

Liturgical Readings for June 2018 Cycle A

Introduction: *Learning how to read*

Lewis Carroll's 19th century tale *Alice in Wonderland* begins with a poetic introduction recalling the way the children delighted in the tale:

Anon, to sudden silence won, / in fancy they pursue / The dream-child moving through a land / Of wonders wild and new, / In friendly chat with bird and beast - / And half believe it true.

And ever as the story drained / The wells of fancy dry / And family strove that weary one / To put the subject by, / "The rest next time - " "It is next time!" / The happy voices cry.

Thus grew the tale of Wonderland: / Thus slowly one by one, / Its quaint events were hammered out - / And now the tale is done, / And home we steer, a merry crew, / Beneath the setting sun.

You know the story – or maybe not, because it takes some pretty peculiar turns. But we all remember the beginning. Alice is becoming tired; her sister is reading a book without pictures or dialogue in it and *what's the use of a book . . . without pictures or conversation?* [This is a figurative way of describing the modern, academic, fact driven environment into which children grow (no pictures, no conversation) – too much imagination considered more likely to distort, falsify reality, distract rather than educate.]

Then along comes a white rabbit with pink eyes (don't rabbits and Easter eggs coincide because of springtime fertility?). *Oh dear! O dear! I shall be too late!* says the rabbit in passing by. Then down a hole it went and Alice followed after – down,

down, down, losing all sense of latitude or longitude. She lands softly and follows the rabbit, arriving in a long hallway full of locked doors. She has trouble opening them.

No need to go into all the details of how she began to cry, even creating a pool of tears. *How queer everything is today!* she says . . . *I wonder if I've been changed . . . was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little bit different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I?*

And so the story goes, one strange experience after another as when she meets a large blue Caterpillar sitting on a mushroom and smoking a long hookah. A very languid, silent larval being who after awhile asks Alice, *Who are You?* Alice replies, *I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.*

What do you mean by that? says the Caterpillar, sternly. *Explain yourself!*

I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir, because I'm not myself, you see.

I don't see, says the Caterpillar.

I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly, replies Alice very politely, *for I can't understand it myself, to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.*

It isn't, says the Caterpillar.

Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet, says Alice. *But when you have to turn into a chrysalis – you will some day, you know – and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?*

Not a bit, says the Caterpillar.

Alice replies – *all I know is, it would feel very queer to me.*

You!, says the Caterpillar *contemptuously*. *Who are you?*

What Lewis Carroll is writing here is not a book to be scanned across each seemingly thin page; he's opening you up to a depth dimension, a rabbit hole down which you are invited to follow Alice on a journey of transformation, into episodes that may everlastingly reveal who you are in cumulative, imaginative ways. We are not trained to read things in that depth dimension way, to *become* the book, the characters in the book . . . In his introduction to *The Annotated Alice* Martin Gardner quotes the Catholic critic Gilbert K. Chesterton who worries that academics will soon take this story and other Carroll stories and study them in relation to questions like "Record all the moves in the chess game in *Through the Looking Glass*, and give a diagram" or "Outline the practical policy of the White Knight for dealing with the social problem of green whiskers." They will make them objects of analysis, study, dissect them, as we dissected a frog in high school to identify its inner organs – something you would never think of doing to Kermit the Frog; he'd be so much more interesting than a dead frog.

But Chesterton was a man of faith, of imagination; he wrote stories among other things. And he was very much aware that the orthodox procedure for studying anything validly in modern times was scientific, objectively; impersonally.

Experience

What is experience? How do we get to know things in modern times? Not just the facts, not just the logical sense of a thing but to know the *thing itself* - as Woody Allen might jocosely interject: "in the biblical sense of the word"?

The prevailing response since the days of “I think, therefore I am” (i.e. the last four hundred years of scientific progress, of relentless technological change, of “mind’s mastery over matter”) has been to set things up *opposite* the human mind (like animals in a cage) or (so to speak) lay them out anesthetized upon a surgical table as objects to be subjected to *oneself* (the human being) *as the subject*, the one with the tools (mental and fabricated) to penetrate even to the “atomic core” of nature -- methodically cutting away at the illusions, assumptions, red herrings, the chaff to get at the really calculable, measurable, *verifiable* reality of a fish, a star, a brain, a cloud, translating even a happening from being a rumor or lie or myth into “what really happened”.

In other words, according to some 20th century thinkers, we have been using “method” defined as a systematic procedure, orderly research, a plan, a logical sequence of steps . . . even as refined as a military attack . . . as the *surest* way of knowing our universe – more often in order to make it do our bidding. So knowledge becomes more and more pragmatic, less and less philosophical or mythical. Knowing becomes less and less an engagement, an encounter, a two way street in which the object we focus on does not remain anesthetized but works upon us, even masters us before we can ever master it. May it not be *we* who walk around anesthetized? Have we ever figured out a play by Shakespeare in one reading? Would it still be new after 20 readings or viewings? Do not all such stories become full of rabbit holes similar to the one down which Alice descended?

Literature, Sacred and Secular, as something to be experienced, not just scanned visually and audibly.

Denise Levertov

It's metaphors (verbal and extended) that constitute the rabbit holes designed by poets and biblical writers to undercut the ground beneath our pedestrian way of thinking and living our precious lives. So much ground covered, so many years lived; so little change recognized, until we notice something, things we take for granted; notice them with the help of a poet. For instance wind flowing through the leaves of a tree and the stillness of a sky – and then . . . As in Denise Levertov's poem titled *Of Being*:

I know this happiness
is provisional

the looming presences –
great suffering, great fear –
withdraw only
into peripheral vision:

but ineluctable this shimmering
of wind in the blue leaves:

this flood of stillness
widening the lake of sky:

this need to dance,
this need to kneel:

this mystery:

Words that move, that change us – if only for a moment – into how we should like to ever BE: fully alive, ever reverent, alert to the holiness of things.

R.S. Thomas

Then there was the poem by R.S. Thomas that I used in a parish essay the second week of May. A friend mentioned Thomas to me the prior Sunday; so I looked up my copy and randomly came upon one poem called *Illusory Arrivals*. Now it often happens if you read great writing even with the least attention that that rabbit hole I spoke of will open up and down you go. The poem grabs you, takes you in, rips you out of your objectivity, your Cartesian universe and you sink to an ever widening understanding that even conveys you beyond the limits of the poem itself. As in Thomas's

Who was the janitor
with the set face, wardening
the approaches? I had prepared
my apologies, my excuses

for coming by the wrong
road. There was no one
there, only the way
I had come by going on and on.

It was the phrase *There was no one / there . . .* nobody waiting to judge us, no warden, no janitor, gatekeeper. Grace taken seriously, God not interested in interrogations; Jesus saying to the accused woman, "Has no one condemned you? Neither do I." God preferring conversation. Life a path mercifully open . . . everlasting life. The brief poem widened my field of thought to life as an experience of constant examination, needing always to measure up, to be accepted, to merit permission to associate

. . . to worry even more, so that as all these examinations became internalized with *myself* as my least tolerant warden; frequent failures of character forecasting my expulsion to something like Dante's Inferno . . . Thus the impact of metaphors of a warden, a janitor with a set face waiting to check me out . . . metaphors projecting me into a truer understanding of God and human destiny – as the poem says: *There was no one there, only the way I had come by going on and on.* In other words: grace was there – assured! Life redeemed. Transformation. Metamorphosis. A winged adult emerging from its chrysalis, confinement, tomb – now empty. See what I mean by experience?

Genesis 11: 1-9 The Tower of Babel

You know the story. The Church assigns it to be read on the vigil of Pentecost. Migrants into what became the Babylonian Empire decide to settle down and insure their unity (one language) and security by building a stepped tower, a ziggurat, as high as the sky – intimidate others by their achievement.

In the course of time this was read literally, as an historical account. But what we really have here is a legend with perpetual power that can change your life, even your country, though you wonder, considering how our modern culture keeps building towers called skyscrapers.

But so do individuals. Somewhere along the way we too harden personally (*Come, let us mold bricks and harden them in fire and bind them together with pitch*). Alert early in life to contradictions, to strangers; becoming increasingly defensive as we migrate among others in a world beyond our control, uncertain as how to insure our survival – we seek the high ground in so many ways, we build a tower from which we can increase our range of surveillance, see “them” before they can

see us - satellite vision as safer than ground level vision. We insist on one language, language being our way of controlling our environment; my way or the highway; no mysteries; we cling to an ideology; everything defined in one dictionary; no dialects, no other ways of thinking that might confuse us . . . that leave us at a disadvantage.

All of this can be said of a society or of *myself* as I negotiate my way through life – alert to my Boy Scout rule of Be Prepared. Control. Don't let yourself be scattered. Make of an actual *e pluribus* an *Unum*. And yet somehow such endeavors always succumb to diversity of languages, diverse ideas; we welcome change. And with what consequence? Growth, expansion, like God's call to nomads named Abraham and Sarah to go to regions yet unknown, to advance into mystery, to find rabbit holes down which to descend and discover for instance the richness of other languages, other ways of saying things, a symphony of discourse instead of monotony; boundless awakenings . . . divine life . . . the wide open invitation that lies between and beyond liberal and conservative, Jerusalem and Samaria. Space to inhale instead of remain always short of breath. That's what experiencing this reading can do for you: metamorphosis. A new way of being.

Selected Readings from the Sundays of June, Cycle A

June 3rd 1st Reading 10th Ordinary Time– Exodus 24: 3- 8
(Feast of Corpus Christi)

Let's look at the first reading out of the Book of Exodus. God decides to make a formal pact, a covenant, with Israel during that people's Exodus from Egypt. What is an exodus? God has led them out of centuries of slavery in a land in which much of their labor was spent in building immense, elaborate tombs. The overall story of the Exodus episodically opens up a new

world, a *new way of being* to all such oppressed tribes and future generations.

The episode of Mount Sinai draws them into an experience of a God, a Creator well beyond the nature and reach of the idols of every land of tombs, ancient and current – it awakens them to a future, something like eternal life, eternal discovery, a migrating development of minds and imaginations, to a world of profound, revitalizing meaning.

It also opens them up to a new way of behaving. By engaging in this covenant with true, transcendent God, they agree never to succumb to idols, to reverence the true name of God, devote time to things transcendent, revere God's creation, respect their parentage; don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't covet the spouse and possessions of your neighbor . . . be just, caring, sociable . . . behave in the manner of your ethical, caring Maker - not like the unethical gods of your own making.

Since all this takes place way back in the 1200's BC this covenant relationship to God is formalized in a signing ritual current in those days. Treaties between nations were often ratified by laying out the bloody flesh of sacrificed animals between which the parties walked, calling down on themselves a similar fate if they reneged on their promises.

Blood also figures in the ritual used in today's narrative. Moses sacrifices young bulls and gathers their blood into two large basins. He then splashes the blood from one basin upon the altar representing God and then, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant the Lord has made with you," he splashes or sprays the blood of the other basin upon the people at large.

Let me emphasize again: this text is not just a description of a past event. Used liturgically it opens up a world to us as well – we are caught up into this covenant event, we sense we have been delivered from whatever Egypt we have been inhabiting, we sense we are being called to sign ourselves over to life as a continual Exodus, driven by our transcendent, ethical, absolutely committed Creator – destined to a journey down through all eternity from one stage to another – and drenched somehow in blood, blood as a metaphor of life, vitality . . . a pulsating, oxygenating relationship with the maker of the universe.

Transition to the Gospel: Mark 14:22-26

Then suddenly we hear Alleluia's sung, a book carried, in old days incensed, endowed with a pleasant scent. We are about to be exposed to another story, sequel to the one we just experienced but much more intimate. [That's the nature of the New Testament in relation to the Old: we are plunged more deeply into a relationship with God and each other.]

At the threshold of the Gospel reading we ask of Jesus: *Where do you want us to go to dine with you?* We are given directions that leave us confused – but it's in our nature to be confused. *Go into town and you will meet this guy, not just any guy but a guy carrying water. He'll show you a private ballroom fully furnished for dinner. Rent it for the evening.*

Anyway we wind up where we are supposed to be. [If you were to trace my tracks, the paths I've walked, let's say from 1940 to 1958 or 1958 to 1970 en route to who I have become today, you would think I was in a maze. You know: one of those hedged gardens where pretty soon the twists and turns make you dizzy. In retrospect it all becomes clear, the trip

makes sense, but during the process itself I couldn't have predicted 90 percent of where or what I would be.]

Anyway the disciples find where they are to dine – and it happens to be your parish church and mine, where a table is set, bread and wine prepared and a voice presents us with a cup and says, *This is my blood of the covenant . . .* the same vital fluid by which you were stained in the first reading and now are invited to *imbibe* until not just your outward self but your very arteries flow with a vitality divine. Dare you believe it? Henceforth, as recipients of divine, unfaltering grace, you have no other destiny than to become gracious yourself like Christ, another Christ. In the words of *Lauda Sion*, written by Thomas Aquinas around 1264:

*Now the new the old effaces, / Truth away the shadow chases, /
Light dispels the gloom of night.*

*What he did at supper seated, / Christ ordained to be repeated, / His
memorial ne'er to cease:*

*This the truth each Christian learns, / Bread into his flesh he turns, /
To his precious blood the wine:*

*Sight has fail'd, nor thought conceives, / But a dauntless faith
believes, / Resting on a pow'r divine.*

*Here beneath these signs [actual bread and wine] are hidden /
Priceless things to sense forbidden; . . .*

June 10th and 17th Gospel Readings 10th and 11th Ordinary
Time – Mark 3:20-35 and Mark 4:26-34

Am I out of my mind? No sooner than Mark's Gospel begins than Jesus runs into opposition. A demon in possession of a man, of a whole society, shouts out: *What have you to do with*

us? Have you come to destroy us? In an effort to move on to nearby villages, Jesus is then pressured to stay put in Capharnaum. Already in chapter 2, having restored a lame man to his feet, indeed forgiven him all his sins, certain scribes, experts in the law, charge him with blasphemy for behaving as if he were God. Within a few more verses they start complaining about his dining with social outcasts and failing to live up to religious dietary laws – to fast on fast days. Then they complain about his letting his disciples glean some grain as they pass through a wheat field – on a Sabbath no less, breaking another commandment.

By chapter three things intensify. He dares cure a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath – a day of rest, no work – and the scribes link up with the politicians in a plot to kill him. The noose gets tighter. He returns home and his own relatives, probably fearing he will bring the attention of the religious and political authorities upon themselves, try to restrain him, saying *He is out of his mind*. The scribes have already concluded he is possessed by Beelzebul, the Lord of the Flies.

Finally his mother no less and his brothers try to call him out of a lecture hall – to save him from himself. The audience tells him, *Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you*. And Jesus says: *Who are my mother and brothers?* And looking at the audience he says, *Here are my mother and brothers! All who do God's will*.

This last event, which culminates this whole sequence of surveillance and hostility, is the Gospel for this Sunday. And in what way does it draw me in like Alice's rabbit hole? It has me asking myself: Am I out of mind? Am I somehow, while insisting on the kind of biblical interpretation I've been describing, destroying what's been taken for granted as a

standard, literal way of reading Sacred or any kind of literature? Am I drawing people away from what is valued as standard fare by inviting them to glean grain even on Sunday – or heal withered imaginations – again even on Sunday? Am I possessed by the Lord of the Flies? Are people even close to me, who care about me, wanting to shield me from myself, from error?

Whatever the Gospel of Mark says about Jesus it says about me and you – if we choose to transcend the fixtures that accumulate over time, that box and bury and lame and wither our experiences of the Good News, which the images, the rabbit holes of Mark and the whole Bible, place before us -- we like Jesus will face some kind of burial – because this world's way of thinking and doing can be a hard nut to crack.

But burial is part of the process of our maturation – even as it was part of Jesus' own ultimate resurrection into the daylight of Easter. Indeed, next Sunday the parables of Jesus will tell you just that. As we grow in this life to the kind of experience of biblical song and story, even secular stories grounded or read in the light of Scripture, we emerge, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear, then as Shakespeare says: Ripeness is all!