

Fourth Sunday of the Year, February 3, 2013

Athena was born fully formed from the head of Zeus. “Fully formed” shows how the Greek gods are very different from us. They do not have to go through the messiness, jagged edges, and divided sensibilities of growing up. Growing up is a glib phrase, for it suggests something as natural as rolling out of bed, as easy as hopping onto your exercise equipment. Whereas, actual growing up means leaving what is accustomed and familiar, and moving into the next stage of life. This is arduous and traumatic, happens many times in life, at many ages. Ask a new mother, struggling with her strange feelings of morbidity and sadness; ask a senior couple selling their house, dispersing their possessions, to enter a retirement community. Each of these transitions is also growing up.

Jesus, being like us in every respect, was historically a very different god from Athena. John’s gospel doesn’t show this, being focused on his divinity. But Luke’s gospel concentrates on the humanness of Jesus. Therefore it gives hints of him as developing, as needing to grow up. The classic example is his adolescent rebellion at age twelve, when to the consternation of his parents he deliberately “got lost” in Jerusalem. But more interesting to us might be the adult stress he felt at age thirty when he left the stability of Nazareth for a precarious career.

Today’s gospel shows Jesus deliberately antagonizing his home town. One minute (we heard this last week) they are eating out of his hand; the next they are trying to throw him over a cliff. It seems unnecessary. Why did he do this? It is a moment when he seems uncomfortable in his own skin. The proverbs he flings in their faces —“physician, heal yourself”; “no prophet is accepted in his own place”—say more about his insecurity than the people’s animosity. They are ready to be impressed, and he insults them. It would take a while until he was the great physician, the serene prophet. He grew into his identity by degrees, not instantaneously as sanitized versions of the story suggest.

He had to struggle. This makes him the legitimate heir of the Old Testament prophets. They always resisted God’s call as being too hard and painful. This lies behind the first reading. Given God’s challenge to speak to the people, Jeremiah says, “I

am too young.” Whether this is a chronological excuse or an accurate reading of developmental unreadiness, we do not know.

We do know that each of us, however privately, must struggle to become the persons we are meant to be. The outcome is not assured; many people settle for less, out of fear, laziness, or unwillingness to bear the wounds such a challenge always brings. They never reach fullness of being, uniqueness, the special purpose for which God uniquely created them. To help us, we do have guides in stories of moral courage, of churchly heroes and secular saints, to prod and inspire us.

An odd one is the movie “Becoming Jane [Austen],” accent on the word “becoming.” Jane Austen wrote six perfect books in the early 19th century, classics, but we know little of her actual life. The movie takes one fact and speculates. She got engaged to a nice man, at a time when marriage was vital to a woman’s security, but 24 hours later inexplicably broke it off. The movie shows how she needed this traumatic choice in order to stop writing silly amateur-stuff and start writing the high art which for some reason always needs suffering underneath to be convincing. This is a good example of how difficulty comes into our lives, or we subconsciously choose it, in order to find enlargement.

A more recent example would be our President’s autobiography, “Dreams from My Father, A Story of Race and Inheritance.” Quite apart from politics or even art, this is a great human achievement. The story of the father who abandons his son for his original family; the demanding mother who rattles around the globe for idealistic schemes that never come to term—conjures up the universal questions: why did she choose him? Why did he leave us? Which parent am I like? Not just what color am I—but who am I? Who do I choose to become? To be bushwhacked by such questions is the human predicament; to come up with answers is a great victory.

Call it successful maturation, or growing up, or monastic conversion. It doesn’t happen all at once, and ultimately it is a spiritual quest that no one else can do for us. At the heart of all great religions is this experience of breakthrough, blossoming, second birth. You have to leave the chrysalis, get out of the womb. That is represented by the Israelite crossing of the sea, the enlightenment of Buddha, the revelation given Muhammed. For us it is the profound truth of Jesus dying in order to experience

resurrection. We are invited to this possibility by undergoing the little deaths that plunge us into deeper life.

Deeper life is describe in the second reading. Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude; it hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. Who can live up to this great ideal?

We do so by moving forward little by little, falling down and getting up. It takes time, which Paul describes so eloquently. “Our present knowledge is partial and our religion is partial. But when the complete comes, the partial will end. When I was a child, I spoke and thought and behaved as a child; but when I became adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see through the glass darkly, but then we will see face to face.” Through the looking glass we go to leave the murkiness and find the truth.

The contrast between partial and complete, between childhood and adulthood, is Paul’s way of saying we have the opportunity to grow up. To become powerful and mature like Jesus did. It means leaving home (where no prophet is accepted), and the often lonely but divine task of healing yourself. It means making a new beginning wherever we are, and struggling to move into the next phase.

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