

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Visitors to our website,

Ever since I was a boy at secondary school I have been an avid reader of novels. My father, himself widely read, introduced me to reading. But it was Father John Looby SJ who stretched my horizons and made me and my 5th year class mates critical readers, and encouraged us to be adventurous in our choice of authors and literary genres. It was to another Jesuit I owe my life-long fascination with the work of William Somerset Maugham, both his novels and the short stories on which his reputation is based. I met Father Dermot O'Connor SJ almost forty years later in Brussels and belatedly thanked him for having read to a group of us the story *Louise*, thus igniting my interest in Maugham's work. The same Maugham was the most widely read author in the English-speaking world in the first half of the 20th century – novels, short stories, plays and screen-plays – while in continental Europe it was the Austrian novelist, playwright and essayist Stefan Zweig who had the cash registers singing in all the bookshops. I often wondered did they know one another's work. I have maintained my interest in fiction but, ever since I became a priest, have had a guilty conscience about this indulgence. My conscience keeps telling me I should be reading theology, preparing my Advent/Lent course, or should be reading the Catholic journals that pop with alarming regularity through my letterbox. Summer each year is an occasion to put my guilt complex about fiction on ice for a month or two. So since the beginning of July I have returned to reading novels and working my way through the stack of as yet unread fiction which has been building up beside my desk since the week after Christmas. And as I close the last page of each novel I have devoured I pinch myself to test whether my conscience has been giving me defective instructions. I learn about people, places, historical periods and above all human situations which I never encounter in day-to-day life. I form affection for characters, empathise with a number of them, puzzle over the dilemmas which provide the tension that makes fiction possible and, as I reach the closing page, feel I am taking leave of a world I have inhabited and which has taken possession of me for as long as it has taken to get through the book.

Over the years I feel I have got to know the club-footed Philip Carey, the principal character of Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*; I have developed an all too intimate acquaintance with Zac Zuckerman (Philip Roth's *alter ego*), Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot are old friends; and I feel, knowing her so well, I can predict the changing moods of Natalia Ginsburg. It is a priest's job to get to know people and, as Vatican II's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* urges us to do, to identify with their joys, hopes, anxieties and fears. Each Sunday as I look down at the congregation I am reminded of this pastoral requirement, imagining sometimes that the 400 or so life stories sitting in the pews are more fascinating and of more immediate relevance to my life than anything imagined by Philip Roth, Émile Zola, Colm Toibín or George Eliot. And then I realise that, precisely in reading Roth, Toibín or Jane Austen, I am getting to know human nature in all its richness and variety better and thus equipping myself for that pastoral challenge I have of getting to know my parishioners better too. We know that fiction is invention, the a novel's characters are artistic creations and that the story an author relates is not *factual*. But we only turn over the page and read through to the end for as long as we have the book in our hands, and we can believe that the story the novelist relates is *true* and that it leads us into realities that for us are new.

Our Christian faith is based on a story, all of which is *true* (it is God's word!) but there would be no work for scripture scholars or exegetes if it were all *factual*. I find that the stories I have read, whether written by Maugham, Roth, Emily Bronte or told me as a boy by my father, have given me more insight into the human spirit than anything else I have heard. I am grateful to my father, to the two Jesuits mentioned above, and to anyone who has recommended me a novel that has opened up a new world to me. I am so thankful to those many authors who, in telling a human story with skill, passion and empathy, have helped me understand my fellow human beings better. So, as long as the summer lasts so too does my commitment to devouring as many novels as I can. Reading brings me closer to people, to life and, I firmly believe, to God too.

Father Patrick