

On The Road Again

I was gone last week to that really big island across the Pacific and as I sat on the plane I got to thinking about the trip we all of us have been on these last 6 months or so — that trip that started the first Sunday of last December....

That's when we opened the book on the season of Advent, a time of preparation not only for the Christ child, but for the next coming of our Lord at the end of days.

From Advent we found ourselves standing next to the manger, surrounded by smelly shepherds and extravagantly dressed Magi, all to be followed by the season of the Epiphany — God revealing himself to the gentiles (to us!).

Not long after, we found ourselves in that marvelous season of Lent, when so many of you, instead of giving up chocolate and red wine, stretched yourselves into doing something new, like reading a lesson during the mass or playing the bells or feeding the hungry and visiting the sick; and Lent gave way to Holy Week, to the foot washing of Maundy Thursday to the solemnity of Good Friday, all pouring into a darkened church and slowly lit candles on our beautiful Easter morning.

For 50 days thereafter, the days leading up to Pentecost, we spent a great deal of time marveling at the hope and promise of the resurrection, remembering how God holds not simply souls in his hand, but these bodies of flesh and blood as well; and then came Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the celebration of the birth of the church with red balloons and birthday cakes, all of which wrapped up last week as Mother Imelda so graciously presided on that most mind-boggling, inexplicable, yet wonderful mystery that we call the Trinity: this strange and surreal sense that the one God is three persons, yet one God.....

Advent and Trinity Sunday are bookends really.

Between those bookends lies so much of the hope and challenge, the wonder and mystery of our faith.

But today we begin our next 6 months, but these 6 months we will live outside the bookends.

These next 6 months we will find ourselves not at an empty tomb or staring open-mouthed as Jesus ascends into the heavens, there's not a red balloon in sight — but rather, here we are on that dusty road again; yet, having just completed our 6 month journey between Advent and Trinity Sunday (shall we call it Segue

Sunday?), today, we lean in to hear what Jesus has to say, and perhaps we will hear him with new ears, perhaps we will see him with new eyes.

Jesus gives us every opportunity to do just that, through his strange, upside down and inside out way of encountering life.

Jesus is a strange one you know.

When he talks about bushes, he doesn't talk about red rose bushes, oh no, he's all about the mustard bush, a bush that invades gardens like a conquering army — and it stinks too!

When he talks about baking, he doesn't brag about three-tiered wedding cakes, instead, it's all about leaven, a fungus that eats living and dead things....

When he's on the hunt for disciples, you don't find Jesus giving the commencement speech or showing up on career day at Yale Divinity School, instead, he's at the loan shark's tent telling Guido to pack up his stuff and come along.

Just so today, when Jesus starts talking about birds, it's not the graceful swan or the Bali Bird of Paradise — what with it's long blond mane and gorgeous magenta chest — no, bird of the year is the plain grey sparrow.

I didn't know this until I started reading up for this weeks lessons, but apparently, sparrows are not only dismissed as ordinary and quite ugly, with a dreadful song to boot; but there's actually a whole lot of people who HATE sparrows.

In Jesus' day, sparrows were stripped of their feathers and threaded onto long strings and sold as cheap food: 5 sparrows for 2 cents.

In ancient Egypt the hieroglyph for "sparrow" means small, narrow or bad. D. Blue, *Consider the Birds*, 129.

In ancient Sumeria, the sparrow means enemy. Id.

Then there's the story of old St. Dominic, whose lecture one day to a bunch of seminarians was interrupted by a sparrow flying about, so the kindly saint lost his mind and while calling the bird the devil incarnate, proceeded to pluck off its feathers one by one in front of his aghast students while the bird shrieked in pain.

In more recent times, Chairman Mao rallied the Chinese population to destroy sparrows, inciting grandmothers to bang pots together to keep the birds from landing so they would die of exhaustion.

And in England, a children's book, of all things, says this about the sparrow:

"Now it is decided that these Sparrows are bad citizens and criminals, so they are condemned by every one....this disreputable tramp not only does no work for his taxes — he hates honest work, like all vagrants — but destroys the buds of trees ... so the Wise Men, who have tried the Sparrows case say he is a very bad bird, who ought to suffer the extreme penalty of the Law" Id. at 136

Now, I realize that's probably a lot more than you ever wanted to know about sparrows, except it explains quite a bit about how Jesus encounters the world, and how we are invited to encounter the world if it is Jesus whom we wish to follow.

Jesus seems to see beauty in what we see only as ordinary.

Jesus seems to see in those people, places and things that are to us, for all the world, only sordid or smelly or bad or ugly, why, Jesus sees in all of these the smiling face of God.

Jesus seems to see in our frailty the power of God.

As much as it kills us to believe it, God seems to love us particularly for our feet of clay.

As much as it kills us to believe it, God seems to love us particularly for our doubts and uncertainties, for our emptiness, for our vulnerability.

For the next 6 months, we are on the road with Jesus, the high holy days are behind us, there are no more parades, there will be no more incense.

So as we walk along with him, exploring these feet of clay, these doubts and uncertainties, as we wrestle with our own emptiness and vulnerability, perhaps from time to time we can take a glance at one another, particularly the ones who seem the most smelly or sordid or bad or ugly, and come to see in them, as we hope to see one day in ourselves, the smiling face of God; this God who counts tenderly every hair on your head, the God who loves us even more than he loves many sparrows.

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