

Will the Center Hold? 11/14/21

I have long believed that a reliable test for determining the overall quality of a movie is whether you find yourself thinking about it the next day. I apply the same “test” to literature. If a story or poem comes back to me even a day after I read it, something about it – generally speaking – must be good, right?

Now imagine, assuming my test has some validity to it, if a poem remains in the mind of a reader not merely for a day, a week, or even a month, but for a quarter of a century. Clearly something about it resonated with that person, something lasting, something he or she could recall without effort. This was my experience of a poem I read in college by William Butler Yeats, a man *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* describes as “beyond question the greatest twentieth-century poet of the English language” (5th ed, vol. 2, p. 1932).

The poem itself contains just two stanzas. It includes a few technical terms I will explain momentarily. For now, however, I invite you simply to listen as I read it to you, letting what you do not understand wash over you while paying attention to the feeling, if any, the poem creates within you.

Yeats’ called it “The Second Coming.”

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

Take a moment now to reflect on what have heard. What impression does the poem leave with you? Would you describe it as dark, sinister, foreboding, or just plain creepy? What about its language? What word or phrase stood out to you? Was it the observation that "anarchy [has been] loosed upon the world," or was it an image, something you can easily picture in your mind like the "gaze blank" of a beast with the head of a man slouching towards Bethlehem, longing to be born?

What strange imagery! Let's unpack a few of the poem's details to make more sense of it.

For starters, did you notice the reference to the "rocking cradle"? This is the cradle of the infant Christ. How do we know that? Because the lines that follow tell us how, after *twenty centuries*, the cradle will be filled again in Bethlehem, only now the one filling it will not be the Prince of Peace but the Prince of Darkness, the anti-Christ, he whom the beast represents.

The anti-Christ appears, in short, to unleash chaos upon the world. His "gaze blank" implies a total lack of soul and conscience. He sows distrust and spreads lies. Perhaps you can see why this poem has stuck with me all these years. It seems like it's coming true more and more. As Americans place their faith in conspiracy theories while losing their faith in the outcome of elections, it feels like our very democracy is being stretched to its limits.

Things are falling apart.

The center, it would seem, cannot hold.

The Text in its Context

Some context will help.

Yeats wrote "The Second Coming" in January of 1919. The First World War had just ended. Millions were dead. The Spanish Flu would pile on more

casualties. By the end of 1920, it would take the lives of an additional 50 million people around the globe. “The Second Coming” accordingly “expresses Yeats’ sense of the dissolution of the civilization of his time, the end of one cycle of history and the approach of another” (*ibid.*, n. 1, p. 1948).

Yeats’ speculation did not end there. What would happen, he wondered, if the coming era constituted the beginning of something *worse*, something a World War followed by an epidemic had merely *begun* to anticipate? What if something wicked was coming this way, something to which the signs of the present age (“wars and rumors of wars”) were pointing?

What if the *bleak* was followed by the *unspeakable*?

The Prophecy of Jesus

Jesus lived in a time radically different than Yeats. Both men, however, found themselves in a climate where uncertainty and social unrest gave rise to apocalyptic thinking. Dark times lie ahead, Jesus tells his disciples in Mark 13, our Gospel reading for today. Consider the Temple in Jerusalem: you may find its size impressive, Jesus says to them, but it will fall. “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2).

Obviously, this causes great concern among the disciples. After all, the Temple had been the physical center of their faith as Jews for centuries. There their temple priests observed the ritual practices described in Leviticus. The people came to it to tithe and to worship God. The buildings, moreover, had survived the occupation of the Selucids, the Greeks, and eventually the Romans.

How could God let it be torn down?

You can imagine the desperation of Jesus’ closest followers, the inner circle of Peter, James, John, and Andrew, when they ask him about the time at which these things will take place. You might also imagine their frustration when they receive what appears to be a rather vague response! “Beware that no one leads you astray,” Jesus tells them. “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come” (Mark 13:6-7).

Who could Jesus possibly have in mind when he refers to those who will lead his followers astray?

The Text in Jesus' Time

Once again, some context will help.

Mark's account of Jesus appeared shortly before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Nero was the emperor. He was famous for persecuting Christians. Many scholars think Mark had a special connection to Peter, whom he invariably names before any of the other disciples. It is also possible that Mark was written in Rome where, at least according to Catholic tradition, Peter was crucified upside down for following Christ.

Mark's audience, in short, would have been Christians suffering persecution under Nero. Because of their situation, these Christians may have been tempted to follow other, self-proclaimed messiahs (or Christs) who attempted to overthrow Nero and his government. We know of at least two in the New Testament.

One was Judas the Galilean who, according to Acts 5:27, "rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered." The other was Barabbas.

Like Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John refers to Barabbas as a "bandit" or "thief" (18:40). In the first century, however, these terms mean something different than someone who steals. Josephus, a Jewish historian of the same period, equates the word "bandit" with a person involved in a riot, a violent revolutionary, or an anarchist. Like Judas the Galilean, bandits or thieves would have been men who took up arms against Rome, leading those who followed them like sheep to their slaughter as Roman soldiers stomped them into oblivion.

Jesus explicitly contrasts himself with the "thieves and bandits" in John. While bandits (i.e., violent revolutionaries) lead people to their destruction, he leads them to "abundant life" (John 10:10). He leads them to "still waters," as Psalm 23:2 puts it. He is the true Christ, the one who invites his followers to be *peacemakers*, to settle disputes, and to love their enemies – something no rabbi before him had taught and no "Christ" after him would practice.

The Anti-Christ

It can be tempting when things seem to be “falling apart” to place our trust in authority figures who divide us, who lie, or who promote violence as the necessary means to a higher good or goal.

January 6th of this year made me realize how many of our fellow Americans, including some of our fellow Christians, have placed their trust in just such people. Look at the suffering and destruction that followed. Look at the toll it took on our nation’s capital, on the democratic process. This may be the way of Judas the Galilean, the violent revolutionary who led his followers to their deaths, but it is not the way of Jesus Christ.

When it feels like the “center cannot hold,” we must ask ourselves what it means to follow the true Christ, the Good Shepherd. Can we love in a way that resists injustice and oppression? Can we fight without fists? Can we stand up without making others fall? I believe we can – but not by ourselves. We need the help of the Holy Spirit.

We also need hope.

The Good News

Yeats, we recall, ended “The Second Coming” with the powerful image of a beast, a symbol of the diabolical, which was vying for birth, for embodiment, in Bethlehem. The bleak would presumably give way to the unspeakable. The First World War and the Spanish Flu were only signs, it would seem, of the darkness that was soon to come.

In our Gospel reading for today things are different. Granted, it appears that the “centre cannot hold.” After all, “nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines” (Mark 13:8). Yet “do not be alarmed,” Jesus adds, for “this is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Mark:6, 8).

You hear the similarity: after the end of terrible things including wars (or the Great War), something new will be born. You also hear the difference: this “something,” according to Jesus, will be God’s new creation! Anarchy may have been “loosed” upon Jesus’ followers, but the center (ultimately) holds. A new creation, the kingdom of God, is at hand.

Merciful God, give us faith and courage to persist even when it seems like the center will not hold. Help us resist the false messiahs who do not know

the way of peace, and inspire us to remember not only the words of our favorite poets but more importantly the words of Jesus Christ. These times may be grim, but the light of Christ shines in the world and the darkness will not overcome it (see John 1:5).

Amen