

Liturgical Readings for September 2016 – Cycle C

A Month of Parables

Introduction: *What is a world? A blue globe? And that's that?*

The year I was born Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, wrote a book called *The Future of an Illusion*. He claimed that all religions, including Christianity, were subjective, inherited, symbolic speculations with no real foundation in fact and were bound to go out of business. Illusion is a word derived from Latin *ludere* meaning to play – in other words religion is a game we play without realizing it's a game. It's a game we take to be true when all the while it is self-deception which can only be healed by a good dose of modern science – which claims to study nature as it is and not as we imagine it to be.

Scholars today criticize Freud's simplistic evaluation of religion as a relic of the sophomoric stage of the Age of Reason and Science. After our initial shock over being told our creed, even our Biblical heritage, was nothing but make believe, a story book not unlike the fairy tales of our childhood, many a genuine scholar of language and literature, rather than argue with people like Freud, say *all human beings* and human societies *live within* a story book world – wake up within a tradition, a pattern that is an interpretation of the world, a blend of both human imagination and reason.

Even modern science has its storied notion of the universe insofar as it dreams hypotheses, reenacts for instance something like the quest for the Holy Grail – anticipating arrival someday at some kind of closure regarding the make up of the natural world. Even science can't articulate itself without metaphor, a poetic overreach into the past and future. Hence: terms like the Big Bang for starters. Imagination has had its role to play within whatever understanding of the world we inhabit – nor need that imagination be misleading. It can be prophetic. Indeed it confronts us with the *meaning of the world we live in* more profoundly than science can.

But (say these scholars) in order to fathom the world, the vision of the world presented to us in both song and story, in literature, myths, plays like those of Shakespeare, the narrative episodes of the Old Testament and the New, right down to parables such as we shall hear at Mass this month, we have to do more than just read them off the page in front of us. Rather, we have to enter each even as Alice stepped into the room the other side of the mirror; we have to live especially within the realm of *sacred* stories to experience their claim to be the

real world as intended by our Creator. (Indeed one could say we have no need to do the Alice thing, to step through the mirror into the stories we meet – because we are always within a story already, whether we know it or not.)

For example: the Creed

I acquired a sense of this when one day last month I recalled (for some reason?) the Gregorian University's opening day Mass in Rome in September of 1951 – within the four hundred year old baroque Church of the Gesu.

I was standing two thirds of the way down the nave of the ornate building among several hundred other young seminarians from every nation under the sun. Only a few years earlier many of them had been on opposite sides in World War II. It was an inspiring experience. Visible high above me was a fresco of the sky, all blue and focused on the Greek letters IHS (the name of Jesus) toward which as a center spiraled clouds of angels and saints. It was as if the church had opened upon a vision of heaven.

Then came the intoning of the 1700 year old Nicene Creed (*Credo in Unum Deum*) followed by the thunderous masculine response of all those seminarians: PATREM, OMNIPOTENTEM, FACTOREM CAELI ET TERRAE, VISIBILIUM OMNIUM ET INVISIBILIUM . . . ET IN UNUM DOMINUM JESUM CHRISTUM FILIUM DEI UNIGENITUM . . . And so on through the Creed's majestic summation of Christianity's version of history, its story, right up to ET EXPECTO RESURRECTIONEM MORTUORUM ET VITAM VENTURI SAECULI. AMEN (and I await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come. Amen.)

I was impressed but too ignorant in 1951 to realize where I was and what was going on. *Now I realize I was standing and singing right in the midst of a story, the Christian story, the Christian "world" from its Alpha to its Omega – told from beginning to end in that majestic profession of faith – surrounded in every way imaginable, colorfully, musically by an environment unlike the one on the secular streets outside..*

Recalling that moment, it hit me for the first time in my life where I have been since my infancy: in a world not limited to the geography books and astrophysical calculations of the distant galaxies or Wall Street, but within a grand drama – Catholic in the sense of universal in its reach, its range of meaning, all embracing, deeper than the deep blue sea.

A lesser story?

But that's not the only story woven around me since I came into this world. As I have said, I now realize we are woven into many stories, subplots of our biblical one. During that same year 1951, living in the company of seven other friars (each intent upon his own interests) - in the close quarters of a 15th century church overlooking the bell towers of Rome, I struggled through the courses taught in Latin at the university - courses in which the drama of our biblical story had been translated into dry as dust abstractions that put one to sleep - in the crowded halls of learning themselves didn't have the same effect. I was lonely.

And there in our small library I came across Betty Smith's novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* - the only novel on the shelves. I kidnapped it and given the crowded, inner city setting of the story so similar to the Philadelphia where I grew up, *it kidnapped me*. I couldn't help but identify with Francie Nolan, daughter of an alcoholic father and a mother sternly dedicated to making ends meet - and of the other characters who so much reflected the people of my own neighborhood and family - and tight quarters. And there was that tenement's rear courtyard where amid the clothes-lines a scrawny tree refused to die to urban entrapment. And moments like a wartime New Year's Eve when after the shouting and counter anthems of the Irish and German residents, Francie with her mother and her brother - in a moment of silence - shouted from their tenement rooftop into the night air: "*Happy New Year, everybody!*"

So much was I into the story that at the end, when Francie is about to go off to college to become a writer, she muses, at her window, upon that single urban tree which the landlord had recently tried to chop down but which hadn't died: *A new tree had grown from the stump and . . . started to grow towards the sun . . . this tree lived! It lived! And nothing could destroy it.* Then, looking at another younger girl reading on her own fire escape as Francie used to do: "*Goodbye, Francie,*" she *whispered*. And she closed the window! And I anticipated she was going to do that and actually called out in the privacy of my cell: "*Don't close the window!*" Don't leave me out here in my aimlessness and ignorance and loneliness.

Talk about stepping into the world of the story. I was so far into that story and it was such a consolation to me, such a revelation of all that unconsciously mattered to me as a *human* being, that I didn't want it to end. And it hasn't, because once you enter such a story you take it with you wherever you go. As *Paul Ricoeur* says - *all such writing presents us with an epiphany of the new being toward which we exist.*

I can see how lucky actors are. They do indeed have a chance to live upon a stage, live within a play, to acquire a new identity in the context of the world of Shakespeare or a film like *The Secret of Roan Inish* or a biblical mystery play.

In the light of this evaluation of the truth of a poetic, dramatic, storybook articulation of the meaning of the astonishing universe, the created world, we live in and of the meaning of life, I want to see if we can enter into *rather than just read* the parables of Jesus assigned for this month.

September 4th – 23rd Sunday Ordinary Time

First Reading: Wisdom 9: 13-18

Brought up in the modern era where only fact supported by reason and experiment is taken for the truth and no longer the Bible's highly imaginative, even liturgically motivated accounts of the world and history, I grew up as schizoid as you – one foot in the so called real, factual, secularized world of the university and workplace and the other within the devotional atmosphere of my parochial school and church – the world of our Credo.

Indeed, for some reason, so fact oriented had people become that over the centuries, the Bible itself began to be read as more a collection of facts than a drama. In other words, the tradition was taken *literally* as by fundamentalists – the flood of Noah was a literal rather than metaphorical flood (and therefore so much more profound than any actual flood could be) and the remains of the Ark are therefore resting somewhere in Kurdistan. Or then there was a conviction that the world was literally created in 6 days and that woman resulted from Adam's donation of one of his ribs. Such literalism, rather than reveal the meaning of the episodes, takes us ever farther away from it – like: to a disappointing excavation site in Kurdistan.

Which makes it all the more imperative that we enter into today's first reading which encourages us to step into the text, its world as one loaded with mystery, a world demanding exploration by *a fertile imagination*; spacious, enticing us to expand and deepen in mind and heart – even beyond dogmatic closure:

For who knows God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends?

For the deliberations of mortals are timid, and uncertain our plans . . .

For . . . the earthly tent [our everyday world of just the facts, ma'am] weighs down the mind with its many concerns.

Scarcely can we guess the things on earth, and only with difficulty grasp what is at hand; but the things of heaven, who can search them out? Or who can know your counsel, unless you give Wisdom and send your holy spirit from on high?

See how the text summons you out of arguments over petty things or over which is true, science or literature, to be open to ever-new horizons that feed not only your mind but your insatiable soul. And who is behind it? A spirit from on high who we sense authors the wealth of wisdom, which is the Bible.

Gospel Reading: Luke 14: 25-33

Stepping into the realm of mystery that permeates the literature of the Bible is no easy matter. It takes courage, or as Paul Tillich says, it takes *the courage to BE*, to really BE, to acquire that new Being that Scripture holds out to us. As I enter this text from Luke it generates a tension in me. Do I really want to enter the world of Jesus, of the Gospel? I feel the tug of my normal, everyday world. Sure it makes demands but demands which when fulfilled serve to maintain the coziness of my routine existence, insulate me from bigger demands, from adventure – God forbid.

Yet within this lectionary Gospel reading I feel a challenge, the disturbing sense that I'm really a coward. Especially when Jesus confronts me with examples of a tower builder who builds half-heartedly and merits ridicule as somebody who said he would do something but didn't have the guts to do it. The same with the other example: a king who talks belligerently but decides to pull his punches. His courage is all talk. A mere talker: he will send a delegation while the other is a long way off or as we say: cop out, renege, ask for terms of peace, which means normality at any price. He will claim to be a cradle Catholic – and that's all.

Inside this passage from Luke I feel a shame coming over me, a tug in opposite directions as did Henry Fleming (in Stephen Crane's Civil War story *The Red Badge of Courage*) who runs away from his first battle like many another recruit but only to return to his company in shame and then in defiance of his fear behaves heroically so that at the end, as his company retires from the scene of battle: – *at last his eyes seemed to open to some new ways. He found that he could look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly . . . He felt a quiet manhood, nonassertive but of sturdy and strong blood. He knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point. He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man. . . It rained. The procession of weary soldiers became a bedraggled train, despondent and muttering, marching with churning effort in a trough of liquid brown mud under a low, wretched sky. Yet the youth smiled, for he saw that the world was a world for him . . . The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks--an existence of soft and eternal peace.*

Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds.

He had passed from one world into another, the description of which echoes many a biblical psalm and prophecy. And he will stay there.

September 11th – 24th Sunday Ordinary Time

First Reading: Exodus 32: 7 – 14

I think I mentioned once how, when I reluctantly began graduate studies in Scripture, I dashed off a term paper that merited a phone call from my professor telling me to get serious or stop wasting his and my time! He was a man of short temper, in constant collision with faculty members who felt threatened by modern exegesis – and so he had no patience with a neutral, uncommitted person like me. Needless to say, I had a sudden awakening. Embarrassment worked.

Today's passage from Exodus allows God to simulate my old professor's rage. Moses had dragged the Israelites out of Egypt, was absent receiving God's Law on a mountain and so the Israelites fell back into pagan practices, worshipping a golden calf as the source of life.

As I enter this scene I feel the anger not of Ed Siegman, my old professor, but of God, upset over my slack, slipshod, ignorant, neutral, lukewarm way of being a Christian – my not being serious enough about a gift that cost the life of my very Creator. "Let me at him, let me give him a taste of how serious *I* am about *him*." And so there I stand waking up to signals that the world of the Creed, of which I am at least a card carrying member, is a serious place, no place for half-heartedness. "Get him off the stage!"

But someone intervenes: Moses, the director, who appeals to God's deeper affection for me, how much he has cultivated my exodus from the prosaic world into which I was born, how often he has sworn to make of me a new galaxy in the sky, a citizen of a promised land. And how can God resist being reminded of all that. His anger cools, his real feelings toward me, his love emerges – and I feel so thankful to Moses for representing me, giving me a new lease on life – and begin to write out a check for services rendered that I know he will not take.

Gospel Reading: Luke 15: 1-32

In today's Gospel Jesus offers us access to a world extremely strange to us who live in a world of quid pro quo where a referee is needed to keep things balanced, neutralized, secure – to the breaking point. He does so by way of three parables, short stories meant to ensnare us into his kind of reality. There is the

one about a shepherd's lost sheep and how – in terms of our everyday world – he foolishly leaves the ninety-nine to find the lost one. When he finds it, his concern comes to an end; he is so delighted that he has to tell everyone about it.

Then there is the episode of a lost coin. You know how it is when you have to look for something, be it a key or even a spool of scotch tape or stamp, how frustrating it can be, how you obsess over the loss, spend more time on it than its worth. So also this woman searches high and low, lights a lamp, looks into the most inaccessible places and then: here it is! She becomes jubilant, wants to tell the world about it!

And yet I find myself reading these parables from the outside, neutral, interested but not experiencing the world of the lost sheep and lost coin. Until I realize – the searchers are not looking for a lost sheep or a lost coin – they are searching for me. I am the wandering sheep vulnerable to the toxic influences of my everyday world. I am the lost coin. I have no idea of what I'm worth although the woman's relentless effort to find me gives me a clue.

And now I *do* sense the world into which these parables would lead me: into a world where I am valued so much more than I can imagine, am the object of God's own persistent search – which fills me with not so much joy as relief, a sense of a new beginning in a world, the world of Christ, where I'm really missed, really wanted. As for joy, that's apparently what God experiences when he carries me on his shoulders to join the company of his saints and angels. And ultimately it's also what I feel – joy, belief in the unbelievable.

Which sets me on the threshold of the parable of the lost son.

We are born to live in God's world of superabundant love, adept at hyperbole. But ever since Adam, I guess, we get nostalgic for the grass that looks greener – we leave our Creator's world to be a stranger among strangers, thinking this is freedom. And so we waste our time, talent and opportunity – life gets boring; the delight in haute cuisine eventually gives way to every menu looking the same, commercials have no impact anymore nor does the news of the day. I begin to miss my father's house where there is nourishment to spare.

Of course, well versed as I am in the self-reproach which living in a barnyard can generate, I will use my best apology to regain entrance to my father's world. I will work over the best formula I can remember and say something like: "Father, I have sinned . . . I am no longer worthy . . . etc." But I'm cut off. My father had his eye on me all the time [filled with something like the feelings, the heartbreak I had for my son Philip when he chose to live on the streets].

And what do I as the lost son hear? Bring the best robe . . . put a ring on his finger . . . let's have a feast . . . spare no expense. I'm in the world I was meant to inhabit – a world of grace, festival, celebration, generosity, relationship. Almost too much to trust - but real nevertheless. Guilt does not reign here. Only worth.

Of course there is that other elder son who, though doing his chores, has in a way also done what the younger son did: left his father's house insofar as he lives judgmentally and not graciously. So that the father, our Creator, has to plead with him to come home and also join the party, the new world gathered around the Eucharistic table of humanity's resurrection.

September 18th – 25th Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 16: 1-13

The Lectionary calls this Sunday's Gospel *The Parable of the Shrewd Manager*. Such a fellow, according to the dictionary, is given to wily and artful ways of dealing as in the phrase "a shrewd operator".

In what way was the manager of this rich man's estate shrewd? Well, he's been setting aside income from the estate for his own use. He's been stealing. And now he is on the verge of being found out and fired. But remember, this is a parable, a short story meant to give us insight into what it is like to live in God's kind of world. First it illustrates the kind of world we usually live in, where fraud is in the news everyday and the courts are busy. But the behavior of the manager opens up for us a path into the world as God means it to be. The manager chooses to become generous, gracious. Granted his motive is to survive as he says, "I'm not strong enough to dig." But nevertheless he risks becoming generous - of course with his boss's money - but the beneficiaries of his generosity are not complaining - and the manager's generosity toward them may in turn make them generous toward him once he is fired.

Generosity, if even for the worst motives, becomes the norm! Grace becomes the norm! Even naughty people are occasionally wise enough to exhibit something of the gracious nature of true God - if only to save their skins.

Quite a curve ball thrown my Jesus - but he doesn't apologize. Indeed he says, "The people of this world are more shrewd (i.e. clever, creative when they have to be) than the children of light." So perhaps the parable encourages even the faithful to emulate the manager, to use their worldly wealth in generous ways, but candidly - to attract people to God's generous way of being.

(Verses 10 to 13 are sayings not originally part of the parable.)

September 25th – 26th Sunday Ordinary Time

Gospel Reading: Luke 16:19-31

In this reading we come full circle from the scene in our introduction in which I described my standing within the “world” of the Church of the Gesu in Rome while with hundreds of other students I sang the Credo – which in a succinct way spelled out the whole story of human history and destiny as recounted in the Old and New Testaments. That story made of an otherwise meaningless natural world a story, a true story that allowed me a meaningful role to play in the company saints and angels.

This Sunday’s parable shakes me up with the hopelessness of the rich man who was so self-centered in life as to ignore a starving man at his doorstep – so that, when he dies and discovers the Credo world where the once starving man has a place at an eternal banquet, pleads with Abraham to send someone to warn his equally self-centered, agnostic brothers on earth to change their lives.

Abraham replies they already have the Law and the prophets, the Old Testament, to wake them up to the world of our Creator. And by the Law, the Torah, he doesn’t just mean the legal codes that run through the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but the dramatic interventions of our Creator in *the account of Noah, Babel, the call of Abraham, the wrestling match with Jacob, the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery* that have made life and this blue globe meaningful to countless generations of the children of Abraham.

But the rich man says the Law and the prophets, the Old Testament, won’t be enough. What his brothers need is a visit from someone who has risen from the dead, a New Testament. Ah, says Abraham, but if the grand story of the Old Testament won’t change them, neither will the New Testament’s story of a resurrection. In other words: people remain free to run the risk of distancing themselves so far from the world of any Credo that values faith, hope and love that they may become irretrievable, beyond God’s reach (*between us . . . a great chasm has been set in place*).

Of course the suggestion of our overall Christian story is that no one is irretrievable – so the great chasm idea may be a vestige of some old pre-Christian, Egyptian tale from which our Gospel version is derived.