

“RIDE YOUR WAYS”

In Sir Walter Scott’s Guy Mannering, the old Gipsy woman, Meg Merrilies, defies the luxury, the pride, the domination of the Scottish lord, Godfrey Bertram, who has built a fine house and a fine family by breaking the backs of the poor, about whom he cares nothing, and she bids him and all of his finery to go, to go where it’s obviously going – to hell and destruction:

“Ride your ways”, said the gipsy, “Ride your ways, Laird of Ellangowan – ride your ways, Godfrey Bertram! This day have ye quenched seven smoking hearths – see if the fire in your ain parlour burns the blither for that.....not that I am wishing ill to your little Harry, or to the babe that’s yet to be born – God forbid – and make them kind to the poor, and better folk than their father --”

So saying, she broke the sapling she held in her hand and flung it into the road.

(Written 1815, not 1967)

Yet, haven’t you ever shared the old gipsy’s mood? Haven’t you ever looked at the world in which you lived, haven’t you ever looked at the family you’ve bred, haven’t you ever looked at yourself, at the self you’ve been so ambitious for, and realized that in spite of everything, it’s all going to hell and destruction, and there’s nothing you or anyone else can do to stop it, so that in defiance, if not in despair and defeat, you say, “Go on, ride your ways, go where you’re headed, there’s no helping it, who’s stopping you, I’ve said and done all I can say and do, the hearth fire burns no brighter for it, so ride your ways, maybe the children will be better folk than their fathers, so ride your ways, on to the end.” Haven’t you ever stepped back from life like that, in realization, or in resignation, or in sad rebellion, and so saying, broken the stick you held in your hands, and flung it to the ground?

“What more can I do for you, world? What more can I do for you son, daughter, you rich, you poor? What more can I do for myself? The course had been set, the end is clear. What more to do now, at this late date? – except: ‘Ride your ways’,

said the gipsy, 'Ride your ways!' World, America, Godfrey Bertram, or whatever your name is ---

If you have ever had this feeling of watching yourself or someone else on an unalterable course, as though plunging on into fate, impossible to check, heading, even with eyes wide open, into the inevitable – then you are in good company.

You are with Old Testament Amos, setting a plumb line by his nation, Israel, and finding his country so crooked, not even God can set it straight: “the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.” “Hush, hush,” said the paid prophets, “You will upset the king’s golden apple-cart.” But bearded Amos was not paid by anybody. He was only a migrant worker. He was also God’s gipsy. And he saw what he saw: that Israel was riding its way “into exile”. And he said what he said: “Your fancy wife shall be a harlot in the city, and your educated sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword.” (Amos 7:7-17) And it was too late to stop it. So, “Ride your ways”, said this Old Testament gipsy.

And if you have ever had this sense of standing aghast at the inexorable onrush of events, you are also in good New Testament company. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” said Jesus. “Ride your way to ‘woe’, to woes you’ve never thought possible, not for you, you who ‘tithed’, who are so ‘clean’ on the ‘outside’, appear so ‘beautiful’, but wouldn’t recognize ‘justice’ if you saw it, much less ‘mercy’ or ‘faith’, so full of ‘extortion’, you are, so full of ‘greed’, and ‘uncleanness’ of the heart – riding high you are: for a fall.”

And, like Amos, he was not one of the paid priesthood either, but only an itinerate carpenter, another one of God’s poor gipsys, who ‘had not where to lay his head’, but saw what he saw, ‘man’s cruelty to man’, and said what he said, ‘Why don’t you love one another?’, but couldn’t stop the onrush, getting himself, like most other prophets, crucified instead.

And as for us? Most of us have no idea where history, where Western Civilization, where our own country, our own society, or even our small enclave of family and friends is rushing. Most of us can only stand back, watch it running pell-mell to its own end, to wherever the incomprehensible vastness of the 20th century is plunging, to whatever destiny its marvelous technology and vast resources and splendid young men and women are taking it, to whatever future its inexorable march of war and pain and poverty and its equally inexorable search for peace and health and plenty are leading it – we can only stand back and say, “Ride your ways, century, ride your ways to your own end. I cannot possibly comprehend.”

And yet, as with Sir Walter Scott’s old gipsy woman, who never gave up her own fight, fate being what it might, and as with every poor gipsy of God, from Amos to Jesus to today, we too must say with Peter and John, as they stood in Jerusalem before forces too great for them: “We cannot possibly give up ... we cannot possibly give up speaking of things we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20)

So, ride your ways, world, and we may never be able to stop you or change you, but what we have seen, we have seen, and what we have heard, we have heard, and we cannot possibly give up. And what we have seen in Christ Jesus, we Christians, is a vision of God. And what we have heard if that God is love – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control,” and though we ourselves can never live up to it, we will never cease trying. Ride your ways, world, but we’ll never give up...

As St. Paul said, “You, my friends, were called to be free men.”

Let us Pray: Set us free, Lord to set a new course for our own lives – free to be as kind as we wish the world to be – to be as faithful and self-controlled as we would the family were – as freely open-handed and open-hearted as we wish the church to be – For Christ’s sake, we ask this of Thee -- Amen