

Spring Training

The other day out of nowhere came a memory of something that happened when I was around thirty years old. I was home on vacation in my native town and therefore free to join my uncle and his friend at Little League practice on a sunny day. I was there only as an observer, watching the kids practice for games to come. At the moment their coach was hitting ground balls to the infielders, testing their skill at retrieving batted balls and throwing to one or other of the bases.

My uncle invited me to take a bat and keep the boys working. So I picked one up and swung at pitches and put the ball into play. After about ten minutes the boy playing third base let out a gripe and threw his glove to the ground. "What's wrong?", said the coach. "You hurt?" "No," said the boy. "But that guy (namely me) is just tapping the ball, half swings, easy stuff. Why doesn't he swing hard, full swing, whack the ball, give us some hard stuff to work on?"

I was embarrassed, wounded, as it were, my pride. But the kid was right. Out of sympathy for their youth I was making it easy, half swings. But what hurt deep down was the fact that I held back on a lot of things in my life, I lived cautiously, regarding my allegiances to things, my opinions; I was afraid of the full delivery of whatever "convictions", whatever power I possessed. I was afraid to excel, to let go. Why? That would be a long story.

Any way this kid at third base touched a nerve. And it hurt – which is why I can still remember it so many years later.

Which (surprise!) brings me to Lent and religion. Lent coinciding with baseball's spring training season is a serious phase of the year. It's about getting intense about what we believe, indeed, whether we really believe in God, in Christ, in his Gospel or merely make-believe! It demands that we practice our faith at a level deeper than we do "any old Sunday"; that our fielding of the Gospel's deeper, trickier truths becomes error free. It requires that we round the bases of our creed with the grace of a Gene Kelly. No wavering upon the verge of total commitment, no half swings at life but wholehearted engagement in the "game".

In other words we need to become like the boy in a poem by - Roger Turner? About a boy at third, blind in one eye, . . . *this kid was sure something / A true believer in his ability to play the game . . . / He really loved it . . . Had an arm like a rocket / the ball would just explode out of his hand / I never knew where it was going / And . . . I don't think he did either / But, wow . . . it went fast wherever it ended up . . . Made a hell of a breeze when he swung . . . He did get a hit once or twice. / I remember that . . .*

Which has me wondering: was this the kid of long ago who called me out for the half-hearted way I was living my life?