

Easter 2021 – From Past to Present Tense

In the Northernmost part of Manhattan, in Ft Tryon Park, there is a museum who's only entrance is from the Hudson Parkway exiting New York City. It is not the easiest to get to by car, but a short hike from a train up a hill will get you there. It is the hidden gem of a museum called The Cloisters.

A large building has been built to house the liturgical artifacts of J D Rockefeller and other items donated by J P Morgan and Joseph Brummer. The majority of the collection is what Rockefeller purchased from the sculpture and art collector George Grey Bernard.

This museum is managed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and its 5000 works mostly date from the Byzantine to the Early Renaissance periods (or the 12th through the 15th century). Entire church

altarpieces and monastery courtyards are rebuilt to their original splendor. These relics of our earlier Christianity were found by Bernard deteriorating in farm fields. Years of looting and physical attrition from nature had taken their toll on this wreckage.

George Grey Bernard was more than merely an art collector, but a highly trained sculpture. He saw the incredible craftsmanship and art contained in these long forgotten relics of faith. It seemed they had become completely erased from time. Purchasing the bulk of these neglected pieces on trips to France, Bernard was able to bring them back to New York City these items for astonishing little in purchasing prices. After selling them to Rockefeller The Cloisters were built to highlight all of these works, beautifully.

I have, over the years, visited The Cloisters multiple times. It is one of my favorite museums. Works are displayed often in the way they were intended to be seen in their worship context. To me there is a sacred dissonance between what the original intent of these works meant and how they have become important in a completely different way. It is a little disorienting to observe liturgical art functioning, but in a different way than it was originally made.

My last visit was with my wife a few months ago. In the midst of a city which had lost so many to Covid it was powerful meditating on these crucifixes and Pieta. It's meaning for me had changed. What it represented had not, but its meaning had deepened, become more profound, and more important as something representing what I put my faith into. At one time it was vibrant worship spaces, reflecting the living faith of a particular community who inhabited it in

France. Then for centuries it fell into disuse, literally sinking into the soil of fields, mostly forgotten.

Then someone appreciated it, saved it from deterioration, and made sure it was preserved it for new generations to share in their love of it. Today it is not a church, not stones amidst wheat, but a museum of preservation.

We look back nostalgically on our glorious pasts of faith, remembering how things used to be in what we often refer to as “simpler times”. Maybe those days represent “the before,” before we had mortgages, before illnesses, before losses, before careers, before a grown family moves away.

In the infancy of psychology nostalgia was to be thought of as a mental illness, it was seen as an unnecessary escape from the reality of the current. Yet, modern

researchers have determined that nostalgia has a function for people, especially when there are overwhelmingly stressful societal events, like a pandemic, which are outside an individual or group's control. Nostalgia has been shown to be an easy self regulating way to help with depression. More than that, nostalgia has been seen to inspire creativity. Inspire something new out of the old. Remembering the best part of the past can bring about creative solutions in the present.

What nostalgia cannot do is bring a carbon copy of the past back to the present. Although the walls of The Cloister are meticulously recreated in beautiful detail, they are not the chapels and monasteries of France. Time has moved, wars happen, pandemics ravage, we age, and we will not delete the suffering of loss in our lives. Nor should nostalgia help us to perpetuate and ignore the systems we have that are destructive and oppressive. Yet, nostalgia

can inspire something new, like the Phoenix rising from its own ashes of death into something beautiful.

It is not only the stone which is rolled away on Easter morning, it is the grand possibility of the deterioration, cracks, and fissures of our own faith being rescued from the corrosion of banality and cynicism. We regain in remembering our baptism the active participation in the life, death, and yes, also the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is regaining the possibility of transforming our present moments into salvation. In remembering we are participating in a great liturgical act, as great as any grand crucifix in a Manhattan museum.

With a firm foot in the present we experience resurrection this morning. The resurrection is not only a historical act from the past, but a transformative act of the present. Maybe our memories of the past are

there for the Spirit to bring about a creative and resurrected faith in the present. The Church will need to be reimagined now, for new generations of disciples, so that they can build on the cloud of witnesses that came before them.

It is time for us to not relive the nostalgia of the past, but create memories of faith in the present to carry on that faith into the future. Thanks be to God.