

The Value of Modern Fiction for Preachers

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There seem to be three values for preachers in the regular reading of outstanding modern fiction. This does not include the desperate hunt for cute or witty anecdotes with which to flavor a sermon which would otherwise be indigestible! These values are: first, an imaginative poet or novelist or dramatist can provide long-term extensions of our lives in both space and time. In this way we will live several lives, past and present, in our own country and in different parts of the world, possibly in five continents. Second, a novel of insight will enlarge our empathy and deepen our compassion, and may even widen our range of humor. Third, a novelist can vivify our words. One of the besetting sins of preaching is using abstractions, not concrete examples. God did not send us a conclusive message until he came as the God-man, Christ, thus visiting and redeeming his people. His messengers need visible words, not wraithlike, ghostly words; words that have become concretized. Otherwise why did our Lord teach in parables? Let me exemplify each of these claims with notable examples of the craft of fiction in our day.

Novelists give us extra lives. If we take our context in the United States for granted where we are free to proclaim the gospel in all its prophetic parameters, then we should read Graham Greene's superb account of the brandy priest operating illegally in an officially atheistic Mexico. Greene's *The Power and the Glory* shows us a man who is both the police's wanted man and God's chosen man in a double hunt. He began his ministry as a pampered priest, one of the elite; he ended as one of the elect. Greene's theological mystery exhibits a man who became a saint without knowing it, and at the same time demonstrated what the role of God's servants would be in a world where Caesar—the totalitarian dictator—would increasingly act with all the prerogatives of God. This is an apocalyptic lesson.

Or, let us suppose, that we have strong theological prejudices, and like superior liberals we insist that the fundamentalists are to be explained as finding the "fun" in "damning the mental." What we need is the marvellous empathy that enables that gifted Presbyterian minister and novelist, Frederick Buechner, to get beneath the skin of Bebb, that apparent con man and cheapjack who runs a theological diploma mill providing certificates of ordination for \$5 a time. Buechner has provided a four-novel study of such in his *The Book of Bebb*, which includes *Lion Country* (this novel was nominated for the National Book Award), *Open Heart* (the appropriate name for the universalist Gospel Church Bebb founded), *Love Feast* (a wonderful romp of a book superbly illustrating confession and forgiveness), and *Treasure Hunt* (with poisonous bitterness contrasted with the surprises that make life joyful). No

cardboard figures here and it is the skeptical agnostic and narrator of the novels who eventually overcomes his prejudice to see the worth of the evangelist Bebb.

An equally effective way of exploding one's own sense of superiority would be provided by reading Peter De Vries' *The Mackerel Plaza*, which is the hilarious account of the minister of the People's Liberal Church in Connecticut, a culture accomodating parson and church if ever there was one. The Rev. Mr. Mackerel at the outset of the novel is shown phoning the town office to protest against the distraction caused when he is writing his ten-minute sermon by an evangelical sign, flashing "Jesus Saves! Jesus Saves!" De Vries is a master of irony when he allows Mackerel to take us round the first split-level community church in the U.S.A. This almost totally horizontal church, without vertical relationship to God, is superbly satirized by its architectural arrangements: downstairs a dining area, kitchen, and three parlors for committee meetings, and upstairs an auditorium for plays, a ballroom for dances, and a gymnasium for athletics. Finally, and almost apologetically, we are informed that there is a small worship area at one end:

This has a platform cantilevered on both sides, with a freeform pulpit designed by Noguchi. It consists of a slab of marble set on four legs of four delicately differing fruitwoods, to symbolize the Four Gospels, and their failure to harmonize. Behind it dangles a large multi-colored mobile, its interdenominational parts swaying . . . in perpetual reminder of the Pauline stricture against "those blown by every wind of doctrine."¹

We may laugh at this Hemingway of the pulpit, but if we are totally unreconstructed fundamentalists, the laughs in this book could also be at our expense. For De Vries is equally critical of the preaching that seems to be only incantation without thought, as well as of repeating slogans. The former weakness is pilloried in the following:

"Jesus is the power-house! Are you plugged in? Jesus is the transformer! Are you wired up? Jesus is the cable carrying that current from God Almighty! Is your trolley on?"

As for laughing at slogans, Mackerel has a ready answer for the enthusiast who buttonholes him with the urgent cry, "Brother, have you found Christ?" His facetious riposte is "Is he lost again?"

Whatever the brand of one's theology it is important both to keep one's sense of humor and to recall that we have not penetrated the mystery of God's innermost thoughts. Thus a satirical novelist can teach us humility and proportion.

If we fail to realize how a charismatic and even corybantic form of Christianity is able to provide reassurance and even joy in an economic and racial ghetto, then we should read James Baldwin's marvellously imaginative novel located in Harlem and see how a sensitive adolescent reaches conversion in a store-front church. This is the experience James Baldwin provides in *Go, Tell it on the Mountain*, which is also a superb evocation of the flowering of young love.

If we are myopic and short-sighted in our provincialism, then one way of getting rid of our northern superiority over the Southerners is to read the brilliant short stories of Flannery O'Connor, that splendid Georgia peach of a writer who died at thirty-nine from disseminated lupus. She is entirely misunderstood if read as a Roman Catholic author poking fun at grotesque southern Protestant freak characters. She insists that her task as a Christian interpreter is made the easier because the Bible is still the informing story of the South, which gives it its values, even when they are refused. And the characters whom she really despises are the liberals and nihilists with only a God-shaped blank in their minds who, as social workers like Sheppard, think of themselves as the Good Shepherd. But Sheppard drives his motherless son to suicide in the story, "The Lame shall enter first."² Such grotesqueness as she finds is her way of indicating the universal need of redemption for those misshapen by original sin.

If we are Southerners with an assumption that God is white, then we need to get perspective by facing a similar—even more difficult racial situation—in another country. This we can find in that Christian parable of Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. This demonstrates in moving terms how Christian faith drives out fear, as it tells how the son of a black Episcopal priest has to hang for the murder of a reformer who had devoted his life to African penal improvement, and how the white father of the reformer and the black priest-father find consolation in mutual forgiveness, because each is conscious of being forgiven by God, and both determine to work for the improvement of inter-ethnic relations in their tragically divided land of South Africa. Here is a powerful retelling of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Novelists do not only give us other lives in our own country and abroad (as we have seen in Mexico and South Africa), but they can take us backwards on the time machine historically. Perhaps the greatest novel that Frederick Buechner has written does exactly this. It is *Godric*, the life of a twelfth-century saint, who was a pirate who robbed pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem and other sacred sites. After a stiff regimen of fasting and contemplation following his conversion, he became a holy hermit. What is so marvellous about this book, which I believe is destined to become an American classic, is that it is written in a lyrical prose, in which the rhythm and shining imagery are all poetry. As on a magic carpet we are transported into the medieval world with its violence and vitality, its tyrannical lords and domineering worldly bishops, but also with its tender love to the Virgin, and its following of Christ and his Cross. Moreover, it forces us to see the importance of the Communion of Saints and to recognize the discipline of the first-class Christians in Roman Catholicism who follow the counsels of perfection, demanding chastity, poverty, and obedience. It is a remarkable Protestant attempt to get under the habit and into the habits of a medieval saint, by one whose own Protestantism is never in doubt.³ And this particular novel takes us to another country (the north of England in the neighborhood of Durham), to another century (the twelfth), and to another very different interpretation of the life of a Christian (a Catholic hermit).

In the second place, the gifted novelist can provide the preacher with

extensions of our empathy. Graham Greene once said in an interview that the aim of most of his novels had been to try to understand what it is to be an outcast. Wasn't that one of the glories of the ministry of Jesus Christ who appreciated the misfits of society? He commended the wit of the Syro-Phoenician woman, accepted water from the woman of Samaria, had his cross carried by an African Simon of Cyrene, made a disciple of Matthew the loathed tax-gatherer for the Romans, promised salvation to a crucified thief, and promised that a prostitute who bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, should always be remembered because she had anticipated his burial honorably. It is the glory of Luke's Gospel that he shows the sublime compassion of Jesus—not the pity of a superior, but the equality of a sufferer.

Part of our terrible apathy and indifference is due to our lack of imagination. And perhaps the finest sentence in Greene's *Power and the Glory* is that which says: "Hatred is a failure of the imagination." A pharisaic old lady in a Mexican jail is condemning two young people for making love in that prison where otherwise hatred abounds—that is a situation in which this profound statement of Greene is made. And in our routinized, dry-as-dust, conventional world, it is often only the novelist who can enable us to see beneath the rusty exterior of coin the image of the King of Kings. Imagination is what we are in need of, and this is the gift of the supreme artists of the word.

In order to cultivate compassion we need to overcome the "balcony view" of life and to get down into the dust and combat characteristic of the "arena view" of life. This our novelists can do for us. Camus, a brilliant agnostic whose ethics reveal the Catholicism which he gave up but which never entirely left him, demonstrates this in his novel, *The Fall*, the story of a man who is haunted by the drowning cry of a woman who fell from a bridge into the Seine in Paris, and whom he never attempted to rescue.

We should also avoid the Himalayan, above-it-all attitude which is that of the chief character in William Golding's novel, *The Spire*. He is the Dean of Salisbury cathedral, England, in the fourteenth century, who has determined to build the loftiest spire in the kingdom. In theory the chief motive was for the glory of God; in reality it was at least in part for the glory of the Dean. We see him drive the master builder who is afraid of heights, and who has excavated the earth beneath the crossing and found the foundations utterly unsound, upwards far beyond his safety and the safety of his workers. The Dean's domineering will makes the rest of the cathedral unsafe, so that Divine worship has to take place for smaller congregations elsewhere, and the Dean is too busy to pray. His ambition and superiority to the advice of his confessor makes him inhuman until he almost destroys himself and his charges. His basic lack is compassion—forgetting that God has had compassion on him. We assume that he receives absolution at the last, after he has sought the forgiveness of others whom he has ruined. This novel is an unforgettable parable about the necessity of compassion in a servant of God, and the higher his rank and responsibility the greater the need for it.

Compassion is also linked with humility. Flannery O'Connor's story, "The Enduring Chill,"⁴ makes this clear. It is concerned with a know-it-all college graduate, Asbury. He is superior to his mother and his sister the headmistress,

knows more about religion than Father Finn, and more about medicine than Dr. Block, and intends to teach his mother a lesson that will bring her an enduring chill on his death. But his arrogance begins to crack and the Holy Spirit appears to him like a chilling and terrifying bird on the wall of his bedroom that chills him to a freezing humility.

I would want to argue that just as the sense of community among Christians of any different denominations has been created in part by the need to fight the common and increasingly powerful enemy of nihilistic atheism, so we need a wider ecumenism in which Christian ministers in particular have a responsibility to understand other religions empathetically. The first priority here must be to understand the faith of Judaism from which Christianity emerged, for which compassion (*cheseth*) is a predominant virtue. The more we know about the Holocaust, the more easily can we be rid of the poison of anti-Semitism and cultivate a profound empathy for Judaism and the Jews. Here again the novelists can come to our rescue.

The two interpreters of Judaism that I find most helpful are Chaim Potok and Elie Wiesel. For a documentary account of what it is like to have your mother and sister go to the gas ovens, and your father to die beside you on a murderous journey towards liberation from which you are among the pathetically few survivors, read Wiesel's *Night*. If you want to know what is like in a supposedly Christian country to survive the persecution or indifference of your neighbors, read Wiesel's *The Gates of the Forest*. There you will realize that the Jewish adolescent Gregor (using an unJewish name) survives for some years only because he is thought to be deaf and dumb! If you wish to understand the difference between the strict Hasidic sect and the Conservative Jews, then read Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* and you will understand why the Hasidim above all fear to assimilate, and why the Conservatives are committed to creating a haven republic for Jews in Israel as Zionists.

For introductions to Buddhism—profoundly a religion of compassion it should be noted—I recommend Takeyama's *The Harp of Burma*, where the hero is the perfect exemplar of the arena view of life. A former Japanese soldier who has sacrificed his safety for his friends while fighting in Burma, decides to stay on in that land while the other prisoners-of-war are repatriated. He wishes to bury the corpses of all the Japanese comrades who died in Burma, sensing that their souls are uneasy unburied. He was the man who risked his life to persuade another company of Japanese soldiers to surrender because the war was over, although they had not known it in their isolated field position. In a supreme act of ecumenical compassion he, now wearing the ochre garb of a Buddhist monk, placed a ruby on the memorial of the British dead in the second world war.

A third value of novelists (or poets for that matter) for the preacher is that they help us make our words in communicating the Word of God far less abstract and much more vivid and concrete. Let us suppose that a sermon is being prepared on the double aspect of the nature of God as holy (and therefore distant from us) and merciful (and near to us). These are abstract concepts, but how they have become etched on our memories, or focussed on the retina of our imagination, in these lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The*

Wreck of the Deutschland: "Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm." It is worth remembering that many of our novelists were also able painters, drawers, or caricaturists, such as D. H. Lawrence, John Updike, and Frederic Buechner. Among the poets, the painters include Blake, D.G. Rossetti, and Edward Lear, to take only a few examples. Artists in words can only convey their thoughts if they can enable their audience to visualize them. God, the Creator of the rainbow and the rose, assures us through the letter to the Colossians that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (the Greek word is *ikon*). Perhaps it is St. Athanasius in his *Concerning the Incarnation* who best expresses the purpose of God enabling us to visualize him in Christ. Athanasius, that adamantly orthodox theologian, says that Christ came from heaven to confront us at our own level and height so that we could not miss him in wild guesses, or, as Charles Wesley understood it, God "contracted to a span, Most marvellously made man."

That is why the preacher needs vividness, and that craft is developed by osmosis through frequent reading of the best craftsmen and craftswomen of words in our language—the novelists, dramatists and poets. They will cultivate our imagination and enable us to be vivid image-makers.

Suppose the minister wishes to produce a sermon on Greed; which is often the problem of members of well-heeled suburban churches. He could do no better in pointing out the utter inhumanity of our living on a superfluity of food while nations in Southeast Asia and parts of Africa are dying from malnutrition than read and retell the stories in Graham Greene's mystery novel, *Dr. Fischer, Or, the Genevan Bomb Plot*, or William Golding's *Pincher Martin*, or Flannery O'Connor's story, "A View of the Woods."⁵ The first tells of the wealthy friends of Dr. Fischer who are invited at regular intervals to his home, where they will crawl in their eagerness to receive his fabulous presents, even though they need none of them and the price they must pay is extreme humiliation at their host's caustic tongue. So rapacious are they that finally they even risk their lives for their greed. Similarly, *Pincher Martin*, so we are told, went through life "with his mouth and his fly always open." O'Connor's story tells of a high-handed grandfather who sells the land in front of his son-in-law's house for a gas station to be built upon it, although this destroys the family's view. His cupidity, challenged by his honest granddaughter, results eventually in his murdering her for her impudent independence. The same type of theme is elaborated in George Eliot's famous study of a miser, *Silas Marner*. After reading any of these stories greed is no longer an abstraction, but a wolflike maw and an elastic stomach.

If we wish to convey the seriousness of hypocrisy, which derives from a Greek word for play-acting and implies dissimulation, it will not be enough to suggest a mask. This is because few modern actors wear masks. Our Lord's condemnation of hypocrites as "whited sepulchres" is certainly striking, pointing to a glistening exterior hiding a rotting interior. But "sepulchres" are anachronistic today. If we want to see the destructive impact of hypocrisy in action, we can visualize it in the character and actions of Brigitte Pian in Nobel Prize Winner François Mauriac's *A Woman of the Pharisees*. Her charitable acts reduced others to total subservience to her. Her jealousy of a highly

intelligent priest in the neighborhood caused him to lose his theological professorship and ultimately even the right to celebrate the sacraments because she reported him to the archbishop as unreliable in doctrine and character. This is hypocrisy alive and all too well.

For vividness, Updike is hard to beat. Consider the following account of early dawn, painted with the bright acrylic colors of an artist's palette: "Despite the low orange sun, still wet from its dawning, crescents of mist like the webs of tent caterpillars adhered in the crotches of the hills."⁶ The image is perfect and the word "crotch" by its unusualness grabs our attention.

Finally, as an example of the unforgettable, apt and witty modern parallel of a logion of Jesus, there is Buechner's illustration of it: "Easier for Nelson Rockefeller to pass through the night deposit slot of the Chase Manhattan Bank" as the equivalent for "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."⁷ This, of itself, is proof how an unusually gifted novelist mints new images and words to make his meaning memorable. We can all learn from such expertise in communication how to convey the gospel compellingly and at the same time vividly.

NOTES

1. Peter DeVries, *The Mackeral Plaza* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958) 7-8.
2. Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971) 357-382.
3. See Marie Hélène Davies, *Laughter in a Genevan Gown: The Works of Frederick Buechner, 1970-1980* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983) for an extensive analysis of Buechner's theology and literary technique.
4. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 357-382.
5. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 335-356.
6. John Updike, *The Poorhouse Fair*, 7. This remarkable novel, Updike's earliest, shows an astonishing ability on the part of the young man to understand the values and psychology of the aged. Written in 1957, it was supposed to take place in 1977.
7. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures. A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) preface.