

Good news that remains

By [Leonard Beechy](#)

November 17, 2009

When my class finishes F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel [The Great Gatsby](#), the discussion often comes around to the title. What's so great about Jay Gatsby, who has renamed and reinvented himself, and amassed an ill-gotten fortune, all in pursuit of Daisy, the wealthy golden girl? One of my brighter students dismissed Gatsby as "a stalker with means." All agree that Daisy herself is no prize, certainly unworthy of the single-minded devotion Gatsby lavishes upon her.

Which is, the students and I eventually agree, the point. It's not the object of Gatsby's dream, but its intensity—his "capacity for hope"—that makes him great in the eyes of narrator Nick Carraway and, presumably, of Fitzgerald himself:

The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty.

When lapsed Catholic Fitzgerald phrases this in New Testament language he reveals a lot about himself and how he read his time. The dissipating devotion to unworthy loves and objects is the theme of Fitzgerald's life, and also that of the postwar, Lost Generation America he epitomized forever when he published the novel in 1925.

In that same year, and looking around at that same Lost Generation, Pope Pius XI published [Quas Primas](#), establishing the Feast of Christ the King. The encyclical targets not only the loss of faith—the rising tides of secularity and disillusionment—but also the rise of *bad* faith: faith misplaced in materiality, violence, earthly systems and "human power." With the rubble of war still surrounding him, Pius proclaimed that we must look for "the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ," a kingdom that

demands of its subjects a spirit of detachment from riches and earthly things, and a spirit of gentleness. They must hunger and thirst after justice, and more than this, they must deny themselves and carry the cross.

In establishing Christ the King Sunday, then, Pius's heart was in the right place—as is ours when we find ourselves a little uncomfortable with the whole business. We soften its patriarchal edges by calling it “Reign of Christ Sunday” and soften its monarchical edges with tricks like “Kin-dom of Christ Sunday.” We do our best to avoid conservatism's worst impulse: denying modernity by insisting that truth is inseparable from old metaphors and old oppressions. We must not preach bad news.

But let's also make sure to preach good news to a generation no less lost than that of Fitzgerald, whose shimmering prose reached out toward a transcendence he saw as having fled. It hasn't; it rules, and that's good news. Let us preach devotion to a beauty that is not “vulgar and meretricious,” but elemental, profound, divine, in whose service both we and the world are made better—something, in Fitzgerald's fine words, “commensurate with (our) capacity for wonder.”