducated ten-year old niece’s arrival among them.

And right away we find ourselves prompted by the text to say to such a world: *It is written: One does not live on bread alone, but on every word, invitation, summons that comes forth from the creative mouth of God.*

And so we move on while the seductions continue. We are raised to a high point of the Temple and challenged to show off, take a dive, to attract attention, to jump based on the psalmist's promise that *God will command his angels . . . and with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.*

The verse is taken from Psalm 91 in which the psalmist calls down blessings upon a person in need. *May the Lord rescue you from the fowler's snare / from the destroying plague. // May he shelter you with his pinions, under his wings. // May you fear not the terror of the night / nor the arrow that flies by day. // Though a thousand fall at your side / ten thousand at your right hand / near you it shall not come. // May he command his angels to guard you wherever you go / With their hands may they support you / lest you strike your foot against a stone. / May you tread upon the asp and the viper / trample the lion and the dragon . . .*

Note how it is of the nature of blessings that they speak in hyperboles, go to extremes in their wishes; they are not to be taken literally; the very exaggeration of their wishes indicates how valued the recipient is to the one doing the blessing.

This tendency to exaggerate becomes more evident in the counterpart to a blessing, namely a curse. There is something about a curse that gets more eloquent, reflective of more feeling as when we say simply "God damn you!" We are not talking literally are we? Take some Irish curses like: *May you be plagued by a powerful itch and never have the nails to scratch it.* And again: *May you marry in haste and repent at leisure.* But more benignly a blessing like: *When you reach the inn of death, I hope it's closing time.* And *May you live as long as you want, and never want as long as you live.*

So for the tempter to read the psalm of blessing literally reveals his ignorance of God's word (he hasn't taken a course in Scripture). Hence the response of Jesus: *Stop playing games, stop manipulating God's word* – something that is done too often every Sunday of the year.

Which forces the tempter to get to the point. We are taken up a high mountain and shown the world in all its magnificence and promised every bit of it if we prostrate ourselves and worship the Adversary of all creation and humanity. And we choose rather to worship the Lord of our biblical saga, the author of our lives. And the result? Angels appear and minister to us.

March 12th – Second Sunday of Lent – Cycle A

Gospel Reading: Matthew 17: 1-9

You could say that every Gospel episode introduces us into another stage of our own transformation – each episode redundant – the same yet different like our day to day passage through life. Here in Matthew's Transfiguration account – even as in last Sunday's Gospel reading – we are taken up a mountain for a preview of where life is leading us: to our face shining like the sun, our trappings dazzling white – while a bright cloud envelops us and a voice like thunder says, "This is my beloved, with whom I am so pleased! Listen to what she/he has to say - for her/his discourse will be poetry."

And we react – “Who me!?” It almost knocks us over! But what is Jesus’ Transfiguration but a revelation of what we are born to become: transfigured? Scared? Jesus says, “Get up and don’t be afraid.”

And we look up and see no one but Jesus, nothing but our every day faces – still reflecting a glimpse of what happened so fleetingly and will slowly materialize into a resemblance of Christ as we pass through one Gospel episode after another. Even as Fanny Price improved, even as the shrubbery she loved developed out of *this apparent “nothing” [into] a garden walk both useful and beautiful.*

March 19th – Third Sunday of Lent – Cycle A

Gospel Reading: John 4:5-42

The leading request, meant to snag you into the very episode you are hearing today is *Give me a drink*. It is directed by a stranger to a Samaritan woman about to draw water from an ancient tribal well. She bristles at the request, is restrained by her culture, her acquired prejudices. Boundaries of “beware” are triggered by the stranger’s accent, his features, his being Jewish. She marvels that the stranger himself doesn’t feel the same about her: *How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?* And so we have a stand off such as have torn our world, even bodies apart since the dawn of time.

I learned to have similar reactions when for a few months I lived with my grandparents and young aunt and uncle in South Philadelphia. There was a grocery store round the corner frequented by the neighborhood. Often I was sent (at age 7) to purchase something somebody wanted, say a loaf of bread, and was told to go around “to the Jew” to get it. The store-owner was Jewish and was referred to as such – as “the Jew”. And so I learned how to make impersonal, negative distinctions among people not of my own heritage. Only later in life to discover that so much of my heritage is actually Jewish!

The stranger picks up on the woman’s recoil from his appearance, his gender. He recognizes how entrapped she is – like others - within her one square among the many that checker-board the landscape of our world, that force her to drink from an exclusive well. How many cowboy films, their violence, have to do with contested access to water or World Wars with contested access to oil or whatever?

He challenges the woman to break out of such seclusion: *Everyone who drinks from this water will be always thirsty but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.* Already he is raising her consciousness to imagine a so much wider, deeper reality, more abundant source of life than her current, shallow, stagnant resource can provide. *The water I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*

Already her own life, her mind, her heart, her vision ceases to be static, stagnant. She begins already to overflow. He has as we say *turned her on* – as the Bible is supposed to do. Your narrative self, caught up in the flow of the episode, remains no longer a dead letter, an eventual

obituary, but a story unfolding into eternity. You can sense it as she says *Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or experience religion as a monotonous cycle of highs and lows over and over again.*

The stranger assures her, having intensified her thirst, her life, her interest in tomorrow, that for her the hour is coming and is now here in the presence of Christ when true worshippers, real people, will worship neither in her box nor in Jerusalem's but in spirit and in truth - in a realm of deeper breathing space and of everlasting un-concealment (aletheia) of what it means to BE.

March 26th - Fourth Sunday of Lent – Cycle A

Gospel Reading: John 9: 1 - 41

Today's Gospel begins with the words: *As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.* Each of the Gospels carries us from one scene after another, each independent, even as our own lives are episodic from day to day – except that each episode of the Gospels offers something miraculous about it – some deed or word that brightens the moment.

As we read we find ourselves in a narrative, a stage-by-stage movement from a birth, a beginning to a conclusion that leaves the narrative nevertheless open beyond the words “The End”. The Gospels are therefore meant to be entered, not just read from outside. You are invited to engage with the action from scene to scene, merging your own life as a narrative with the sacred narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Today's narrative episode centers on a man born blind who as you follow becomes you – far more than you know. For we are all born blind even though we see. I think that's what Ambrose Bierce is talking about when he writes of a man born blind whose sight has been restored “by a painful operation”. And now:

He saw a merchant, good and wise.
And greatly, too, respected,
Who looked, to those imperfect [surgically corrected] eyes,
Like a swindler undetected.

He saw a patriot address
A noisy public meeting.
And said: 'Why, that's a calf. I guess.
That for the teat is bleating.'

He saw a lawyer pleading for
A thief whom they'd been jailing,
And said: 'That's an accomplice, or
My sight again is failing.'

Upon the Bench a Justice sat,
 With nothing to restrain him;
 'Tis strange,' said the observer, 'that
 They ventured to unchain him.'

With theologic works supplied,
 He saw a solemn preacher;
 'A burglar with his kit,' he cried,
 'To rob a fellow creature.'

A dame, tall, fair and stately, passed,
 Who many charms united;
 He thanked his stars his lot was cast
 Where sepulchers were whited.

A palace's well-carven stones,
 Where Dives dwelt contented,
 Seemed built throughout of human bones
 With human blood cemented.

His eyes were so untrained and dim
 All politics, religions,
 Arts, sciences, appeared to him
 But modes of plucking pigeons.

And so he drew his final breath,
 And thought he saw with sorrow
 Some persons weeping for his death
 Who'd be all smiles to-morrow.

In other words, after his painful operation the man sees a lot of monkey business, crime going on that's overlooked by people who claim to have sight. Such overlooking of the truth of what's going on is a kind of blindness that afflicts the whole human race.

In today's Gospel Jesus heals a man afflicted with just such blindness – so that the man can only henceforth tell the truth, not conceal the deliberately blind ways people live.

Everyone now notices the change and he is compelled to explain how come he now sees so clearly, honestly. It had to do with the man Jesus washing mud from his eyes. Such cures needed to be certified by the Pharisees to whom he repeats his story. After all, the cure might be nice but it broke the Sabbath – no such work allowed.

The real threat here is not the man's recovery of sight but it's being done on the Sabbath and by a man whose credentials can't be found. Breaking down sacred rules of behavior and worse,

opening up human minds to question existing norms, sacred norms, can be catastrophic – as in the way the once blind man answers questions simply, candidly and then begins to notice (in the Pharisees repeating the same questions) the possibility they were not as sure of themselves as they're supposed to be, that their "authority" is beginning to stammer. So the man switches roles and says:

I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.

"What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?

But in removing the mud from your eyes Jesus isn't just equipping you to see all that is wrong, false in this world. You are not to end up simply a critic. It's that other kind of vision that great art, the play of imagination, the music, the healing touch that advances the creation of the world, opens up those clearances which amount to a perpetual dawning.

In conclusion, to refer back to Mansfield Park

By the end of Jane Austen's story, what with Sir Bertram's daughter Maria marrying the boring Mr. Rushworth for his fortune only later to elope with Mary Cashman's unprincipled brother Henry; and his daughter Julia, following her older sister's example and running off with a marginal fellow named Yates – the novel ends with Fanny marrying their brother Edmund.

Sick of ambitious and mercenary connections, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper, and chiefly anxious to bind by the strongest securities all that remained to him of domestic felicity, [Sir Bertram] had pondered with genuine satisfaction on the more than possibility of the two young friends [Fanny and Edmund] finding their mutual consolation in each other . . . ; and the joyful consent which met Edmund's application, the high sense of having realized a great acquisition in the promise of Fanny for a daughter, formed just such a contrast with his early opinion on the subject . . . as time is for ever producing between the plans and decisions of mortals, for their own instruction and their neighbors' entertainment.

Fanny was indeed the daughter he wanted.