

May 16, 2020

What follows are the opening verses of Wallace Stevens' 1915 poem, Sunday Morning:

“Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

II

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?”

It is suggested that the inspiration for the poem came from a vacation that he enjoyed in Florida in the early days of the last century. Many of you have enjoyed Florida and from what I hear the water and the sunsets are pretty amazing.

It is a much longer poem than these verses and when I read it without any real knowledge of poetry and Stevens, I connected with his images immediately and it resonated in my mind as a very appropriate description of the specialness that Sundays had in my life from when I was a child through my adult life as a priest.

Sundays were always special and lingering and different and that is what I saw in the poem but those verses you just read above were when they were written and through the middle of the 20th century were understood to be a kind of manifesto against religion and religious belief.

Apparently, Stevens as a young successful business executive and poet of the modern era had no use for religion and this poem was kind of making fun, my words, of Sunday as the Lord's Day or Sunday as the sabbath.

In my mind Wallace Stevens was a brilliant poet and in the minds of much smarter people than me, he was a major force in offering poetic insights into the inner lives of 20th century Americans who were increasingly moving away from the interpretations of reality and human life offered by conventional religious thinking.

As I suggest in my Words for the Wind for this Sunday, the problem is in the marketing and delivering of the product, in other words, the packaging, not in the product and that the Spirit inspires and does not conspire.

There is an unconfirmed bit of information that on his deathbed Wallace Stevens asked to be baptized into the Catholic Church, as he lived on the East Coast almost all of his life mostly close to New York. By avoiding baptism until his deathbed, he would have been able to avoid the suffocating empire building kind of Catholicism that dominated the cities of the east coast and been able to stay close to the product minus the packaging, the marketing and the delivery thus having a rich and complex inner life of thoughts that were not just “impure.”