

## City of Day – Easter 6C

What to make of 38 years waiting by the pool but never taking the plunge? This story might be funny if it weren't so pitiful. And what to make of a song about David being promised hereditary kingship of a mighty nation that turned into a mere notion soon after that promise was made? Certainly after the destruction of the temple, and Israel's exile, the idea of "David's Royal City" became a perfect dream. Like so many of the dreams in the Bible, indeed, as in so many of our own dreams, the cerebral notion illuminates a pathway to the mind of God, a clue to what God would have us do and be.

"Some say the world will end in fire. / Some say in ice." The great saga just concluded, wherein HBO has tried, with no little success, to inscribe the name Daenerys in the pantheon of legendary figures like Roland, Beowulf and, dare I add, the Cid, ends as we might have predicted, in extended council meetings and an elective monarchy. That is, after the entire city of King's Landing is destroyed – once in Dinklage' royal city indeed. The arguments about what it all means will doubtless carry on for years, but thus far, no one has claimed that G.O.T. conveys insight in to the mind of God.

There are other dream cities. For ten days not long ago, by way of a vacation, I had the privilege and delight of accompanying two of my children on a road trip across Northern Spain. It was wonderful. In the cathedrals and churches and public places, the dreams of the people about God are stupendously written in art.

Paris is another. Remember the *Les Miz* movie, with its depiction of the awful consequences when people in power use deadly force to insist that the dreams of the poor are unimportant. Anne Hathaway may sing slightly off key, but she is very convincing.

Dream cities are metaphors for our inner lives and intentions. “There is a river whose steams make glad the City of God.” That river is our dream life. We humans cannot function without such images of a greater good, and until the reality comes, the images live in stories and music, art and architecture, conversation and counsel. Novelist George Saunders has said, “Our most profound experiences may require an artistic uncoupling from the actual. A work of art is meant to change us. If the change will be greater via the use of invented, absurd material, so be it.”

The huge carvings and wild rococo church decoration we saw in Spain certainly support the idea of absurdity. Our astonishment reached its zenith in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, where pilgrims are swallowed by a gigantic space full of bizarre, exaggerated cherubs and angels and other strange figures wearing bright paint and tons of gold leaf stuck all around and over the chancel. Tradition says that those who embrace the largest of these colorful figures will achieve spiritual closure to their pilgrimage. The statue’s legs are worn smooth by the tens of thousands of holy hugs.

In today’s story, the dream state occurs in Jerusalem at the pool of Beth-zatha. By the time Jesus came into the World, David’s erstwhile city thrived again, with its temple. But the system was broken; people weren’t being supported, validated

or changed for the better. We might cringe at the pathos of a lame beggar who (after 38 years!) finally gets some healing, albeit not by the proper procedure. He gets some healing, and thus a life, only to have the Temple authorities bust him later in the day on a technicality. If it weren't so painful, it might sound like a comedy sketch: "The good news? You can walk again, after 38 years, Oh, the bad news? 38 days in exile for healing on the Sabbath."

Jesus himself cannot resist the comedy inherent in a system that can deny healing indefinitely, then denounce the timing of the healing when it finally comes. He runs into the man in the marketplace and teases him outright: "Dude! You're walking! Looking good! Watch out you don't do any more sinning, or you'll get three weeks in Samaria next time... Just kidding!"

It is a bittersweet joke – Jesus knows the authorities will now get wind of his own identity, once they hear of the signs he has performed. But he accepts the consequences that follow, despite knowing what they include: Calvary. In telling the man to take up his mat, his bed, his life, Jesus takes up his own life – leading to the cross. By engaging the authorities, healing on the Sabbath, speaking truth to power, he lays down his very life.

Jesus makes of himself a work of science fiction; real people don't behave like that! It's no wonder the television people realize the power in life outside the known. Jesus' life is one of spiritual imagination, of performance art, he becomes for all of us now, henceforth and forevermore an absurd image of perfection.

It's absurd because we cannot possibly imitate Him with anything like thoroughness, yet he is also perfectly real. He has brought to life for us the blueprint, the scheme, the essence of God's enterprise here on Earth, which is for us to make our selves, our souls and our bodies know and purvey love.

In Psalm 132, God tells David that his sons will be kings. David is a king already, so the poetry must carry a deeper meaning than the obvious idea of hereditary power: We children of humankind may or may not become monarchs of worldly cities, but our allegiance to God and adherence to God's precepts will enable us to rule -- over the temples of ourselves. We are guaranteed free rein over the house of God that is our own very heart, soul and mind. We have the power of choice and the freedom to choose rightly.

Likewise Jesus insists to the authorities that, although God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day after creating everything (thus instituting the Sabbath), the Sabbath is not a time to rest from the healing and compassion that are the very purpose of our lives. On the Sabbath, we are able to lay down the tools of quotidian work and set aside our more mundane activities in order more fully to pursue a purer purpose. We still breathe, feed one another, bless and heal and dream, as we do all week long, but on the Sabbath we are bidden to love 'most 'speshly', as Winnie the Pooh would say. That is how we build David's royal, dream city wherever we are.

What would Jesus have us do to embrace this absurd, dreamy, sublimely powerful new range of chores? What is our to-do list? When pressed, of course Jesus simplifies: "Love God, love your neighbor; on these two commandments hang all the

law and the prophets.” But how does that work? Perhaps our most glorious and obedient Sabbath activities include developing disciplines of abiding with one another. We can help one another flourish just by withholding judgement, by opening ourselves up to others’ possibilities, just as we would open ourselves up to the possibilities contained in a story, a piece of music, a work of art, or a cathedral in Spain.

In deciding what to make of the flood of life and dreams that will pour in when we make a habit of remaining open to the lives and stories of others, we must remember what Jesus recommends: Don’t be afraid to be confused. Try to remain permanently confused. Anything is possible. Stay open. Forever. Stay so open even if it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day you die, World without end.

Tee shirts on sale to pilgrims at Santiago de Compostela say, “Sin Dolor, No Hay Gloria.” ‘No Pain, No Glory.’ For many pilgrims, this is mostly a direct reference to the world-class blisters they have from walking for months on end. But also this painful openness is the only way to obey Jesus and love one another. It is the only way to fully experience the Camino, and it is the only way to propel urban development in these dream cities of God that are our hearts. In *Les Miz*, the good Bishop reassures Jean Valjean in the last moments of his life: “It is when we love another person that we see the face of God.” It is the way Jesus would have us follow; his only intention is for us to have life, and have it more abundantly.