

Lent and Literature

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR

It's probably heretical to use as a text for a sermon a sentence from current literature; but once in a while such a word grabs us and seems to demand to be used: especially when it comes from Flannery O'Connor. She died from lupus at 39 and had been disabled physically for years. But she never let her illness overcome her. Her faith and humor shine through her letters; and her short stories and novels are among the most "Christian" of our age. Here's the text:

"Christianity makes a difference; but it cannot kill the age." She was writing to a friend:

ALL your dissatisfactions with the Church seem to me to come from an incomplete understanding of sin. . . . What you seem to demand is that the Church put the kingdom of heaven on earth right now and here—that the Holy Ghost be translated at once into all flesh. The Holy Spirit rarely shows Himself on the surface of anything. To have the Church be what you want it to be would require the continuous miraculous meddling of God in human affairs, whereas it is to retain our dignity that God has chosen to operate in another manner. We can't reject that without rejecting life. . . . Christianity makes a difference; but it cannot kill the age. (*Habit of Being: Letters of F. O'Connor*, Farrar Strauss, 1979, p.307.).

With a text like that the sermon almost writes itself:

You cannot kill the age. Just try it! you cannot snap your fingers and say, "Brave New World." You might turn into E. A. Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy." To tell the truth we don't really want to kill the age, and we're not ready for a new one. In spite of our gripes about the present age, there's a lot we like about it.

Christianity makes a difference. You might be hard-put to keep from going pious here. Not just quiet acquiescence or inner peace surely! Christianity makes a difference because it's a different way of looking at people, at our world, at daily events. It started with Moses and the prophets. They read events differently—and our Bible is in fact a series of case-studies on where God is to be found . . . in history and human relationships.

Jesus made/makes the difference. He opens up to use the future and invites us to take a fling. He underlines what abides, endures . . .

At this point I'd have to quote from Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson*.

When Jefferson wrote that all men are created equal and entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, he was enunciating an ideal *as if* it were a reality. He defined the visionary future as if it were the living present . . . There was no confusion when he said, 'It is so' and meant 'It will be so.' He would not let faith in his own destiny be destroyed by what was. It was the vision of what could be that held him. (Norton, 1974, p. 37).

How much more for Jesus! He lived *as if* the boundaries of the future were open. He refused to accept the idea that history was grinding its way inexorably with everything fixed, frozen and fateful. (We are presented with a series of options and called everything possible to preserve our freedom.) So the difference is the Kingdom of God . . . the future God has prepared for those who live by suffering love. Bernard Shaw put it nicely: "Some people see the age and ask, 'Why?', while others dream of the age that could be and ask, 'Why not?' "

MEANING IN THE MYSTERY

During Lent we are called upon to seek meaning in the mystery of the Cross. I suggest that our theology, and thus our preaching, may be enriched through reading current fiction, biography, plays. Of course, it is a kind of prostitution to read such works in order to find sermon illustrations. Sometimes they appear serendipitously; but current writing at its best seeks to see the age, react to it, struggle with its issues . . . in other words, to do theology.

I'm grateful that some of our contemporary theologians have found this to be true for them. Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope* uses Elie Wiesel's *Night* effectively to muse on where God was in and at Calvary. In his more recent spiritual autobiography, *Experiences of God*, Moltmann uses current writings to illustrate his own history. Robert McAfee Brown introduced me to Silone's *Bread and Wine* in his *The Pseudonyms of God*. And I felt a kinship with Diogenes Allen when I read his *Finding Our Father* and discovered he had used "my" (!) Iris Murdoch to delineate the theme and suggest his theological perspectives.

Years ago George Buttrick when pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church would choose six books as the basis of his Sunday evening Lenten sermons. The books were often from among the best-sellers; but Buttrick did not review the books—he used them to come into dialogue with a passage of scripture so that both book and Book reverberated. He helped us know that theology is not removed from daily struggle or agnostic's prayer.

So with this proviso (that the works be used with integrity and allowed to speak for themselves) I will suggest some places where such reading can help our Lenten preaching.

KURT VONNEGUT

It's Ash Wednesday and the Gospel is the account of Jesus' Temptations

in the wilderness. We must assume that the struggle was real, which is to say, "like ours." There is a war within us—a compulsion, a claim, some traffic that refuses to let us settle for the obvious and safe. Kurt Vonnegut in *Mother Night* tells of an American living in Berlin when war broke out. He became an announcer for Nazi propaganda (like Tokyo Rose . . .). Actually the man was an American spy and his broadcasts contained coded messages to our State Department. As the story unfolds, the war over, this American (betrayer or loyalist?) comes home to meet the hate and invective of his fellow-Americans. For reasons of security the State Department keeps silent and will not allow him to reveal his real mission. He goes through dark hours of struggle (temptation = trial in the Gospel account); he cannot be sure of his motives.

Isn't Lent a struggle with motivations, directions, goals? Aren't we asking for assurance that what we do has meaning? Jesus' motives may be all in light; ours hardly ever are. But there He is, with the temptation to think that God is around to comfort. We avoid conflict (angels preserve us!) Surely there must be some cheap grace somewhere! Yes, cheap as a Cross. The power to suffer by and for love, and be rejected, is always met with testing—the temptation to do it, if at all, for the devil of it.

At any rate, in *Mother Night* the former spy, tormented by his conscience as to his ambivalent motives, surrenders to the State of Israel to be tried with Eichmann for the murder of the Jews. He surrenders because he knows that he cannot justify himself. And in the ensuing trial—at last—the head of the secret intelligence for our State Department (up to now maintaining a deadly silence) comes to Jerusalem to vouch for what the spy had really done. It is no mere happy ending but a sharp insight: if we are to be healed, Someone must vouch for us, Someone who will not, cannot, avoid a Cross and who will help us take up ours. In His necessity is our peace.

GRAHAM GREENE

Vonnegut always makes me squirm because he has the knack for irreverence while at the same time he pierces our theological armour with Christ-like insight. So too does Graham Greene in novels from both his Christian and post-Christian period, and by all means in his several excursions into autobiography. In *The Human Factor* (1979) Greene has this one line on the page following the title page:

I only know that he who forms a tie is lost; the germ of corruption has entered his soul.

A reverse text, if you please, like reverse snobbery! The story is about a British Intelligence Officer who, on leaving South Africa, arranges to have a black woman and her son smuggled out. But then the "corruption"—or is it conversion? He has to compromise his loyalty to nation and transfer secret information to foreign agents. I must not give the case away; but brooding on the line of the preface, I could not help think of Him "who made Himself of no reputation . . ."

One could do with brooding a bit during Lent on safety and salvation

since we often think them synonymous. Somewhere during the forty days we might want to preach on Baptism; this is how I used the above quotation from Greene. Baptism is to be submerged, like our Master, in His death . . . to bear in our bodies both His death and life. No navel-gazing separatism here! It's why I go back so often to Dick Shepherd, "Woodbine Willie" of the trenches in World War I, and later vicar of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in London. He upset the church and society when he asserted that "the one thing that stands between people and Christianity is the Church of England." He brought alcoholics and strays and prostitutes to his church and for a while drove "decent folk" away, although later they came back because Dick made them know he loved them, too. On the day he died—too soon—he had gotten up at four in the morning to give a pair of strong, soft gloves to a man who had burned his hands in an accident and who had to go to work or lose his job. He preached three times, remembered to send a bouquet of flowers to a friend on his birthday, and called on a dying man after the last evening service. He died feeling he had failed; and part of the failure was that he had not been able to get people to know that he loved them not because he was a parson but because he was a person who had been made honest-to-God by what had been done for him in baptism. "Are you able to . . . be baptised with my baptism?" Jesus asks—which means getting up at some ungodly time to "form a tie" or "lose one's reputation. . . ."

DICK GREGORY

Biography often clarifies theology (see J.W. McClendon's *Biography As Theology*, Abingdon, 1974). There's enough for a series of sermons. I don't know when I found a more helpful and disturbing story than in Dick Gregory's autobiography (*Up From Nigger*, Stein & Day, 1976). In second grade his teacher asked all the children to ask their fathers for money to bring to school for the United Fund drive. Dick decided that he was going to get him a daddy. He took money out of his mother's sugar-bowl, hard-earned money from shining shoes; and he vowed that however much Helene Tucker, the richest girl in class, reported her daddy had given her for the drive, Dick Gregory would top it. But next day the teacher never called on Dick, although she called on the rest; and when Dick raised his hand, the teacher said, "We're doing this for folks like you, you don't even have a daddy!"

But Jesus had a Daddy! And Dick can be assured he does, too. That, says Jeremias, is about as close as one can come to translating ABBA. There's something again to say about baptism as it relates to patrimony. A story like Gregory's makes me rush to someone like Jeremias (*N.T. Theology*, vol. I) to see if my preaching can get over being pulpit-bound, by the questions my current reading presses in to ask.

McCOWAN, MARK, AND MURDOCH

Lent is a good time to develop a series of sermons that can help us tackle

a great theme from several angles or to provide more continuity. How about a series on "The Gospel According to Mark"? Alec McCowan, the English actor, has returned to America for the third time to appear coast-to-coast in "St. Mark's Gospel": word-for-word, all of it, in KJV. I don't know when I was so taken with Mark's central theme: Jesus is Lord. Yet, He is the one who remains hidden. He says, "Tell no one what you have seen. . . ." To the scribes and elders He says, "Nor, will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (Mk. 11:28).

I was glad I saw McCowan's performance before reading John Simon's review in New York Magazine (5.12.78):

Mark will never convert anyone to godliness. This Christ who rebukes people for washing their hands before meals and blasts the harmless fig-tree because it does not bear fruit out of season is bad public relations. It is as easy to remain unmoved by him as for a needle to pass through a camel's eye. It is one thing for divinity to clothe itself in the raiment of flesh, but quite another thing to stink of mortality. . . .

So the priests and elders felt! They could not relate Jesus to anything they expected God to do. So they challenged His authority, and He replied by asking them about John Baptist. "We don't know," they said; but they were shouting loud and clear what their authority was. They were playing it safe; their authority was public opinion, sticking to tradition. They were afraid of change, the new, the different. We can understand this; for we have been given to make queasy responses to tough questions because we don't have the guts to say YES or NO! So instead of struggling with Jesus' questions we become book-bound, navel-gazers, seeking a private peace. Jesus' authority is in the tough questions He asks. Christianity is not a straight-jacket with answers popping out as from a fortune-telling machine. Life is found through Him to be open-ended, even tentative. But we are to be open to others: and then the leap of faith . . . that answers will grow out of the perceptive questions He asks us as we are with Him on the way.

Another sermon from Mark on "The Incognito God" could well compare two stores: Mark 4:35-41 and 6:45-52. Both have the disciples in a boat and there is a storm. Both incidents follow a period when Jesus has been with the crowds and now wants to get away. Both stores have Jesus playing the part of savior. But the difference in the stories is telling. In the first Jesus is in the boat with the disciples. In the second Jesus is up in the hills alone and the disciples are at sea without Him; then Jesus comes walking on the water. In the first Jesus is the human companion. In the second He is the Christ, and the story is probably a resurrection account.

We are not being asked, "Did it happen just like that?" We are told to probe more deeply: "Who do *you* think He was?" The second story comes after the feeding of the 5000. Mark has commented, "Their minds were closed, because they had not understood what Jesus had done in the feeding of the multitude." In other words, Jesus had promised to come when they were all at sea and beyond their depth; and no barrier of time or space would stop Him. I suggest that everyone of us, whether we know it or not, is looking for a savior.

When we ask, "Does it matter what I do?", we're really asking, "Where is salvation to come from?" John Lennon's murder brought back a song the Beatles used to sing:

Some seek it Down Town:

When you're alone and life is making you lonely,
You can go Down Town . . .
When you've got worries, all the noise and hurry
Seem to help, I know . . . Down Town.

In other words, get out of the house, be where the action is, find the lights. Isn't that where salvation is? Another Beetle song:

I read the news today: O boy!
I woke up, fell out of bed,
Had a smoke; somebody spoke:
I went into a dream. . . .

So when the news is bad—and our world is on the verge of bankruptcy and war—take a trip, run away, stimulate the senses.

And in all this Jesus comes and asks, "Why are you so fearful?" What if the prevailing wind is by Christ? He helps us meet the storms and employ the wind to come at last to harbor. I can only be suggestive, but it occurs to me how much Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* (1981) directly and indirectly helps us with the exegesis of these two Markan stories. In a world where death seems to be everywhere, Murdoch tells of five people who struggle with personal crises and are left with no clear structures. Some will be nuns (un-con-vent-ional) who have lost faith but try to minister in a God-forsaken world. Some will be soldiers: people without an army who still try to maintain and preserve some kind of community. Tim, the young artist, brings his liberated (?) life-style to the company of the five. He draws cat-portraits for a living, but for years he's wanted to paint a crucifixion. He cannot because he cannot believe. Murdoch has no answers, but she seems secretly to wish that Christ could be contemporary. I cannot spoil the story by giving you more than a lead; but it's been my experience so often that a novel like this helps me to listen to scripture more attentively and imaginatively. One of Murdoch's best is an early novel, *The Bell*; it's about Christian vocation and relations and where love and truth are to be found. It keeps coming back to mind to quicken many a sermon.

FREDERICK BUECHNER

I hope that every parson has read, learned, and inwardly digested Frederick Buechner's sermons, lectures and novels. The image of Christ in Bebb, the two-bit evangelist, will wipe out all our "parsonmony"; and we'll come to Lent with less self-righteousness. (See *Love Feast*, the best of the four novels on Bebb). I am sorry that *The Final Beast* is no longer in print; surely your library can get it for you on loan. It's a great way to prepare for Lent; for it's Buechner's personal story of his conversion and calling. The young novelist in New York, on Sunday in Lent, for reasons he could never explain goes to a church around the corner. With little interest in, or knowledge of, Christianity

he hears the preacher say, "Jesus refused a crown from the Tempter . . . yet, again and again in the hoping heart of the believer, Jesus will be crowned with tears—and with great laughter." This phrase startled Buechner—"great laughter"—and the young novelist called the next day on the preacher. The next week George Buttrick, the preacher, drove Buechner to Union Seminary to study how the Gospel might be "Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale."

Moreover, Buechner's ability to rewrite the old, old Story in contemporary speech and situation is due, I think, to his novelist-training in the uses of imagination and symbol. I am constantly amazed to find that Buechner in both his novels and sermons anticipated the current emphasis in New Testament studies on aesthetic and literary-critical thought. What the scholars have come to from one direction Buechner has reached from the vantagepoint of the artist.

For this reason a series of sermons during Lent could use Buechner's *Telling the Truth* (which has an unforgettable scene of Jesus before Pilate) and *Love feast* which is an enlargement of Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet. What has to be avoided is to treat the parables as one-point stories with a moral. We have to try to go beyond the parable-studies of Dodd, Buttrick, *et. al.* and work now with John Crossan (especially his *Dark Interval*), Dan Via, and Robert Tannehill in order to come to the parables in a fresh and startling way. [In *The Sword of His Mouth* (Fortress, 1975) Tannehill says that if a text from the Gospels doesn't stick in the preacher's throat we are treating it too cavalierly.] During Lent the parables could help us see that these crazy stories (and that's what Jesus' listeners thought) precipitated conflict and were part-and-parcel of the charges leading to His death. Jesus risked His life through His words.

So does Nadine Gordimer, a South African, risk her life through her novels. Her latest is *July's People* (1981). It would be a good way to introduce Jesus' story of the Wicked Tenants. It is an apocalyptic story of blackvictory in South Africa and of the whites having to flee. July, a black servant, takes his white family for whom he's worked for years to live with his wife's people in the back country. It is a gripping story that sets off sparks; for me it lit up Jesus' coming in a most parabolic way.

POETRY

I haven't mentioned poetry, and I think one has to be careful in its use. I've tried to steer clear of it a good bit of the time because I was encumbered with the old definition of sermon as "three points and a poem." But it does not mean that I haven't read and listened to the word-makers. I began this article with a text from Flannery O'Connor. I'll end with two texts and commentary arising from verse: the first a real poem, the second almost doggerel.

It's Maundy Thursday, without which we cannot come to Easter:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost, of course—but it makes me think of Jesus going out to His favorite haunt, the Mount of Olives, which had often been so “lovely, dark and deep”; and now on this night He is saying, “But I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep. . . .” Then one thinks of how the crowds who had once followed Him had now evaporated—and even the Big Fisherman had had trouble and couldn’t keep *his* promises. That is what Maundy Thursday is about: promises. “When you recall and redo this Supper,” He seems to say, “you’ll see why I went this way. I had promises to keep—and now in the miles you have to go I’ll go with you to help you keep your promises.”

The doggerel is for Good Friday. That’s all we can offer anyway, since proper theologies and well-tuned passion music can keep us from the truth: “One of you shall betray me.” In Leonard Bernstein’s “Mass,” which will be produced on TV sometime soon again, there is the baroque music of the *Kyrie* followed immediately by the entrance of the celebrant who sings a guitar-accompanied ballad:

Sing God a simple song,
Mark it as you go along;
Sing like you like to sing.
God loves all simple things;
For God is simplest of all.

But the celebrant fails to live his own message and proceeds with the ritual of the Mass whose pagentry is anything but “simple.” Then the congregation has a chance to talk back and to express how they really feel. So Bernstein’s “Mass” has two scripts: the traditional Latin words and the subtext which is “what is going on in your minds during the Mass” . . . What to make for dinner, which football game to watch, how to get the family car for a date. . . .

It’s easy to criticize and beat my jive
But hard to deny how neatly I survive
And what could give more positive proof
That living is easy, when you’re half-alive!

That is our betrayal: only “half-alive.” It’s at that point that the priest breaks down, tears off his priestly robes, smashes the symbols and cries, “How easily things get broken.” And he takes the bread and breaks it—and rushes out, to come back, dressed simply and able now to say, “Tho’ I betray Him, He never will betray us . . . PEACE BE TO YOU!”

And that’s what I would pray: Peace and Joy in Lent and until He comes.