

Provincialism

Meredith Wilson's 1957 show *The Music Man* is a prime example of a provincial town resisting the outside influence of a traveling salesman, conning its residents into buying band instruments for their children – to form a town band. The adults will have nothing to do with it . . . the idea is alarming, a threat to Midwestern everydayness – it's a new idea and therefore dangerous.

But "Professor Harold Hill", the salesman, wins their approval, distracting them by a worse intrusion, a pool hall! As he sings: . . . *Or you are not aware of the caliber of disaster indicated / By the presence of a pool table in your community. / Ya got trouble, my friend right here in River City. . . . I say that any boob kin take / And shove a ball in a pocket. / And they call that sloth . . . / I say, first, medicinal wine from a teaspoon, / Then beer from a bottle. / An' the next thing ya know, . . . / Your son is playin' for money / And list'nin to some big out-a-town Jasper / Hearin' him tell about horse-race gamblin'.*

In normal use, to be provincial is to be insular, parochial, inflexible, bordering on bigoted, set in one's ways, wary of novelty . . . dogmatic. Back in the days of H. L. Mencken (1880-1956) provincialism, home-town-ness, was greatly admired in the United States, though not by Mencken who wrote a rambling piece about sections of the U.S. thus: . . . *there a poet is now almost as rare as an oboe-player, a dry-point etcher or a metaphysician. It is, indeed, amazing to contemplate so vast a vacuity. One thinks of the interstellar spaces, of the colossal reaches of the now mythical ether.*

Which brings us to Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. It had a small population, much inbred as is evident in Jesus' having so many relatives there. John's Gospel has someone asking: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* And in today's Gospel the town actually resents the fact that Jesus has made a name for himself. "Where does he get off sounding so superior? We know all there is to know about that carpenter's son." Yet what is it that turns them off during his discourse at their synagogue? We have only a fragment of his message (in Luke's version of the visit) but it's loaded with challenges – in a way similar to those set before the citizens of River City: to get musical, become harmonious, acquire rhythm, snap out of your static everydayness, loosen your minds.

We are all citizens of Nazareth (or River City) in some way, once a routine is set, not wanting to change, to widen and deepen our interests, pay some curiosity to why we exist, what brought us here, why must tomorrow differ from today. The concrete has dried, the paving set – so let's continue to tread our familiar way. All this Jesus stuff about bringing good news to the poor, freedom to shackled lives, insight to obsessed minds, hope to the oppressed, a God of grace to people burdened by guilt – is asking too much, thank you – so will you please leave town?

Indeed, I myself am a citizen of Nazareth; I am inclined to wish the challenges of Jesus to leave me alone, like caring interminably for a demented spouse – and live my tomorrows as I have all my yesterdays – comfortably dormant – skeptical as ever of anything like a miracle – unless maybe it is I whom Christ expects to behave like a miracle.

Geoff Wood