

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 27, 2022

The First Sunday of Advent

Litany in Procession and Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Luigi Gioia, *Associate for Adult Education and Formation*

on

Matthew 24:36-44

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Willing To Be Lucky

“No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky”.

I have mulled over these words from the celebrated essay *Here is New York* by Elwyn Brooks White practically non-stop ever since Claudio and I landed in JFK last Wednesday.

I never thought this sentence would apply to me in the way it does now when I first chanced upon it some 8 years ago, the first time I visited NYC. A friend of mine had recommended to me a bookstore in the Village, *Three Lives & Company*, which was one of the first places I went to when I started to explore the city. Ever since I have maintained that the booksellers in that shop possess gifts of divination. They look at you, ask you few questions, and magically point to you the novel, the essay, the poetry collection which best resonates with you, ends up shaping your life, proves to be prophetic over time. Tell me I am projecting too much on them and of course I won't deny it – and yet crediting the place with this magic has made the subsequent pilgrimages to it unfailingly charming and rewarding.

I thought it made sense to revisit E. B. White's essay during the flight from London to NYC, and the sentence I quoted earlier puzzled me:

“No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky”.

Isn't luck something you either have or you don't – I have been wondering? How then can you be 'willing' to be lucky? Well, you can – I concluded - if you are prepared to defy the odds, take risks, relish the challenge, bet on the greatest treasure each one of us is endowed with, that is our *passions*.

“There are roughly three New Yorks” – so E. B. White claims:

There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter—the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something. Of these three trembling cities the greatest is the last—the city of final destination, the city that is a goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York's high-strung disposition, its poetical deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements. Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it *passion*. [...] Each embraces New York with the intense excitement of first

love, each absorbs New York with the fresh eyes of an adventurer, each generates heat and light to dwarf the Consolidated Edison Company.

So, passion seems to be how we are ‘willing’ to be lucky. Still, you do need luck! E. B. White is not naïve about the shortcomings of the city, and can be affectionately scathing in explaining how only by a tiny margin New Yorkers seem able to escape mass hysteria:

“they sit in stalled subways without claustrophobia, they extricate themselves from panic situations by some lucky wisecrack, they meet confusion and congestion with patience and grit—a sort of perpetual muddling through. Every facility is [...] overcrowded, [...] highways and bridges are bottlenecks; there is not enough air and not enough light, and there is usually either too much heat or too little.

But -he adds- the city makes up for its hazards and its deficiencies by supplying its citizens with massive doses of a supplementary vitamin—the sense of belonging to something unique, cosmopolitan, mighty, and unparalleled.

In a word, one thing NYC can do, is keep you awake – provided though you are and remain “willing to be lucky”.

Just as I was grappling with this sentence by E. B. White, I was confronted by the mantra of the chapters 24 to 25 from St Matthew’s Gospel – of which we have just heard a segment in today’s readings: “keep awake”, “be watchful”, “keep ready” – the leitmotiv of the time of Advent which begins today. A mantra which comes surrounded by ominous and frustratingly vague imagery:

“Two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left”.

Come to think of it, is it not the case for NYC too that for each person who “is lucky”, succeeds, or shall we say “is taken”, another – or rather many others - are left behind, and end up worse off?

“Walk the Bowery under the El at night -writes E. B. White (let’s remember it was 1949 when there still were ‘elevated’ or “el” lines)- and all you feel is a sort of cold guilt. Touched for a dime, you try to drop the coin and not touch the hand, because the hand is dirty; you try to avoid the glance, because the glance accuses. This is not so much personal menace as universal—the cold menace of unresolved human suffering and poverty and the advanced stages of the disease alcoholism”.

Are we to infer that those who are left behind in our cities are not “willing to lucky”? Or that the man “left” in the field and the woman left grinding her meal the Gospel talks about were not ready, not awake? To me it looks like they were doing pretty much the same thing as those who were “taken”!

Try to look for more clarity in the rest of this page of the Gospel and your confusion is likely to intensify. All you will hear is about “not knowing”:

“About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”. We are equated to the people in Noah’s time who “knew nothing”.

And all we are left with is this baffling reminder: “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming”. Mind you, this “not knowing” refers not only to *the time* of the Lord’s coming. We are left with no clue either about *what* we are supposed to wait for – since what the Gospel calls “the day” or “the coming of the Lord” is a cryptic way of referring to the way in which the whole of human history will end. Are you like me one of those who is always tempted to skip to the last pages of a novel to know how it ends? Well, I am afraid we cannot do it with the most momentous novel of all, the history of salvation. The way it ends does not

depend on what we do or, for that matter, on what we omit or refuse to do. The last word, and the plot, belong to God alone.

Imagine that you are an actor and are given a part in a play, but are warned that you cannot know neither its plot, nor its conclusion. You just have to be on the lookout for when you receive a cue – all you have to do is keep ready, remain awake, present, mindful. If you don't, you risk missing the opportunity to play an active, constructive, positive part in the play – and everything will carry on without you.

We might think that this is disempowering or frustrating – and yet, there are ways in which we can detect some good news in all this.

For one thing, the fact that the plot and the end belong to God alone prevents our innumerable blunders, omissions, mistakes, and wrongdoings from ruining the play. God is an immensely resourceful playwright and stage director – and for each cue we miss, creates for us ten more chances to catch up with the play and still contribute to the plot in ways that make it even more captivating (twist and turns are what make a play interesting after all!). No surprise if our divine playwright wants to keep for himself the exclusive knowledge of the plot – this is how he keeps it open-ended, fluid, capable to receive as many adjustments as our erratic acting skills require.

All we are asked is to invest all our energy, our passion, our love – our wakefulness, our readiness, our attention, in the little part we are called to play, when we are called to play it – even, or especially, when it is unexpected. Our input might seem insignificant in the big scheme of things but trust God to make it yield a hundredfold.

Somehow, with the Kingdom of God as with NYC, it is a question of “willing to be lucky”! Luck -we said earlier- might not depend on us, but getting out there and making sure we bet on our real passions definitely does. So with making sure human history ends according to God's intentions: this too definitely does not depend on us, but being ready to follow the cue and contributing with the lines entrusted to us at the right time, with all the precision, the intensity, and the generosity we can muster – this yes we can do, and this yes is bound to make a difference.