

ADVENT SERIES ON MARYLINNE ROBINSON' GILEAD (1)

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND THE POWER OF GRACE

Fr Luigi Gioia

Theologian in Residence

1. From the outset, Ames's conversational style and his diction reveal a mind at once gentle, humorous, and penetrating and eyes able to see [beauty and grace] that most of us miss.¹

I really can't tell what's beautiful anymore. I passed two young fellows on the street the other day. I know who they are, they work at the garage. They're not churchgoing, either one of them, just decent rascally young fellows who have to be joking all the time, and there they were, propped against the garage wall in the sunshine, lighting up their cigarettes....They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me. (4)

2. He recalls baptizing kittens as a child [...] and makes a reflection on baptism as a confrontation with the reality of another being:²

I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature.... I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you, but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out.... I don't know why there is so little about this aspect of the calling in the literature. (27)

3. Another trait that makes Ames's voice endearing is his humor:³

[My mother] had her rocker so close to the stove that she could open the oven door without getting up. She said it was to keep things from burning. She said we couldn't afford the waste, which was true. She burned things often enough anyway, more often as the years passed, and we ate them anyway, so at least there wasn't any waste.... She never slept well during the nights.... She'd wake up if the cat sneezed, she said, but then she'd sleep through the immolation of an entire Sunday dinner two feet away from her. That would be on a Saturday, because our family was pretty strict on Sabbath-keeping. So we'd

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¹ Lydia McGrew, "[The Challenge Of Forgiveness In Robinson's Gilead](#)".

² McGrew.

³ McGrew.

know for an entire day beforehand what we had to look forward to, burned peas and scorched applesauce I remember particularly. (87)

4. At the beginning of the book Ames seems (and in many ways is) a generous and reflective person who strenuously attempts to live up to his beliefs. He is a diligent minister and a loving husband and father.
5. We discover, though, that for some forty years after the death in childbirth of his first wife and child, Louisa and Angeline, he withdrew into solitude and loneliness, focusing more on studying theology and writing sermons than on ministering directly to his congregation.
6. Progressively he acknowledges that he is prone to what he calls "covetise" and which he defines as⁴
"that pang of resentment you may feel when even the people you love best have what you want and don't have" (152) and, later, as "taking offense at" the "virtue or happiness" of someone else (214).
7. Ames loves to talk about his best friend, Robert Boughton, a Presbyterian minister in the town who is also now in ill health.
 - 7.1. Boughton eagerly awaits the arrival of his son, Jack Boughton, Ames's namesake.
 - 7.2. At every mention of Jack, Ames's lack of enthusiasm and even active dislike become more noticeable, especially as they stand in contrast to his usual ability to find something beautiful or loveable about everyone he mentions.
 - 7.3. Of Jack he says,
I suppose he'll appear sooner or later. I don't know how one boy could have caused so much disappointment without ever giving anyone grounds for hope. (82)
 - 7.4. When Jack Boughton actually comes on the scene, Ames' grip perceptibly tightens. No matter how charitable he tries and means to be, John Ames cannot find it in his heart to like him, much less to love him.⁵
8. Ames' "covetise" makes him distrust Jack's motives in pleasing his wife, Lila, and son, Robby.
 - 8.1. Jack teaches Robby a little about baseball and plays catch with him because he hopes to make Ames look on him more favorably.
 - 8.2. Ames does recognize that Jack is thoughtful and charming.
 - 8.3. He writes how "beautiful [it was] to watch [the] two in the flickering shade" as Jack teaches Robby to "scoop up grounders" (116)
 - 8.4. and, on another occasion, writes "It's pretty to watch you" as Jack plays with Robby and his friend Tobias (188).
 - 8.5. Despite this appreciation, Ames is jealous because his heart is too weak for him to play with Robby himself.⁶

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⁴ Susan Petit, "Finding Flannery O'Connor's "Good Man" in Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead and Home" in *Christianity and Literature* , Winter 2010, Vol. 59, No. 2, SPECIAL ISSUE: Marilynne Robinson (Winter 2010), pp. 301-318.

⁵ McGrew.

Then here comes Jack Boughton, who really is the spitting image of his father in terms of physical likeness, with that same black hair and the same high color. He's just about your mother's age. I remember when she lifted her dear face to me to be baptized—lifted it into winter morning light, new-snow light—and I thought, She is neither old nor young, and I was somehow amazed by her, and I could hardly bring myself to touch the water to her brow because she looked a good deal more than beautiful. Sadness was a great part of it, it was. So she has grown younger over the years, and that was because of you. But I have never seen her look so young as she did this morning. (106)

9. Ames tries to fight against this "sullen old reptilian self" (167) and to "*think* graciously about [Jack]" (123), but he resents him so much that he does a cruel thing:
 - 9.1. One day that he is officiating in church he sees Jack sitting close to his wife and child
"like a handsome young family, and my evil old heart rose within me, the old covetise ... as if I were looking back from the grave" (160)⁷
 - 9.2. In his sermon that day he uses the biblical story of Hagar and Ishmael to point to paternal unkindness to their children – a not so veiled reference to the fact that Jack had abandoned the daughter born from his casual sexual relation with a destitute girl – the daughter eventually dies because of neglect on her mother's part (149f).
 - 9.3. Ames immediately acknowledges that
I felt perhaps others in the congregation might have thought the sermon was directed at [Jack]. It was all most unfortunate. I must hope some good can come of it. I just don't know why he isn't worshipping with the Presbyterians. (150)
 - 9.4. When later he ponders the effect of his sermon on Jack, he says,
"it was considerable egotism on [Jack's] part to take my words as directed at him only, as he clearly did" (148).
 - 9.5. This is hypocrisy, for Ames admits that
"my extemporaneous remarks might have been influenced by his sitting there with that look on his face, right beside my wife and child" (148).
 - 9.6. Examining his conscience a few days later in a related context, he acknowledges
"I conceal my motives from myself pretty effectively sometimes" (167).⁸
 - 9.7. Ames later worries,
"lying awake Sunday night, that Jack might go away again because I had brought up the old catastrophe right there in church, or so he seemed to believe" (167f).⁹

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⁷ Petit.

⁸ Petit.

⁹ Petit.

10. As he pursues his random reflections, Ames reveals that during his four decades of widowhood he had envied Boughton his boisterous family of eight children, and he particularly resented Boughton's naming his fifth child [Jack] John Ames:
 - 10.1. Boughton meant this act as a gift to his lonely friend, but Ames seems to have taken it as a denial of his actual fatherhood and a pointed statement that the Boughtons were so fertile that they could symbolically give him one of their children.
 - 10.2. His resentment of his namesake turned into active dislike when Jack got Annie Wheeler pregnant and did not acknowledge their daughter.
 - 10.3. That baby's death in her mother's squalid home only sealed Ames' rejection of Jack. Ames is bitter that he should [have lost] his child and [Jack] should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing ... I don't forgive him. I wouldn't know where to begin. (187).
 - 10.4. Only when Ames realizes that he himself long ago squandered his chance to be a father to Jack does he become ready not only to forgive Jack but to love him.
11. In fact it progressively appears that Ames carries a long-standing sense of guilt for the fact that, from the moment of Jack's infant baptism, he could not love him.
 - 11.1. Baptism is sacred to Ames. It represents a central theme of his life—that meeting with another creature, the pure intention to bless, the confrontation with a face in its “courage and loneliness.”
Any human face is a claim on you - he says - but this is truest of the face of an infant. (75)
 - 11.2. When his friend Boughton took him by surprise at Jack's baptism announcing at the font that the child was to be Ames's namesake, in loyalty to his own dead wife and child there arose in Ames rejection and anger:
This is *not* my child. (214)
 - 11.3. To the present day, that original resentment continues, and the fact that Jack turned out the black sheep of an otherwise wonderful family seems both the confirmation of that original rejection and a rebuke to Ames for refusing the child.¹⁰
12. Then begins Ames's internal struggle:
 - 12.1. Should he or should he not tell his wife what he knows of Jack Boughton's character from his past, warn her not to trust Jack after he, Ames, is dead?
 - 12.2. Might she marry Jack after Ames is dead if he does not warn her?
 - 12.3. Is it contrary to his own honor, to charity, and to the discretion of his pastoral role to tell her a story twenty years old which might better be left forgotten?
 - 12.4. His feelings are a mixture of ordinary human humiliation at his age and at the contrast between himself and Jack, anger at all the pain Jack has caused over the years and at what seem even now his deliberately provoking ways, and fear, which seems justified, for those he loves.

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¹⁰ McGrew.

- 12.5. Because he cannot sort out his personal resentment and jealousy from his purer motives, he cannot decide what to do.¹¹
- 13. Ames tells himself, in his on-going inner monologue, that it really is not his business to forgive Jack.
 - 13.1. Jack's great sins over the years have been against others.
 - 13.2. What he has done to Ames, the nasty pranks in boyhood, for example, are nothing in comparison to the anguish he has caused his father and the harm he has done elsewhere.¹²

I don't forgive him, Ames writes decidedly. I wouldn't know how to begin. (187)
- 14. It then appears that Jack is eager to talk to Ames, despite Ames' attempt to avoid him and mistrust. Over the course of the narrative we are told of few of their meetings.
- 15. **The first meeting** is a failure. They merely annoy each other and they never get to what Jack has come to say – namely that he is now married to a colored woman (Della), has a child (Robert), and hopes to be able to bring them to Gilead.¹³
- 16. **Their second meeting** is one of the climactic moments of the book.
 - 16.1. Jack asks Ames for practical advice and help with his situation but Ames fails to give any meaningful answer to him.
 - 16.2. Jack reveals the way in which he has tried, and mostly failed, to make something of his life, the way he has changed, and the way he hasn't.¹⁴
 - 16.3. It becomes clear that Jack has always forgiven Ames' coldness and hoped for some acknowledgment from him; even now Jack hopes Ames will help him both with his spiritual difficulties and with making a home for Della and Robert in Gilead.
- 17. But because of Ames' "covetise' Jack's repeated attempts as a child to attract his attention just cemented Ames' rejection, although Jack's early misdeeds do not seem much worse than other children's pranks. Jack could not get Ames to respond even when, at age
 - "ten or twelve ... he filled [Ames'] mailbox with wood shavings and set them on fire" (206).
 - 17.1. Ames just put out the fire and said nothing (*Home* 127).
 - 17.2. Ames does not realize that ten-year-old Jack stole his car (whose odyssey became part of local lore) to get his admiration or attention; that was why Jack told no one else.
 - 17.3. He does understand that only a lonely child would have painted his steps with molasses or broken the windows of his study, but it does not occur to him that he should have done something to help the boy.
 - 17.4. Ames remembers that once when he was talking with Boughton, Jack sat nearby

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¹¹ McGrew.

¹² McGrew.

¹³ McGrew.

¹⁴ McGrew.

"fiddling with a slingshot ... and from time to time he would look up at me and smile, as if we were in on a joke together, some interesting conspiracy" (210).

17.5. The conspiracy is that although Jack had broken Ames' windows with that slingshot, Ames said nothing about it, not even to Jack's father.

17.6. In the lonely boy's mind, this shared knowledge connected them.¹⁵

18. Will there ever any healing in this fraught relationship? Here we touch one of the main themes of *Gilead*, namely the slow workings of God's grace which, through Ames' prayer and self-questioning, prepares him intellectually and emotionally to finally ask forgiveness, forgive and bless Jack.

18.1. Even before Jack tells him why he has returned to Gilead, Ames decides, after his long spiritual struggle,

John Ames Boughton is my son By 'my son' I mean another self, a more cherished self. (215).

18.2. He accepts Jack even before he learns of Jack's last ten years of struggle to lead a respectable life or that he has a wife and child; he accepts him because he now clearly sees his own failings and therefore his own need for forgiveness.

18.3. He reflects that it is
a rejection of grace to hold our enemy at fault. (215)

18.4. After more thought and prayer, Ames even accepts the possibility that his death may bring Lila
a greater happiness than [he has] given her" (238) in the form of life with Jack.

Love is holy because it is like grace - the worthiness of the object is never what matters. (238)¹⁶

19. During the second meeting, in the very midst of asking for Ames's help, Jack makes a remark about Ames's wife so casually unkind that it takes Ames's breath away.

But then that look of utter weariness came over him -says Ames- and he covered his face with his hands. And I could only forgive him. (262)

19.1. Now that Jack has done something new and cruel to Ames, it becomes possible to forgive him, or at least to begin.

19.2. Ames is unable to forgive just that easily though and only a moment later he hits back, introducing a seemingly relevant but quite unnecessary reference to the worst of Jack's old sins. Jack goes white, and Ames says,

You'll have to forgive me for that. (263)

19.3. Now, the forgiveness must go both ways.¹⁷

20. In many ways, *Gilead* can be taken as a description of the way grace works its way in human hearts despite our resistance, our fears, our denials, even complacency in the feeling of being 'in the right', of being 'good'.

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¹⁵ Petit.

¹⁶ Petit.

¹⁷ McGrew.

- 20.1.** As we saw in our previous talk, the greatest obstacle to authentic love is the conviction of being ‘good’,
 - 20.2.** and that conversion begins when instead of looking for assurance about our righteousness we discover and learn how to cherish our solidarity with every other human being.
- 21.** The most remarkable aspect of Ames’ character resides not so much in the qualities that endear him to the reader from the beginning (his gentleness, his humour, his humanity), but in his honesty with himself. He acknowledges his shortcomings and even when – or especially when he becomes defensive, he does not lay the matter to rest until he has found inner clarity on his deeper motives. This is what we might call ‘self-knowledge’.
- 22.** We can say that the growth in self-knowledge is one of the ways in which the work of grace in Ames transpires – and this grace leads to what happens during the last meeting between Ames and Jack.
- 23.** Jack realises that Gilead will never welcome him and his family – and decides to leave. Ames understands that he has a last chance to amend for his life-long rejection of Jack and reaches him in time before his departure.

We sat there for a while. Then I [Ames] said, “The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you.” He [Jack] shrugged. “What would that involve?” “Well, as I envisage it, it would involve my placing my hand on your brow and asking the protection of God for you. But if it would be embarrassing—” There were a few people on the street. “No, no,” he said. “That doesn’t matter.” And he took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course—“The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient, for that matter. Then, when he didn’t open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.” Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream.

“Thank you, Reverend,” he said, [...] I told him it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment. He just studied me, in that way he has. Then the bus came. I said, “We all love you, you know,” and he laughed and said, “You’re all saints.” He stopped in the door and lifted his hat, and then he was gone, God bless him. (p. 275f)