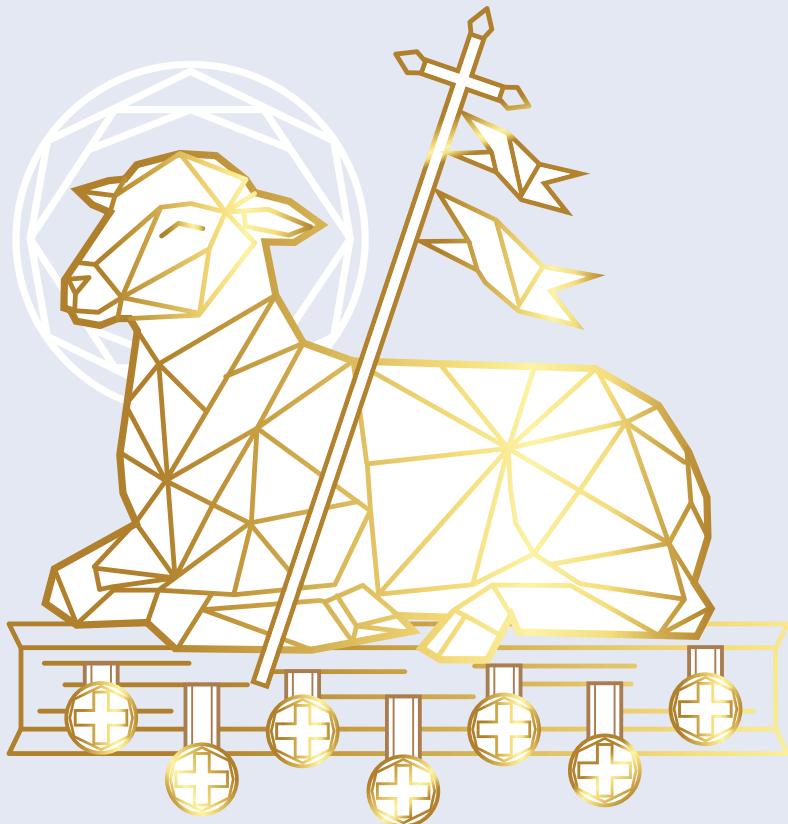


Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice

James Alison







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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

I first started giving this course in the front room of some friends of mine in London in the late 1990s. I called it *The Forgiving Victim*. The title was my shortcut “way in” to describing the difference that Jesus makes to the world we know and inhabit. A world in which sacrificing others, marginalising and expelling them is standard practice for the way we humans gather together and create unity. It’s such a default, fallback position for any of us whenever anything goes wrong that we’re scarcely aware that we’re doing it. Often we’re only joining in because everybody does it anyhow. We depend on victims whom we don’t see, and whom we don’t want to see. And we can get quite annoyed when someone points out our complicity, our silence, or our involvement in such a thing. Then we start to feel that *we* are the victims and feel justified by that victimary sense in pointing the finger at others, who started it. It is into this, all too familiar, world that Jesus comes, occupying the place of shame, of expulsion, of death, voluntarily and deliberately to detoxify that space forever. Central to what he was about was getting us off being tied up in, involved in, this victimary world, whether as perpetrators, as victims or as is usual in the case of most of us, some mixture of the two depending on which bit of our life is under examination. And all of that was done freely, voluntarily, lovingly. It is the shape of God’s love.

For my London friends, the title was not shocking. I suppose because they knew I was trying to get them to sit for a time in a place where they could see that someone else, Jesus, was doing something for them. In any case, and being my friends, they also knew that, as a person of dubious morality myself, I had zero business telling them what to do or moralising at them. Instead, I wanted them to find themselves inside what Jesus had done and was doing and thus to find new and interesting ways of their own to be creative in their life responses, to work out what just living might look like, starting from where they were. However, as I began to be invited to give elements of the course, and then the whole course, in the United States, I stumbled into an unexpected

problem. For a significant number of those coming to hear me, the title “The Forgiving Victim” had toxic associations.

People assumed that I was going to be laying upon them the moral burden of turning into the sort of victim who forgives people. In some cases, their fear was grounded in having themselves undergone serious abuse. Very reasonably, they were nervous of anything that sounded like “Jesus wants you as a doormat”—battered-spouse syndrome, among other sorts of abuse, is far too frequently sanctified in this way.

In some cases, it was because they were beginning to deconstruct their earlier indoctrination in Penal Substitution Atonement Theory Evangelicalism (or equivalent sacrificial forms of traditionalist Catholicism), and were, again, rightly, terrified of the language of “victim” because of the violence of the associations it aroused.

Because of what I heard from these two groups, I changed my title to *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening to the Unheard Voice*. This was my attempt to make clear from the get-go that it is Jesus, not they, who is the Forgiving Victim in question, and thus to get them to de-centre themselves from any immediate identification with the victim position. But also, to emphasise that first hearing and then listening to “the unheard voice”, the normally silenced voices of those who are victims, is the high road toward the risk of just living.

However, there was a further element to the reaction which seemed particularly strong among US listeners or participants. The sense that what they expected, and wanted, was that I should give them a message, if possible, clear, simple, and with practical steps to follow, which they would then go and put into practice. The problem is that what I am proposing is pretty much exactly the reverse of this. My inductive method is to make it easier for people to allow themselves the time to take on board what someone has done and is doing for them. For them to sink into it, begin to get a sense of it as something which brings them life. And only as they find themselves within it, to see what practical steps they might want to take. To discover the living out of justice as a creative, and not primarily a reactive, thing. For some, that is deeply counterintuitive.

So, when I received an invitation from Street Psalms to revise the course, update some of my images and allusions to things from the 90’s

and early 00's which few people would "get", and turn it into a single volume to be published by Aliosventos Ediciones, I also came face to face with the question of whether I could come up with a new and better title for the course. After all, my French publishers (Desclée De Brouwer) had decided that it was to be called "*12 leçons sur le christianisme*"—"12 lessons about Christianity"—not a bad title at all, and certainly not misleading labelling. But it does seem to run away from letting on much about the content.

While mulling over a title that would keep the elements of Jesus' detoxification of both victimhood and victimary sentiment, the element of an inductive path, and the sense of something being done for us, rather than our being told to do something, I remembered my favourite verse of the New Testament, Hebrews 12:2:

...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

I love it because of the phrase "for the joy that was set before Him". As I understand it, it means that from the get-go, Jesus conceived of his whole project as something entirely joyful, suffused with joy in its carrying through, and achieved with a view to bringing so, so many into joy.

And of course, this is the apparent counterfactual that I long for us to relax into as we enter into His way.

So, I thought up a new title for the course: *For the Joy that Was Set Before Him...: A Course of Induction Into the Faith Pioneered by Jesus the For-giving Victim*. Well, this captures what I want it to well enough. But, yes, you've got it: it's too long and is neither catchy nor memorable.

Which is why, despite my misgivings, the course still has the name: *Jesus the For-giving Victim: Listening to the Unheard Voice*. Please let me know, as you go through it, if you can come up with an improved title!

James Alison
Madrid August 2025

CHAPTER 1:

“Don’t Speak Until You’re Spoken To”

Introduction: The Stupefying Nature of what is Proposed

I’m going to start with something I hope makes no sense to you at all. My reason for doing this is that I want you to glimpse, as we begin, that whatever we are doing in this course is coming at you out of left field. This is to prevent you from falling back on patterns of understanding that are obvious to you. I don’t want you, at least initially, to sense you’ve “heard it all before”. I hope that, thus forewarned, you will be available to sink into what is being proposed for you over the next few chapters.

So here’s where I would like to start: with some well-known verses of Scripture, from the beginning of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is what they say: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; (...). Well, so far so good. This is a model of communication which I imagine is more or less familiar. A long time ago, someone called God speaks to a bunch of ancestors somewhere in the Middle East, and he does so by inspiring certain prophets—more or less wild, agèd, bearded males, and just conceivably one or two females—to speak in his name. In any case, the notion of some oracular pronouncements coming through certain individuals is not completely alien to us.

The author goes on to say: “but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son”. Well, the previous model of communication seems intact, but has been ratcheted up a couple of degrees. Now the degree of authority of the oracle-bearing one has shifted from a mere prophet to a Son. Still, we get the message: what is being claimed is that the most recent communication is somehow of much greater weight than

the previous utterances. This is underlined by what comes next: “whom He appointed the heir of all things”. Well, who knows quite what this means? But appointing an heir seems, in principle, something we can cope with: this mega-prophet—who, by being a Son, is somehow more on the inside of things than the other prophets—has turned up and is going to inherit everything.

The author then expands this to say: “through whom also he created the world.” Whoa! What on earth could this mean? We’ve suddenly leapt out of a paradigm of communication with which we could more or less deal. Instead, we’ve stumbled upon a rogue statement—rather as if someone were having an apparently reasonable discussion with us, but then discreetly disclosed to us that they are, in fact, Napoleon.

Either that, or the whole of the previous picture doesn’t do at all: how on earth does someone who appears in the middle of history—and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is in fact talking about the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth—get to be involved in the creation of the world? Something which, if it happened at all, happened a very, very long time before any of this, and scarcely seems to be the sort of thing which happened through a historical person.

It’s tempting to imagine God the Father and Jesus standing next to the hot and cold tap in a bath, turning them on together, and Jesus rushing round the side and jumping into the tub when it’s half-full. But frankly, this picture sounds mythical; what’s more, it sounds silly. Furthermore, it doesn’t seem to add anything significant to our knowledge to tell us that this particular bloke, in the middle of history, had also been around at the beginning—other, perhaps, than to aggrandise him. In any case, it’s a very weird statement. It suggests this historical person, who lived between fixed dates like the rest of us, was somehow involved in bringing to being everything that is.

Now, I’m not going to try and give you an answer as to what this sentence “really” means at this point. And that’s not because I have one tucked away—I wish! What I wanted to do was bring out the weirdness of the act of communication into which I hope to induct you. To show how we are going to have to change our ears and our perceptions if we are going to be able to imagine what might be meant by it.

In fact, the sentence goes on. Even though there is a full stop in the English translation, there is no punctuation in the Greek. So this is a continuation:

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

He better to paraphrase it something like this:

He, who is the breaking forth of the radiance of God's glory and the visible imprint of God's (in principle invisible) nature and the holder-in-being of everything that is by the constitutive decree of God's power.

The paraphrase makes it even clearer that it is this historical person, Jesus, to whom all these descriptions apply. So our author is not running away, in an embarrassed fashion, from having tipped us the wink that he is Napoleon. He's about as un-closeted a Napoleon as you can imagine: Napoleon on stilts!

So, as I say, I hope that what is being suggested here is not obvious to you. Because I want it to be evident just what an odd starting point we are at. What I hope we will do over these chapters is *begin* to become habituated to being the sort of people who *might* hear God speaking through the Son, whom he appointed over all things. In other words, rather than merely listening to a bloke with a message, we will become aware of someone who is God's very self, involved in the creation of all things, who is speaking. It's going to be a rather different sort of communication than ones we are accustomed to, since it is not merely saying: "Well, there's Creation, everything that is, and Creation somehow has a message for us, like "Help, stop polluting me or using me up". And then there's also a bloke who turns up and, on top of that more general message, gives us some instructions to live by, maybe of a more or less moralistic sort.

No! To judge by what is being said in Hebrews, the Creator of everything that is—who cannot, of Himself (if you'll excuse the sexist pronoun) be heard by us, who is outside everything that is, outside

all our possible forms of comparison—this Creator has entered into a form of communication which is a making-alive of everything that is, towards us—as something personal for us. Creation as everything that is, and Jesus as a historical person, is the same act of communication: God speaking with one voice.

Does that make sense? Not too much, I hope. If so, you've "got it" already, and there's no point you're undergoing this course! Instead, I hope you will sit with the oddness of the verses I've started you with, so we can become accustomed to what an odd form of listening, and what an odd act of communication, it is to which we are being summoned.

From Grasping on to a Soundness of Theory to Relaxing into a Practice

OK. After having dumped you in the theological deep-end and rather discourteously suggested I hope you drown, we can now move on to what I'll be looking at during the rest of this first chapter, which is not strictly theological *at all*. I'm going to be looking at what I call *basic anthropology*. This rather fancy-sounding word means the exploration and study of the origins, the behaviour, and the physical and cultural development of the human animal. I'm not using it here to refer to a study of distant tribes; rather, I'm going to be highlighting certain things about how we function, simply as humans, being the sort of animal we are. These are things which, in fact, you know already. We all know them. Nevertheless, we often ignore them in practice.

So I want to start by asking you to make quite a big effort: suspend the temptation to theology for a bit. We'll get back to theology eventually. For the moment, I want to ask you not to rush in and supply "solutions from God" to anything we talk about. We are going to be talking about basic matters of being human instead. For instance, I want us to think about how we humans manage to tell the truth, be truthful. I want to point out how much we are, all of us, under the spell of what a friend of mine calls "physics envy". This spell suggests to us that what is really truth-bearing in our world is the paradigm bequeathed to us by physics and mathematics, and that anything else is not really up to much in the truth stakes. So there are really true things—those that can be set out

in clear, distinct ideas, like maps, building structures, bridge engineering, and physics. This is hard science. And then there are flaky forms of truthfulness that aren't really very true, like narrative, storytelling and other things of that sort. Story-telling humans, this paradigm suggests, aren't really up there when it comes to truthfulness. Literature? Film-making? It's all fantasy, really. No, you want the real paradigm of truth? Mathematics! Physics!

Well, how this works out for us in the religious sphere, is that we typically make assumptions about the forms of life and of practice which would be perfectly appropriate to make if dealing with astronomy, but which are not at all appropriate to dealing with God and with our neighbour. For instance: according to this way of thinking, when it comes to theology, what we need to do is to grasp a theory, get it right. Once we work out the theory, then we can hold onto it, come hell or high water. And once we've got it right, we should go and put it into practice. So, first step: get your theory clear; once it's all tied up and you know your bridge will stand, go off and put it into practice: build the damn thing.

This is a good and useful way of thinking—if you're building bridges. However, from our own experience, most of the things we know about, we know from within, as the result of practice. Very few of us, as infants or kids, sat down and learned a book called *The Theory of Bicycle Riding*, which we had to master before anybody would allow us to sit on a small bicycle. On the contrary, what happened at Christmas, or a birthday, was that a small bicycle with stabiliser wheels appeared. We were gingerly put astride it, held on to, and tried all sorts of moves, falling off a few times and grazing our knees. After a bit, we started to get the hang of it, and found ourselves able to balance without so much dependence on the stabilisers. At a certain point, they were removed, and we were off.

We found ourselves doing something because we saw other people doing it, they encouraged us to do it, they gave us the means to do it, and they helped us through the first bits of it. And because of all this, we find ourselves knowing how to do something, and doing it increasingly well and without even thinking about it.

Now, imagine you have to teach someone else how to ride a bicycle. You would be scarcely likely to say: “Aha, well, I don’t want you to learn the bad, old-fashioned way that I learned it, which was by practice and trial and error. I want you to learn it the new-fangled, up-to-date way, which is by my giving you a little book called *Everything You Needed to Know About Bicycle Riding*. And once you’ve learned that by heart, then we won’t need stabiliser wheels, you’ll just sit on the thing and go”. This would be a disaster! Because one of the things we learn how to do when riding a bicycle is how to hold balance, and other things which, before we actually find ourselves doing them, don’t really seem possible. And this is not only true of riding a bicycle; it is true of almost any form of learning—even, dare I say it, of mathematics. Certainly, of language learning, painting, theology, or any other disciplines. We are gradually inducted into a set of practices, such that we find ourselves knowing from within how they work and become more or less skilled operators of them.

When it comes to understanding Christianity, this is absolutely fundamental. If we are under the spell of “physics envy”, then Christianity becomes a matter of grasping with our minds a particular soundness of theory and then putting it into practice. What happens is that, very quickly indeed, Christianity becomes very boring. And why wouldn’t it? For you can only get the theory right once, and then hold on to it. Thereafter, everything is reduced to how you should behave, to morals. Christianity gets reduced to morals. And this, in my humble opinion, is part of the great collapse of Christianity over the last two hundred years in the West: it has become so exclusively linked to morals, and morals tied to a pre-existing theory, that it has been rendered boring.

There is little more tedious and joyless than morals, when these are how you put into practice something which you are supposed to have learned already. The whole point of what we looked at in our verses from Hebrews is that they were about finding ourselves on the receiving end of an act of communication—which is, in itself, a very interesting, difficult and delicate thing. As a result of being affected by this act of communication, we begin to discover more about ourselves than we already knew—sometimes a frightening thing. We find ourselves developing new sorts of practices that correspond to how we’re being

spoken to, attempting to find new ways of becoming excellent through them.

Do you see that this is a rather different picture of the relationship between learning and practice than we're used to? I hope you will see that many things start to make much more sense once we realise it's not a matter of "getting ideas right". It's a question of "sitting under someone doing something to us over time", which means we discover from within what the ideas really mean, as we discover ourselves becoming something. This is really very different from having grasped them from the outside and then tried to put them into practice.

Please notice, before I move to my next point, that what I'm talking about here is not something specific to theology or religion. It's a point of basic anthropology—something that is true about every sort of learning we do: learning a foreign language, the practice of medicine or law, how to play a musical instrument, or coming to appreciate the excellence of music produced by others.

The Grammar of Escaping from a Mentalist World—Induction, Habits, Time

In order that we should be able to resist the temptations of the spell cast by a cultural world dominated by "theory first", I want to work through some notions that have, until recently, had a bad reputation. I call these notions the "grammar of our escape from a mentalist world". The first is the most obvious: the notion of induction—the notion of being led by other people into something over time. This is, of course, how any of us are brought into any sort of skill. Not only advanced skills like those displayed by professional musicians, but basic, infantile things like being able to speak a language at all. Other people induct us into something. This is because we are animals and, as animals, we are muscled creatures. Even our brains, which are not strictly speaking muscles, respond to stimuli as though they were—in other words, they can be stretched, exercised and so forth. And the whole point of muscles is that, in order to work, they need to be exercised. As they get exercised, they function better and better.

This means that one of the things we are inclined to despise, habits, become tremendously important. Habits are stable dispositions which you have acquired over time to be able to behave in certain ways. If you are habitually patient, let us say, it means that, when someone is being particularly aggressive or unfair in their treatment of you, rather than having to bite your tongue and say to yourself, “I must sit this one out, I must sit this one out”, you actually find yourself sitting it out without too much effort, because you’ve done it before. You’ve acquired a habitual disposition to act in a certain way.

Now, the fact that your behaviour is habitual doesn’t mean that it’s somehow less valuable than it would be if you were having to bite your tongue. However, our modern mentality tends to think that it’s only really good if it’s sincere and meant, which means, not habitual, not a disposition, but something that has to be done anew each time the occasion arises. However, this is nonsense.

Let me give driving a car as an example. After reading this chapter, some of you will get up and go somewhere by car. (Some of you, listening to the audiobook, may be in a car right now). Some of you will have, or have had, the option to be given a lift. I want to propose to you a choice of two drivers: Driver A is a cautious and thoughtful person, and before she indicates or turns or does anything else, she thinks: “What must I do next?” “Is that a car that is coming?” “Does it have its lights on?” “Are my lights on?” “Should I turn left?” “Should I turn right?” Before every action which Driver A performs, she gives thought to the matter. Then there is Driver B. She doesn’t deliberate about any of these things because she is used to driving. She habitually checks the mirror, observes the traffic, indicates, and picks out what’s going on. Now, I bet that, if you have a choice between being taken home by Driver A or Driver B, you’ll go with Driver B, because there’s far less chance that you’ll get into an accident. A driver who has to give thought to everything she does is not good. On the other hand, the fact that there is a habitual lack of spontaneity and “authenticity” about every movement Driver B makes does not make Driver B a worse driver. On the contrary, it is in this that being a skilled driver consists.

Isn’t it interesting that, when we hear the word “habit”, we tend to supply the value “bad”, so that a habit is automatically a bad habit? This

is especially so in matters religious: if something is habitual, that tends to be a sign that it's bad, because it's not sincere, not felt, not authentic. This is a kind of schizophrenia on our part; normally, we know it is *habitual* forms of excellence that are really excellent, while constantly thought-through ones are those of beginners.

Another example might be a doctor. Let us imagine a doctor who has to go through a checklist of every possible thing that might be wrong with you while making a diagnosis. He is going to be much slower and less good a doctor than one who has developed a kind of "finger touch", who is so accustomed to finding things out: it seems to be by instinct that he so regularly and speedily finds out what's wrong. You would be fooling yourself if you thought it really was by instinct; it isn't. It's a very highly developed skill, a habitual excellence in detection. More often than not, such a doctor doesn't need deliberately to go through the checklist, though every now and then there will be something that catches him out, and he'll say, "I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure about this—we'll have to do a test". I'm pretty sure we would all prefer to be treated by the habitually skilled doctor rather than by the rigorous stop-and-think Doctor.

All I want to point out is that habits—which we often regard, especially in the religious sphere, as bad things—are in fact what make excellence possible. They are what make skills work. There is nothing new about saying this. Aristotle said it a long time ago, but we have tended to junk it since the seventeenth century. But it is a good idea to remember Aristotle from time to time; in this, at least, his observation about how the human animal works is true.

So, we are inducted by others into the acquisition of stable dispositions over time. And it is this matter of "over time" that I would like us to consider next. Because the assumption behind the picture of truth I gave you—the grasped, theoretical picture—is that what is really true is true outside time. If it were time-laden in some way, it wouldn't be so true. The moment time gets involved, things start getting relative, so what is really true has got to be somehow free from time. It's got to be true yesterday, and today, and tomorrow, and not subject to the ravages and alterations of change and time. True ideas must be time-free.

Well, I want to remind us of something we all know: for us humans, time is not an option. We are intrinsically time-laden. There's no such thing as a human who is not shot-through with time. All our perceptions are inescapably time-related, and none of this is a bad thing at all. Quite the contrary. Rather than our time-clad nature leading somehow to a defect of truthfulness in us, it is the condition of possibility for this sort of creature to be truth-bearing. It's when we are aware of just how much we are affected by time that we become skilled tellers of the truth. We know, for instance, that each year has 365 days. Nevertheless, the 365 days between your eighth birthday and your ninth birthday, and the 365 days between your fiftieth birthday and your fifty-first birthday, felt very different indeed. You might say, "mathematically they are the same", but psychologically they are not at all. You start to look back in quite a different way as your lifespan gets longer. The years seem to get shorter as perspective comes in. And this means that the kinds of truth you tell, the ways you describe things, show an understanding of time marked by your place in it.

We all know this. It's perfectly obvious. However, we rarely remember, officially, that we are not all on the same playing field. There isn't a universal, psychological measure of time. There are only all of our different measures of time, and how we actually live them. Think, for instance, of the television news. Imagine we start watching a regular news show—the 9 O'Clock News, for instance—when we are ten years old, and we carry on watching it more or less regularly until we die, say, in our nineties. Usually, the anchor is a person somewhere between thirty and fifty, dressed in a more or less neutral kind of way, with a relatively neutral but somehow reassuring voice. They talk about what happened that day in a somewhat deadpan style, so as to get through whatever it is that has occurred. And this is important to us, since none of us would describe any of those events in the same way. The newscaster says, "Today, a bomb went off in a Gaza marketplace, killing upwards of twenty people. A new poll shows Senator McDoody edging slightly ahead in the Republican Primary in Alaska. Taylor Swift has been awarded billions at the conclusion of a long, drawn-out defamation battle. A large earthquake in Kamchatka failed to produce the expected Tsunami along the Pacific Rim, and Apple announced the launch of its new

iSatellite". All these things come off in the same tone of voice. Now, a nine-year-old living in Gaza or Kamchatka would have described exactly the same event as we have just heard in an entirely different way from his or her 70-year-old grandfather living in the same place. For each of them, the event will be part of a quite different series of expectations, hopes, fears, memories, considerations of normalcy and so forth. The same will be true of voters in Alaska concerning Senator McDoody, or of computer-illiterate seniors concerning the latest "must-have gadget" from Apple when compared with their teenage relatives.

Curiously, then, we're all used to an entirely fake, apparent, timelessness. Nevertheless, it's interesting how often we assume that the timelessness is real, whereas, in fact, all our capacities for living any of these events are time-soaked. And this time-soakedness is good! Without this, we would not be telling the truth; we would not be talking as humans.

The "Social Other" and its Priority

This leads me to my third point: here I'm going to introduce you to a phrase I'll use a fair amount in this book, so I want you to know what I mean by it. The point I want to get across is that the "social other" precedes us, is prior to us. By the "social other", I mean everything that is other than "me", in the case of each one of us: other people, the climate, the weather, the country, the geography, the atmosphere, the agriculture which enables food to be grown and so on. Please notice that I don't include "God" in this collection; God is not part of the social other. Everything that actually exists in our universe is the social other. God, as we will see later, is not something or someone that exists as part of our universe. In fact, you'll often find me talking about God as the "other Other". So when I talk about the social other, I'm once again speaking at an entirely human level—if you like, a wholly horizontal level. The air we breathe, the history we receive, our parents, neighbours, politicians, and educational systems, for example.

What I want to bring out about all these members of the social other is something undeniable that we usually forget: the social other is

massively prior to us at every point in our lives. On the one hand, where were you when your parents set about conceiving you? You weren't. That's the whole point. We weren't there. We made no decision about the matter. We were not consulted. There was not a "me" there to do any of that. Someone else did something, and it began the process by which we started coming into being. It's worth stopping and remembering this from time to time: we were utterly dependent on something quite other than us, over which we had no control at all, bringing us into being.

On the other hand, it's not merely that they brought you into being, then stopped and said: "Okay, now that we've conceived the little bugger, he's going to be a self-directed being—like a toy that will run until the battery gives out". Quite the contrary! Compared with other animals, and considering our size, we have a very long gestation period. Nine months of gestation, and then an even longer period in which we are not regarded as viable by other members of our race. In other words, for nine months, we are wholly vulnerable, entirely protected by someone else. Not only protected, but actually given everything we are from our mother and her body—and, with a bit of luck, protected additionally by another human who enables this female person herself to be relatively safe, warm and fed, despite her increased vulnerability to storms, robbery, murder, rape: her decreased ability to fend for herself while bearing a child.

Then the blighter is born. Do we say: "At last, here is our fully-functional project—wind the damn thing up and let it go?" Not a bit of it. What happens to an abandoned baby? It dies. A self-starting baby is dead within a very short time. Not only do we not self-start or self-gestate. We can't even begin to look after ourselves once we are born. We don't even know how to control our own temperatures. We are totally dependent on what is other than us for food, warmth, and protection. Part of our vulnerability is that our bodies are born in quite different proportions from those they'll have when we grow up, which is rare among other mammals. If you've ever seen a mare foaling, it's a wonderful thing: the mare drops a foal, licks off a bit of the afterbirth. Within a very short time, the foal kicks open its legs like a camera tripod, and within a few hours of birth, it's trotting around the field.

Furthermore, it's already the same basic proportion—legs to body to neck to head—that it's going to be for the rest of its life. Of course, it's going to get much bigger. But what is amazing is quite how viable it is, how quickly, and quite how unviable we are, for so long: how utterly dependent we are on the social other.

This is even more than a matter of basic biology. It is not as if we come wrapped in a body that needs all this care, attention, and bother from others; still, really, inside this, there is this pre-packaged, self-starting individual who is just raring to go as soon as the wretched body-wrapping develops enough. No! In fact, we are dependent on the social other—usually our parents or guardians—to begin developing a “self” at all. It is the movements they make towards us which start firing off our mirror neurons, so that we start to reproduce in our brains the things that are done to us and which we see other people doing. In other words, neuroscientists have discovered something else that Aristotle knew without anything like the same detail or sophistication: what we are is incredibly well-equipped imitators, and the imitation is kicked off by someone doing something to, at, or in front of us. You stick your tongue out at an infant, and the infant will stick its tongue back out at you within an incredibly short time after birth. More amazing, only a little while later, the infant will know how to defer imitation: if you put a pacifier (or dummy, as we call them in the UK) into an infant's mouth, and then stick your tongue out at it, at a time when it can't stick its tongue back out at you, and then later remove the dummy, the infant will stick its tongue out at you then.

This is far more than cute—it's astounding. It means that, within an amazingly short time, the infant's mirror neurons are fired off in such a way as to create not only the possibility of imitation, but the possibility of imitation staggered over time, which is the beginning of memory. And it is having a memory that is going to make a person a viable “self”. Once, rather later, you start to get that deferral of imitation linked to language, to repeated gestures and sounds, you get the beginning of memory and the condition of possibility of someone telling a story about themselves. Far from being a self-starting little individual, the little bundle is fired off by other people doing things to and at it. This will go on for a very long time. As any educationalist knows,

there is a world of difference between a parent, a guardian or a teacher talking to an infant and leaving an infant in front of the television. The same sounds can appear on the television and will not be learned; they do not fire off the mirror neurons. As infants, we can, amazingly, distinguish between things being done which are not part of something being done towards us, and exactly the same things being done towards us. It is the latter that produces in us skills, language and so forth.

Desire According to the Desire of the Other

Now, there is something even more amazing than this. So far you might say: OK, the social other gives us a body, and, reluctant though we be to admit it, it is the social other which produces in us the capacity for memory, for language and so on. But nevertheless, deep, deep within us are our desires. These are surely ours, these surely come from us, and then somehow latch on to the scaffolding which the social other has so painstakingly set up within us.

Well, once again, this is wrong! What is increasingly evident is that, when we talk about imitation being the motor through which the social other brings us into being, we are talking even about our desire. Not our instincts, which are biologically determined, but our desire, which is how those instincts are received, handled and lived socially in the case of this very malleable animal which we are. Scientists have observed that an infant can distinguish—once again from very, very early on—between an adult doing something and an adult failing to do the same thing. Imagine an adult slowly and deliberately putting a doughnut-shaped rubber ring on a stick in front of an infant. Now imagine that adult trying, but failing, to put the ring on the stick. What is astounding is that the infant will imitate the successful putting of the ring on the stick, but will not imitate the failure. In other words, the child is not imitating the mechanical movement; the child is imitating the intention, something entirely invisible and non-mechanical.

This is something which my guru, René Girard, had already pointed out in philosophical terms forty years previously, and the “hard science” is catching up with it now: intention is picked up from the other.

Or, in Girard's language, which is the language I prefer to use: we desire according to the desire of the other. I want to do what you want to do. I want to be who you are. You suggest me into being through driving my imitation of you. What is enormously important here is that it is the interaction between the other person's desire and our mirror neurons which allows us to develop empathy, and this is what starts to give us being over time, a sense of who we are. Who we are is given to us by the regard of another. How does a baby first learn who it is? By seeing itself reflected in one who is other than it (and we've all seen how excited infants are by relatives wearing spectacles, since the infants can see themselves in the reflection). As it is treated by an adult, so will it take itself to be. If the adult is terrified of this whole business of having the child, and holds the child with fear, what the baby will learn is: "I am a fearful thing". It will hold itself with fear. If the parent is relaxed, the baby will see that the parent is pleased it is there and will pick up: "I am a good thing to be around". We are given to be who we are through the eyes of another. This entirely anthropological insight will be central to everything we learn in this book.

I'd like to strengthen this point with one further example of how the social other gives us to be—runs us, if you like: that of language. It's not merely that we learn words from imitating the sounds of people who are other than us, though we do do that. In fact, we find ourselves being inserted into a language. The language was here before us. English had been spoken for hundreds of years before we came along and started mucking it up. We were inducted into hearing sounds, experiencing them, trying to find out what they mean, bouncing them off people by saying sometimes the wrong thing and expecting to be corrected—or shouted at, or knocked down—until we find ourselves engaging skilfully with the use of the English language. But we didn't invent it. On the contrary, we became symptoms of it. It invented us. That's the bizarre thing: it's because we find ourselves swimming within a particular language structure that we are able to express ourselves in certain ways.

Any of you who is fluent in a language other than your mother tongue knows your pattern of feelings is subtly different in another language. You're a somewhat different person; you feel things differently;

there are emotions and ways of being and doing things that you can't quite translate. And there's nothing wrong with that! You are a symptom of the language which speaks itself through you. This doesn't mean you can't be inventive in a language. However, all of us can tell the difference between someone who is "inventive" in a language because they are not very good at it and so will occasionally come up with interesting new phrases because they've got their grammar wrong. We can tell the difference between someone like that and someone like Shakespeare, who habitually got the grammar wrong and invented new words and phrases out of, if you like, an effervescence of excellence. A French-woman learning to speak English for the first time is not on the same plane as Shakespeare with regard to creative use of language. In the former, the creative use of language is a sign of not yet having become an appropriate symptom, a skilled channel for the language. In the latter, it is a sign of having such mastery over the language that he is able to flout all the rules, get away with it, and be appreciated for it.

So the other is prior to us as regards all these physical, linguistic, and mental things, as well as desire. The reason why I've taken such a long and deliberate route to get here is that it opens up for us something which, again, we all know to be true, but usually forget, which is how utterly dependent we are on the desires of others for *wanting* things. The people who do remember how true this is—indeed, whose profession depends wholly on their remembering it—are those associated with the advertising industry. They know perfectly well that the desire for something I neither need nor want, and which is at the very outer edge of my budgetary possibilities, is something that can be produced in me. They need to provide a model of some sort for my desires—someone who is attractive, who is clearly enjoying him or herself, who has a certain "zing" to them and who is more or less subtly indicating that it is ownership of this car, or immersion in the social life associated with this drink, that has led them to be the beautiful, successful, well-poised chick-magnet—or hunk-trawler, or whatever—that they are. Message: if only I had that, then I could be more like them. Without it, I'm only half a human being, with the wrong body shape and so on.

As an example of how well advertisers understand this, they have come up with something called "viral marketing", which works as fol-

lows. Scouts from, as it were, Adidas or Nike will go around certain high schools. They are trained to watch for the most popular kids, the trend-setters, the ones who clearly “have it” and who everyone else wants to be like—as opposed to the left-out ones, the ones who skulk around by themselves at recreation time. Then the scouts will go to the popular kids and give them a new pair of whatever it is they are selling—Air Jordans, for instance. They do this because they know very well that by giving away just one well-placed pair here and there, they will sell 300 pairs in a week. Because if *those* kids have it, everyone who wants to be anyone has to have it. This is viral marketing, whereby an object that has little or no value in itself acquires huge value because someone else has it. That desire spreads like an epidemic: because we desire according to the desire of the other.

This is true of us, whether it is to do with clothes, wives, holidays, cars, homes, husbands, boyfriends, girlfriends—you name it! We are the animal whose instincts have been transformed into desires. Even the basic instinctual forms of life which we have—the way we sleep, eat, the way we have sex—are all received by us in patterns pre-shaped by the desires of others. It is the social other which reproduces itself in and as the body of each of us, thus bringing into being that subsection of the “we” which is a “me”.

Sorry to have gone on for so long about this, but I really want us to be free from the pop-psychology picture most of us tend to fall back on. This pop-psychology picture presupposes that somewhere, relatively independent of the accidents of birth, background, and upbringing, there is a real me. This real me is authentic and has its own desires, and that’s what makes me different from everybody else. Although I’m temporarily dependent on other people in an annoying kind of way, I’m not really dependent. Really, I am the centre of the universe, just waiting for the rest of it to get to its knees and acknowledge the fact.

Well, as you have seen, this is nonsense. There is a real “me”, but it is real as a project over time that is being brought into being through this specific body, born in this definite time and place to these particular parents. It is how this body has learned, over time, to negotiate with the “we” that precedes and surrounds it. It is this body over time that is

different from anybody else's. The patterns of desire are what make us similar, not what makes us different!

The Importance of Memory

Within this picture of the social other reproducing itself in and as each one of "us", I'd just like to check back and look a little more at memory. You remember that memory is produced in us over time as mirror neurons are fired off, and we start to make repetitive gestures and sounds. We begin to be able to defer response very quickly indeed. We find ourselves imitating sounds and gestures, coordinating them in such a way that they combine into forms of communication and language. With this, we are beginning to be able to situate ourselves within the group which surrounds us. We are beginning to be capable of becoming a viable "I" in the midst of a "we". It's not that the "we" is a collection of "I"s that banded together; the "we" is what enabled the "I"s to come into being. And this "I" negotiating its place amidst the "we" over time is beginning to be able to tell a story of "myself". I came from X, I was born in Y, I am from this family, from that social class, with this educational level—from all of these, I begin to be able to tell a story about myself. Even in such basic, childish things as "I didn't break it. She did it", and other such attempts to negotiate the "we" of parental outrage.

Memory consists of these attempts to start telling a story. Memory is, among other things, our ability to be viable as a person. This is why a person who either has total amnesia or is in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease is one of the most difficult things for us to come across. It's not that they've forgotten who they are, as though there were a "self" that held their memories. Quite the reverse: since it is our memory that structures—holds in being—our "selves", they have lost who they are. Other people have to hold who they are in being for them—know where they come from, what they're about, where they used to live, where they live now, and why. It is not we who have memories; memories have us. Bizarre though it may be to say so, it is more accurate. It is the memories which underpin an "I" who is able to tell the story.

This is going to be very important in our course, as we come to look at the role of narrative in all our lives, for we are aware that memories are not always accurate. Memories alter over time—sometimes owing to perspective, sometimes through forgetfulness, loss, or blockages provoked by traumatic events, and occasionally through deliberate distortions. At times, we try to present a fake account of ourselves. We try to pretend that we are the Grand Duchess Anastasia, or some other figure of fantasy. In other words, memories can be true or false. But without them, there is not even a fake “I”. Nevertheless, the ability to be the sort of person who *remembers*—which is to say, who re-members, pieces together the bits—is part of what makes us human. This means that narrative is not an extra in our lives; it is constitutive of our lives.

Story Telling and Revisionist Historians

This leads, as you can imagine, to a further element in our awareness of how dubious the picture of truthfulness is that prizes mathematics and physics over narrative. Storytelling is not a second-rate form of human truthfulness: it is the basic framework within which humans communicate at all. There really is no such thing as entirely non-narrative knowledge for humans. Why? Because even mathematicians, astronomers, and physicists are members of storytelling communities which have become able to make their discoveries and develop their cutting edges through particular conjunctions and shifts in conjunctions in the way stories are told. I’m glad to say that, nowadays, scientists are some of the most straightforward and compelling advocates of this post-Cartesian way of understanding things.

Now, this leads to something we’ve touched on before: because we are people who are born in time, receive our “I”s over time, receive our ability to find ourselves through other people, and are people who are inducted into skills over time, so we find our perspectives shifting over time. Because of this, every form of scientific knowledge and endeavour is also time-related. There is a narrative element to it, without which it could not be. And this makes us all, whether we like the term or not, revisionist historians.

You probably remember the term “revisionist historian” from the Cold War period. It was the kind of thing Communists were accused of being by outraged westerners. The accusation ran like this: “Those Communists completely tailor all the facts to explain how Cuba, or North Korea, or Albania was always on the road to becoming a perfect socialist state. Every conceivable moment in that country’s historical past somehow prefigures the current state of affairs. Anything inconvenient to this picture is somehow forgotten, and, mysteriously, explorers, artists, as well as soldiers of previous generations are discovered to have been Socialists “avant la lettre”. Because of this, Communists will demonstrate that there is only one true understanding of history, and all other historical roads lead to this current socialist understanding of where we are now. Everything is always leading up to *us*”.

This was the sort of accusation made about revisionist historians, and their critics would point out: “But this is nonsense. There are an awful lot of other ways to understand the history of, say, Cuba or North Korea. Revisionist history is bad history”. And I want to say: Yes, indeed. Revisionist historians did indeed produce bad history. We all know that. History is much too mucky an affair for any of us to be able to determine in advance what the grand sweep of everything will be and was always meant to be. But on the other hand, all of us always effectively do the same. We are all revisionist historians, because there is no other way to tell the story of how we came to be and who we are—and the way we have is not entirely bad.

Think of it this way: imagine that you are a thirteen-year-old, and someone puts you on the spot and says: “Tell me who you are and what you’re about”. You think long and hard, with the sincerity and innocence that a thirteen-year-old can still summon up, and give a perfectly appropriate, limited, thirteen-year-old’s answer. Then, twenty years later, someone else comes along and says to you: “Tell me who you are and what you are about”. You remember what you said when you were thirteen, and say to yourself: “Gosh, I must be honest. Even though it was a long time ago, if I am to be a consistent and truthful person, then I must say the same thing, or else I’m somehow lying”. So you come out with the same answer you gave when you were thirteen.

Well, I hope that the person talking to the thirty-something you would look at you with astonishment and horror, and think that you probably needed to be taken to an asylum. Because they would have discovered you to be someone so incredibly fragile that, in the years between 13 and 33, you had learned nothing about who you are. Your picture of who you are has not developed at all. Dating, falling in love, going to school, going to university, maybe fighting a war, getting married, having children—none of these things made the slightest impact on your account of who you are. In other words, you have failed to become a revisionist historian. You have failed to be able to tell someone about yourself in such a way that all those things were included in some organically developing narrative.

Now, it is also possible to be a *bad* revisionist historian: a Jeffrey Archer figure, coming out with a full CV, invented university degrees, Olympic medals you never won, and so forth. You could be a liar; you could be a fantasist. Both of these are forms of revisionist history. My point is not that there cannot be bad forms of revisionist history, but that you cannot be truthful *except as a revisionist historian*. We revise our story as we go along, and if we didn't, we would be *less*, not *more*, truthful. Later on in this course, you're going to see how important this is for theology, because without it, the notion of the forgiveness of sins would mean nothing. Someone whose sins are being forgiven is someone who is being let go of their past in a certain way and being given a whole new perspective from which to hold themselves in relation to their past. In other words, a massive—and often initially painful—revision of their story is being given to them by someone else. This revision is not, however, the enemy of truthfulness: it is because we are revisionist historians that we are able to become truthful.

“Revelation” and “Discovery”

Just one last little piece of basic anthropology before I give you a quick theological jab in the arm to try and inoculate you against one of the big problems we'll come up against: one of the words we are used to hearing in matters religious is the word “revelation”. Of course, how we

understand that word is of a piece with how we imagine undergoing the act of communication with which we began this chapter. Typically, our picture of “revelation” is of someone important—God, for instance—imparting something from on high that we’re then supposed to know about and hold fast to. Of course, that fits very well with the grasping picture, the mentalist framework that I’ve been trying to wean us off: God imparts that which we then hold on to.

I’d like us to consider our normal human usage of this word “revelation”, which I think gives us a much more accurate picture of what is going on. For instance, when a tabloid newspaper makes a “revelation”, what does it usually mean? Usually, it is a form of spilling the beans about the private lives of politicians, actresses, or religious leaders. This alters public perception of the person, leading them to resign or whatever. Or, there is the rather more positive form of revelation, such as when someone like Pavarotti is about to sing an opera, but has a bad attack of hiccups and can’t go on stage. The director casts about and finds an understudy, a barrow-boy from Barnsley, whom no one has ever heard sing live on stage before. He appears in an ill-fitting costume, all nervous, his first time before a real audience, opens his mouth, and stuns everybody. The audience, the critics, and the newspapers all say: “Fred was a revelation! The barrow-boy from Barnsley is now a world-class tenor! Who would have thought a barrow-boy from Barnsley would make it into the big league of operatic stardom?” Well, this is a “revelation” in the sense of something completely unexpected. But what is being revealed is something that was true before—that Fred has a superlative voice—but no one knew about it. And while the likes of Pavarotti occupied the stage, no one was going to know about it! So that’s a slightly more positive sense of “revelation”.

How about the following classroom examples? You are a parent; your child comes home from school and says: “Mummy, Mummy” or “Daddy, Daddy—do you know 22,793,456 people are living in Mexico City?” And you say: “Gosh, how utterly amazing!” but immediately get on with preparing supper, or whatever you were doing before, because this piece of information, while true, is not very interesting. It would only be a revelation to you if you were a member of a small and improbable sect of people who deny the existence of Mexico City. For

such people, who believed there were no people there at all, the news comes as a shock. But mostly you carry on, rather expecting your proud progeny to come in tomorrow and announce that King Henry VIII had six wives. In short, we're talking here about imparting information: something is being revealed, but it's only got a certain weight.

Let's ratchet this up a little: you can imagine a twelve or thirteen-year-old child coming in a few days later and saying: "Mummy, Mummy, I've decided I'm going out with X or Y"—let us say Cassie, or Johnny. OK. This is a bit of a revelation. You had kind of suspected they were almost at the age when this kind of thing would start to happen, but you hoped the childhood thing would go on maybe a little longer. Nevertheless, you realised this was going to happen eventually. So yes, it's a bit of a revelation. You're also aware that some of their friends are the sort of people you don't want them to hang out with, and, well, there's another tangent for you to go off worrying about. In any case, they come in and tell you about Cassie or Johnny or whoever. A slight revelation, a little earth-tremor in your system, but the tremor is to do with: "God, am I that old already? Lord, they've grown up quickly, their childhood's almost over"—all that kind of stuff. So here, yes, information is being imparted, but it's more than information. It's the beginning of a change in a set of relationships, or the bringing-out into the open of changes that had already started, but hadn't yet been shared with you.

Then imagine this scenario: your thirteen-year-old child comes home and says, "Mummy, Mummy, I'm pregnant" or "Mummy, Mummy, I'm gay". Much bigger earth tremor! Now they've said something that genuinely wasn't part of what you could or would normally expect. That a child should announce, at twelve or thirteen, that they are "going out" with someone really is par for the course. But for a twelve or thirteen-year-old to announce that they are either pregnant or gay is a communication of a slightly different magnitude. What is being communicated is actually going to alter your relationship with them forever. It is introducing something new—something quite unexpected, and entirely outside your control—into the relationship, and into the sphere of relationships you share. You are going to find yourself relating to them, to your other relatives, to teachers, friends, and other children in quite new ways. You are going to find yourself having to discover a

lot about yourself and about them that you didn't know; you are finding yourself put into a new position by them.

What I want to suggest is that, when we come to talk about "Divine Revelation", we're talking about something more akin to the "I'm pregnant" or "I'm gay" announcement than to the Mexico City population announcement. We're talking about the kind of earth tremor of something happening outside your control, but which is going to alter your relationship to everybody else and lead you into a process of discovering things about yourself and others that you didn't know before, making these discoveries as your relationships alter.

The reason I bring this up is that, often enough, when we are stuck in our minds, we think of revelation as the equivalent of God imparting information about Mexico City's population. We don't notice that there is a process of discovery involved. However, the anthropological correlate to "revelation" is "discovery". What does it look like when there has been a revelation amongst humans? It looks like a process of discovery. What does it look like when a meteorite has hit the Earth? It looks like a concavity. From the concavity, you can deduce a good deal about the meteorite which hit. If there were no concavity, you would say it was not a real meteorite, just a paper one or a virtual one. It is the same thing with the old saw about teaching: where nothing has been learned, nothing has been taught. There has only really been teaching when there has been learning. The anthropological correlate to teaching is learning. The anthropological correlate to revelation is discovery.

I hope you now see why I wanted to bring this up. A good deal of what we will be looking at in these chapters concerns the shape of the concavity: different dimensions of the anthropological correlate of a revelation.

Not a Moral Story, but a Story Told by "Bad" People

My final, very quick point—a quick jab in the arm which usually gets me into trouble: you are embarking on a course of induction into the Christian faith; twelve chapters of theology. And usually, when people hear words like "Christian faith", "theology" and the like, a pernicious

moralistic veil hangs about those words, such that you imagine you are signing up to a group of good people meeting together to talk about being good.

I really, really want to disabuse you of this. The presupposition behind this course is that we are not good people, that we do not know how to speak well—and that it doesn’t really matter, since it is someone else’s business to make us good, and their business over time. The gospel story—the concavity in our humanity pointed up by the Apostolic witnesses—is a story told by people who are not good, about something which happened in their midst and which shook up their previous sense of goodness. It gave them a longing for a quite other sort of goodness, one which they then found themselves becoming, not through their own efforts but at the hands of someone else—and all this to the very great scandal of those who were experts in goodness.

This, I think, is vital for us to remember: this course presupposes that we who are gathering together, or reading or listening—and I, who am attempting to pass it on—are, however well we may veil it, liars, fantasists, thieves, self-publicists, manipulators, addicts to phony reputations and to emotional blackmail, deeply self-deceived, muddled, and sometimes quite vicious. The presupposition of this course is that it is *people of this sort*—the self-deceived ones wedded to our self-deception and our deception of others—who are being spoken to. We are on the receiving end of an act of communication from someone who knows *all that* about us, is not taken in by us, is not concerned by how little good we are—and yet, even so, wants to take us to another place.

For many of us, this is a difficult thing to sink into since, in addition to grasping onto a sound “theory” and then practising “morals”, our self-identity as “good” is one of our most sacred idols. It is one of the things that makes us most dangerous to others and to ourselves. This is why it is so difficult for us to be forgiven. Only those people who are not good in their own eyes can allow themselves to be forgiven.

One of the things I hope will happen as you undergo this course is that you will be able to relax into the realisation that being good or bad is not what it’s about—it’s about being loved.

CHAPTER 2:

Emmaus and Eucharist

In the previous chapter, we primarily examined anthropological matters: how we function as human beings, the roles of habit, narrative, memory, language, and desire in our lives. Above all, we saw the ways in which we are other-dependent for all of the above. This was to prepare us to make better sense of the theological matters we're going to be looking at. By sitting with some of the things we saw in the last chapter, we will be in a much better position to appreciate the texts of Scripture at which we will be looking going forward. Here however we are looking into a very particular text from Scripture: Luke 24, 13-35, the "Road to Emmaus".

Before we actually look at the text, I'd like to stress its centrality to the whole project of our course. This passage is going to be something like the axis around which we will be spinning. We'll return to it later, in light of what we learn, allowing it to set the criteria for what we are being inducted into.

Most of us have heard these verses read before. We are used to hearing them as a sort of miracle story. I want to suggest that we have here something far richer, more sophisticated, more exciting—and indeed more miraculous—than a mere miracle story. Luke is a remarkably sophisticated narrative writer, and here he has taken something that happened (an appearance of the Risen Lord to at least two individuals very shortly after the Resurrection) and set it out in such a way that he is not only telling a story. Instead, he's giving us a considerably detailed and sophisticated answer to the question of its interpretation—what we would nowadays call a *hermeneutical* question. He is setting out the framework by which Christians answer the question "Through whose eyes do you read these texts that we call the Scriptures?"

Yeshua Rabbénu

One of the factors which blinks us in our reading of the Scriptures is our modern presupposition that the authors of these ancient texts, and thus the texts themselves, are somehow primitive; that we are much more sophisticated than they were. Because of this, we read the texts of Scripture as if they were incompetent history, bad geology, or fictitious palaeontology, and fail to see what is really going on in them. Ancient authors (such as those alive at the time of Christ) were well aware of something we moderns have come to pride ourselves on knowing: that texts can be made to mean more or less whatever it is you want them to mean. Therefore, for ancient readers, even more than the question “What does the text say?” the question was: “How do you read it?” Or “What is your interpretation of it?” And that meant “Who is your Rabbi? Through *whose eyes* do you read this text?”

Let us remember something about the texts of Scripture at the time of Christ: the scrolls were in Hebrew, which, even by that time, was not precisely a “dead” language, but a language reserved for a small educated class. The spoken language in that part of the world was Aramaic—the ordinary day-to-day language of the former Babylonian empire.

Hebrew was the language of a caste, much like Church Latin was the language used by the educated in Mediaeval Europe. Furthermore, Hebrew was a language whose written signs contained only consonants, no vowels. The dots and squiggles you will find in modern Hebrew Bibles, which indicate the vowels to be supplied, were fixed considerably after the Biblical period. Any First-Century person picking up a text to read aloud was going to have to provide the appropriate vowels in order to breathe life and meaning into the text.

Think of what it would mean for the English language to have no vowels. You are asked to stand up and read a text that includes, as a single word, the letters “l” and “v,” but no vowels. You might supply them so as to say “love,” but you could also supply the vowels which give “alive,” “olive,” “lava,” “levee,” and I’m sure that Scrabble experts could go on. In fact, you would probably draw on a mixture of what you had heard before, when you’d listened to this passage read by one of your teach-

ers, and what common sense dictated was the most likely and logical reading.

Please notice, however, that the *more skilled* you became at reading in this way, the more interesting and *varied* might be the vowels you supplied, and the meanings you therefore produced. In short, the exercise is closer to playing music than to what we regard as reading a text. Musicians create a unique performance each time they play together, breathing life, energy and style into the silent notes which adorn their scores.

So reading a text in this way implied taking a great deal of responsibility for the meaning that emerged from it. And reading a text considered to be given by God implied an even greater responsibility for—and indeed, a greater sense of awe at—the multiplicity of meanings which might issue forth from the different combinations of consonants on the page in front of you.

All of this meant there were people at the time who were very familiar with what we now call “hermeneutics”—the formal discussion of how you interpret things. And they were well aware that it was not “what the text says”, but “through whose eyes you read the text” that was going to give you your interpretation. And to the question “Through whose eyes do you read the text?”, two quite different answers emerged from the remnants of the Jewish world after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. The answer given by the rabbis who regrouped after the Judaean war was to double down on the claim that the books of the Law—*Torah*—were written by Moses. Far more than a fundamentalist claim about historical authorship, this meant “We read these texts through the eyes of Moshe Rabénu (Moses our Rabbi)”.

Of course, the texts of Torah themselves are peppered with reading instructions—the equivalents of words in an orchestral score saying *rallentando* or *allegro, ma non troppo*, giving you advice as to how to play the notes below. For instance, in the book of Numbers, Chapter 12, there is a row concerning who gets to speak for God—in other words, a row about interpretation. Aaron and Miriam respectively say: “Why shouldn’t we get to speak for God as well as Moses?” Good point; after all, Aaron is both High Priest and Moses’ elder brother. Miriam is pretty important as well; it was she who rescued Moses when he was a baby.

But God makes it clear that only Moses is authorised to speak for God. Moses is presented as meek: “more so than anyone on the face of the Earth”, whereas the other two are presented as jealous. So, meek Moses is the one through whose mouth God speaks—and through whose eyes, therefore, it is proper to read God’s word. This is emphasised when God punishes Aaron and Miriam, in her case with a week’s worth of leprosy and the exclusion from the camp which that implied.

So, how should a good rabbinical reader read Torah? Well, through the eyes of meek Moses, entirely without the jealous self-importance of his brother or sister. The other main answer to the question “Through whose eyes do you read the texts of Scripture?” is the answer given not by Rabbinical Judaism, but by its slightly older contemporary, Universalising (or New Testament) Judaism, which we now call Christianity. That answer, worked out in the years between Jesus’ death and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD was “We read the Scriptures through the eyes of Jesus our Rabbi”. Those who gave this answer were well aware that they were answering a quite specific and complex question of interpretation. They claimed that Jesus was a dead and living Rabbi. In other words, a *living interpretative principle* opened their eyes to read their texts.

Just to show that this principle is not something unique to Luke, whose text we will be reading, there are some striking examples of it in Matthew’s Gospel. For instance, in Matthew 23, Jesus gives a highly polemical discourse concerning teaching and interpretation. At its centre is the notion that his disciples have only one rabbi, only one Father and only one teacher, the Christ, in whose presence they are all on the same level. That is to say, it is through Jesus’ eyes that they are to read the texts of Scripture. This presence of the one Master acts as a way of teaching his disciples—us—how to relativise and not be overawed by all the fakery and contortions of religious leaders. It is a permanently *contemporary* presence—as indeed it needs to be, since the fakery and contortions of religious leadership did not suddenly come to an end when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed, nor are they limited to an ethnic group, ideological party or religious denomination.

For it to be even clearer that this is a deliberate instruction about how to read, then how about this passage from Matthew, which you have all heard before?

At that time Jesus said: “I thank you, Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11: 25-30)

This is some pretty technical material! Whereas Moses was described by God as “my servant”, here we have a Son. The Son is the proper interpreter of the Father, and also the one who freely drives that interpretation—the *active interpreting force*. The “yoke” was a standard way of referring to the Law of Moses, and where the book of Numbers had used the rare word “meek” to describe Moses, here Jesus describes himself with the same word. In other words, Matthew is giving a reading instruction: you want to know what “meek Moses” really looks like? This person, Jesus, is what “meek Moses” really looks like. The crucified and risen Rabbi is going to teach you to live God’s law in quite a different way. It is not a question of “Moses bad, Jesus good”, but rather “You know what Moses was about? Well, the servant was a stepping-stone on the way to the Son, who’s going to open things up for you and make you free. This is what meek Moses was really about”.

So that is Matthew’s answer to the question “Through whose eyes do you read the texts of Scripture?” Now, let’s finally turn to Luke’s answer to the same question. He’s going to point out for us the normal experience of having Scripture read to you through the eyes of his Rabbi, *our Rabbi*, who is going to be interpreting things for us. He does so through a narrative—something which is often treated as just a slightly

weird miracle story, but which I hope you will see is something even more wonderful than that.

Reading Luke 24:13-35

Our narrative begins on the day of the Resurrection.¹ Two of Jesus' followers are going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. If you've been to the Holy Land, you know there are at least four candidates for a place called Emmaus! In fact, no one has any idea which, if any, of these candidates is the real deal. Regardless, an Emmaus is referred to in the book of the Maccabees (though with a different spelling). It is at least possible that Luke was deliberately using a vague name—somewhere that was not Jerusalem but was reasonably close to Jerusalem (see the comments on pp.1560-63 of J. Fitzmyer's commentary on Luke's Gospel in the Anchor Bible series).

Luke was no fool and was quite capable of an accurate geographical description. See, for instance, his descriptions of Malta and Italy in the Acts of the Apostles. But he was also capable of what I might call "theological geography"—such as when he posits a precipice in Nazareth from which Jesus avoided being thrown (Luke 4:29-30). There, he shows how Jesus' rejection in his hometown at the beginning of his ministry foreshadowed both the casting of the scapegoat into the wilderness, typically from a precipice, and Jesus' crucifixion at the end of his ministry.

The fundamental importance of "Emmaus" as a piece of "theological geography" is that, by being "not anywhere of any importance in itself"—unlike Jerusalem, which is a very definite place charged with enormous significance—, Emmaus can, in principle, be anywhere at all. After all, if it had been easy to tie down Emmaus to being a particular place of importance in itself, what do you think would have happened to it as a result of this story? A sanctuary, a shrine, a "Now you see him, now you don't" theme park of the sort we Catholics love. The mysterious encounter on the road and in the home of Cleopas and his colleague would have become the story of a particular miracle, tied to a specific place, rather than a paradigm of the sort of encounter that can,

1 See the appendix.

and does, happen “wherever”. We are talking here about the parameters of a transferable event. And as we will see, Luke is really very subtle in how he sets this up.

So, our two disciples are walking along, talking about everything that had happened. The English translation says: “While they were talking and discussing together (...)” The Greek word used here is “*homilein*”. Think of our word “homily”. In fact, the word merely means “to talk,” just as the Latin *sermo* just means “word,” so a “sermon” is a lot of words. Our two disciples are walking along and talking together: “*homilating*”.

While they are doing so: “Jesus himself drew near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognising him”. Now, here’s something significant. A third party draws up, someone they do not recognise, and says to them: “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other (*οὓς ἀντιβάλλετε πρὸς ἀλλήλους*) as you walk?” Lest you think this third party has lighted upon a quiet afternoon chat between two English vicars strolling gently along by a river bank, I’ve included the Greek word *antibállete*, from which we get our word “antiballistic”. It means “to toss back and forth in a somewhat violent manner”. Rather than a quiet discussion, what is going on here is a row—a considerably charged exchange of multiple viewpoints. (You know the old joke: “Two Jews, five opinions”). This is going to be very important, since these same two people who are unable to agree on anything at this point will, by the end of our narrative, be singing from the same hymn sheet, talking together with one voice. But for the moment, they can’t get their story straight—they’re tossing it back and forth, trying to make sense of it. “And they stood still, looking sad (*σκυθρωποι*)”.

The word that is translated as “looking sad” is the word *skuthropoi*, which means something like “with darkened mien” or “with downcast visage”. It’s not a common word in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures), but it does appear in one rather special place in the story of Joseph (Genesis 40:7-8). In that story, there is a moment where Joseph is in prison in Egypt, and among his fellow prisoners are Pharaoh’s butler and Pharaoh’s baker. These two have had dreams, and they can’t work out what the dreams mean. They don’t know how to interpret them. Joseph comes upon them and asks: “Why are your faces

downcast (*skuthropo*) today?” They tell him they have had dreams, but have no one to interpret them, and Joseph says: “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me.”

Do you see what Luke is doing? He’s putting a big red flashing light in his text: “Attention! Attention! Story about interpretation coming up!” In fact, Luke assumes that most of his hearers have access to—and memory of—the Septuagint, and he makes lots of references to it. He quite closely imitates its style in places, giving a more “artsy” feel to his writing than the style of Mark, Matthew, or John, where hints of original Semitic words (from Hebrew and Aramaic) frequently show through the rather more stilted Greek of the text. So when Luke drops a rare word from the Septuagint into his recounting of a New Testament story, we’re supposed to notice.

And indeed, what was happening in the Joseph story? Two people are discussing things that they are unable to interpret, and a third person arrives and offers the definitive interpretation from God. Exactly what is going to happen on the road to Emmaus! We are about to get an interpretation: “Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him”. Before we look at Cleopas’ answer, I’d like to ask: what was the other one, Cleopas’ companion, called? There have been lots of guesses over the years. My hunch is that, just as I suggested that the place “Emmaus” is deliberately “wherever”, so I think Luke is deliberately leaving the name blank. Thus, we, the listener, can insert the person who is known in our liturgical books as “N”—“we pray for N, our Pope, N our Bishop, and N and N your faithful departed”—where “N” stands for the Latin “Nomen” or “name to be supplied”. In other words, you are supposed to supply your name: it could be you, it could be me.

And look at how cleverly Luke is setting this up: we have two people, a named individual, Cleopas—one of the Apostolic “B-team” who was a genuine eyewitness to the Gospel events and to whom there are other references in the New Testament—and “N,” meaning one of us, who is not necessarily an eyewitness to the events. You or I, who, through a chain of named individuals, have a real historical link to people who were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ historical life. This sets the frame for the interpretative experience that these two are about to undergo as something that is indeed structured, but is not a question of authority.

This incident, the definitive account of Christian interpretation, happens entirely outside the gaze of the Apostolic “A-team”—Peter and the other ten apostles who are left after Judas hangs himself.

You see, some people might have thought that Christianity involved a series of miraculous occurrences to a group of folk in authority—the A-team—who are the ones who “really know”, and the interpretation is the one which they pass down, as it were, from “on high”. But no, says Luke! The definitive interpretative experience is something which happens to N, to *any-body*, in company with a historical link to the real historical events concerning Jesus. It is always the crucified and risen Rabbi who is the authority. Cleopas and N go back to Jerusalem at the end of the story, and they compare what the A-team is saying with what happened to them. That Luke gives us this text is the sign that the A-team confirmed their story, and that *confirmation* is the shape of the A-team’s authority.

Do you see how artfully Luke is setting out the narrative structure of what appears in Matthew as “You have one Rabbi and you are all brethren?” (Matthew 23:8). Luke takes very seriously the named historical link and the difference between the Apostolic A-team and the Apostolic B-team. He’s affirming a “Church structure” to the matter of interpretation, that it is not a chaotic free-for-all. He is, however, making it clear that the central interpretative experience is not a matter of Church authority; it happens to anyone, anywhere, at the hand of the crucified and risen Rabbi.

Curiously, some Nineteenth Century German Protestant theologians noticed this about St Luke and accused him of what they regarded as a grave heresy, which they called *Fruhkatholizismus*, or “Early Catholicism”. They wanted to interpret ecclesiastical order as a later invention, foisted upon a pure Gospel. Still, they noticed that Luke didn’t help them make their point, since he was quite keen on showing how structures work and are intrinsic to spreading the Gospel. For Luke, the historical link is important. But our experience of Jesus does not depend on—and is not received from—the glowering eye of ecclesiastical authority. If we are undergoing the real thing, we’ll know it; it will become evident through us as we share it with others in the Church, and ecclesiastical authority will confirm it later.

At last, we can allow Cleopas to answer the question the unrecognisable Jesus has put to him. He says: “Are you the only visitor (παρόποιος καὶ οὗτος) to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” Now that little word *paroikeis*, translated here as “visitor,” is important. It sounds like our English word “parochial” or “parish”. But whereas our word “parochial” is a way for us to say “very domestic”, the word *paroikos* actually meant something not quite domestic. Rather than a “visitor”, it meant a “resident alien”, someone who is *living* here, but not *from* here—who doesn’t entirely belong. The sort of person who in the US would be the bearer of a Green Card but would not be a citizen, and whose patriotism and reliability as a neighbour would thus be held in suspicion by those who keep watch on such things.

This term “resident alien”, which our older translations render by the splendid word “sojourner”, is a very important word in the Bible. Almost everyone who matters in the Books of Moses is a sojourner. Abraham was a sojourner, Isaac was a sojourner, Jacob was a sojourner, Joseph was a sojourner, the people of Israel were sojourners in Egypt. People with “no abiding city” as the Epistle to the Hebrews tells it. People who are always on the road to somewhere else, and never fully domesticated. The experience of being someone “who lives here, but is not from here” is crucial to the whole Hebrew story.

So, what has Cleopas noticed when he says to the unrecognizable third party: “Are you the only resident alien in Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened there in these days”? He’s heard an accent! A tone of voice. Something about the third party who was speaking has given away that he’s “not from here”, is “not one of us”. And people who are not one of us are the sort of people who wouldn’t get it. If you’re a recently arrived resident alien in the US, you are unlikely to “get” late-night comedians’ jokes immediately. A recent immigrant to Great Britain will need someone to explain to them what “Private Eye” is all about, because it relies on a series of “in” jokes in order to let you know what is going on.

Think about what this means for the relationship between the unrecognisable third party, and Cleopas and N—that is to say, yourself. Your first reaction is going to be to discount this half-outsider’s point

of view: “We’re having this discussion”, you might say: “and we, who are insiders, don’t really get it, so how much less is an outsider like you likely to get it!” Now the unrecognisable third party comes back to them about “the things that have happened” and asks: “What things?” Is this Jesus being cutesy? Playing hard to get? As though this was a vaudeville scene, and Jesus is tipping the wink to the audience that he’s going to catch the disciples out being dumb and rub their noses in it?

Here’s another possibility: The third party from “somewhere else” is from such a different psychic and emotional place that listening to these guys jabbering on was like listening to foam burbling away on the surface of the sea. He is a big fish from such a deep part of the ocean that there is scarcely anything in common between his reality and theirs. His knowledge of what had happened—the whole parameters of his story, the place from which he lived it—were so totally different from anything that these guys were picking up on that he simply couldn’t make sense of what they were talking about.

While I think this latter interpretation is more plausible than the “Jesus playing cutesy” reading, what seems most important here is our third party’s awareness that these guys are never going to understand what was going on except through their own attempt to tell the story. If they just shut him off and say: “You wouldn’t get it”, they’ll never learn to piece the story together and sense the holes in their own version. So the definitive interpreter, with the voice from somewhere else, has first to *induct* the “insiders” into telling their own story rather than squabbling with each other. It is through their own failed telling that they are going to be given an interpretation that actually makes sense.

Luke then shows Cleopas and N setting out, very briefly, some five different angles on the Jesus story, none of which fit together in any way which makes sense. They are, we might say, fragments of a story without a hermeneutical key to bring them together. Our duo starts by referring to Jesus of Nazareth, a person within their very recent historical memory. They describe him as a prophet (already an act of interpretation), and one who was “mighty in word and deed before God and all the people”. In other words, someone who had made a public impact by what he had said and done and who was known all over the place. The chief priests and rulers—the local political and religious

establishment—obviously had their own interpretation of what Jesus was about. They delivered him up—that is, handed him over to the occupying forces of Roman law and order—and crucified him—a particularly nasty form of public execution by which the Romans shamed their victims.

So here we have things that don't fit together: this Jesus was a prophet, but the local political and religious authorities, who might be expected to have a vested interest in such a firm representative of their own way of seeing things as opposed to that of the Romans, had done him in. Something is wrong with this picture.

They go on to offer another strand of interpretation: they had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. In other words, they interpreted his words and actions within a series of archaic hopes for fulfilment. Jesus had been, as they understood it, in the business of bringing back certain things: the real Temple, the Kingdom of Israel with its institutions. The twelve tribes would be restored; that was, after all, why he had named twelve disciples as his apostles. The New Israel was being brought in: “redeemed”, vindicated. Nevertheless, in this, the disciples had been disappointed—it didn't seem to have happened.

Further strands of interpretation emerge across their following remarks: “All this is very recent, though now it is the third day since it has happened (which itself has curious scriptural resonances, about which we are not sure). Some women are saying they had been at the tomb early in the morning but could find no corpse there. They returned saying they had seen a vision of angels—though we must remember they are women, and so only second-class witnesses—and that the angels said Jesus was alive, which seems a pretty steep claim. So a few of our male companions, being more reliable witnesses, went off to the tomb and, although they didn't see the angels or Jesus, they confirmed what the women had said: there was no corpse in the tomb”.

We have here a mishmash of public persons, historical incidents, current events, physical impossibilities, and interpretations which don't make sense. There is no overarching narrative that can put all this together, hence their tossing the material back and forth at each other anti-ballistically.

And now, the third party again addresses them: “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” First, he upbraids them in classic Biblical style. Then he announces to them what he is going to do: he is going to propose a unitary interpretation of all the things they had been talking about, showing not only how they hung together, but how they *had* to hang together, *had always* hung together. An interpretation at once unifying and self-evident. In short, he is saying: “All the things you’ve described, and don’t know how to put together, all make perfect sense as part of a deliberate project or trajectory. They *have* to be this way”.

Now, please notice something curious here: this unrecognisable third party starts giving his interpretation by himself referring to a third person, the Christ, whom he refers to with the pronoun “he”. So for the moment, we have a “he” talking about another “he”. “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them (διερμήνευσεν αὐτοῖς) in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” The Greek word which I’ve put in brackets here is translated as “interpret”. From its sound—“*dihermēneusen*”—you can guess it is the word behind our modern word: “hermeneutics”, the grand word we have for “the science of interpretation”. So this third party interpreted—or “hermeneuted”—for Cleopas and his companion. In other words (and this is what this passage is all about), he became their *living hermeneutical principle*.

Now, sometimes one hears preachers or commentators raging against Cleopas and his companion at this stage. “Here was the Lord giving the definitive interpretation of the whole of Hebrew Scripture!” They’ll ask: “Why didn’t they get out their Palm pilots, or their iTablets, or their iPapyri, and either record Him or at least jot down His interpretation! Just think of the trees we’d have saved if we weren’t condemned to endless tomes of commentary, all rendered redundant if only these jokers had written down Our Lord’s very own commentary!”

Those preachers are entirely missing the point. If Cleopas and his companion had done just that, we would have been left with... yet more text to interpret, for there is no end to interpreting texts. What Luke wants to show us is the shape of the living interpretative presence among us, in light of which all texts become secondary.

Our unrecognisable third party continues through the entire corpus of the Scriptures, starting with Moses and all the prophets. Please notice that this is not necessarily a chronological description; it's a global description. We are not even certain which books would have been included in the phrase “all the Scriptures”. While the list of books of the Law and the Prophets had become stable by this time, the other section (known as the “writings”) was in flux. The canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was not yet fixed. So our third party may well have referenced books which “didn’t make it” into the final cut and haven’t reached us. What is important is that this “global package” was not only an amalgam of what we would consider “religious” books and history; they were the entire political and cultural history of the Hebrews as well, the whole story within which Cleopas and N had grown up and which had given them to be who they were. The stranger was telling them the very tale of themselves from an entirely new angle that they had never heard before.

Imagine someone telling a couple of Americans the story of their country from, say, the perspective of some native inhabitants of the land at the time the Pilgrims arrived. The real story behind the feast of Thanksgiving, what it looked like to have their food supply destroyed by these white folk who turned up, what was really going on with the declaration of Independence, the economics of African slavery, the Civil War, the decimation of the Native Americans, the Great Depression, and so on. We can all imagine this history told from different perspectives—and the various reactions to those perspectives.

But here, the story being told is not designed to make Cleopas and N feel bad about being who they are. It is an integral story, not just a collection of disjointed bits of accusatory minority perspective. It's a whole, and it makes sense to its listeners. Later on, they describe their experience of undergoing this act of interpretation by wondering: “Did not our hearts burn within us?” They knew that they were being told the truth, and hearing it was turning who they thought they were, and how they thought they belonged, upside down. They were being *re-narrated into being*.

Now remember, we still have here, in this third party, a “bloke talking about a bloke”. Even though Luke makes it quite clear that this

is Jesus talking about Himself, for the moment, Cleopas and N don't get that at all. The word "I" has not yet been said. It continues to be a third-person narrative, which is hugely shaking up the two first-person listeners (the real protagonists, in their own minds) as they hear it: "So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained Him, saying: "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent."

As I mentioned, the village could be anywhere—its real geography is unimportant. But now we get a nice little Lucan Yahwistic hint: the third party appears to be going further, but they constrain Him. I say this is a Yahwistic hint, since one of the things that YHWH often does in the Hebrew Scripture is pass by, being grasped at as he vanishes. YHWH does that to Moses, and Moses only gets to see God's "hind parts". (I love that translation!) The same thing is referred to in Mark, when Jesus walks by the fishermen on the water and they have to call out to Him to get back into the boat. So here we have Luke's hint: you're about to get a Yahwistic theophany, an appearance of God. YHWH is about to make an appearance.

Let's sum up, then: you have two people, Cleopas and N, who, as far as they were concerned, were the protagonists of their own discussion. A third person—who, being an outsider, can't really "get it"—has come up to them and asked what's going on. They tell Him as best they can, and He turns the whole thing around for them, telling them their own story such that they begin to find themselves "inside it" in quite a different way. He shows them that there's a project and a protagonism at work here, which is different from what they had imagined, and in the presence of which they are not the protagonists they thought they were.

Now they've "constrained" Him, invited Him in, still thinking of themselves as the host and of him as their guest. And guess what? Now, *even that* element of their protagonism is inverted: "When He was at table with them, He took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them". Suddenly, they are the guests, and he is the host.

And not only the host, but one who has performed certain signs which Cleopas (and quite possibly N) would have associated with Jesus: "And their eyes were opened (*ιτηνοίχθησαν*) and they recognized Him; and He vanished out of their sight (*αὐτὸς ἀφαντος ἐγένετο*).". This

sounds like three consecutive moments—one of amazement (“Wow!”), one of recognition (“Oh, look, it’s him!”), then finally, with a wave: “Yes, it’s me, bye!”

However, it’s all one flow in Greek: three dimensions of one movement. “Their eyes were opened”—this is something that someone does *to* them; the verb is passive, as earlier when Luke wrote that “their eyes were kept from recognising him.” They recognise him, and then—well, our word “vanished” is too active. It suggests a movement away from them. What it literally says is: “He unappearing became.” This is not even something like “Now you see me, now you don’t”. This is a Yahwistic theophany, where there is a buildup to something, and then, only in immediate retrospect—“as it passes by”—do you realise what you have experienced, because YHWH can’t be grasped.

This Yahwhistic theophany is not only visual; it also works at the aural, or interpretative level. Cleopas and N are beginning to realise that, all along, it hadn’t been a “he” who was talking to them, but I AM. I AM is who YHWH is. In other words, they hadn’t been hearing an outsider explain a narrative thread to them from the outside; they had found themselves summoned into the narrative that the *actual* protagonist of the events had been recounting, and the recounting was part of the event.

I AM had been interpreting I AM’s self to them all along. They thought themselves the protagonists of the story, when in fact they had been its receivers. They had been being turned into different sorts of “I”. And as they find themselves given a new “I” by “I AM,” they discover that I AM is no longer a third party outside them, but the very source, *within them*, of who they are and what they are becoming: “They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?’”

No wonder their hearts burned within them! They found themselves at last being given an account of what happened that includes them in it—in fact, writes them into being in an entirely new way, with a truth that does not come from them and about which they need not be in rivalry. Where earlier they had been “antiballeting” about, now they are speaking together with one voice, as recipients of an interpretative theophany:

And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said: “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!”

Despite the evening hour, they get up and hurry back to Jerusalem. There, they find the A team, the eleven, along with a group of Cleopas’ mates on the B team. It is these who tell them: “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon.” This, we know from other passages of the New Testament, was the first *Kerygma*—the formal, authoritative announcement of the Gospel: “The Lord has risen and he has appeared to Cephas”. This, the A team announces.

Then, the B team shares: “Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.” In other words, what they have experienced is entirely separate from, but is confirmed by, the A team’s experience. Luke has given us the framework for the ordinary experience of what it is to be a Christian: to have your text, your story—and thus your very self—interrupted by and reinterpreted for you by the crucified and risen Lord.

Dead Man Talking

Earlier, I pointed out that one of the first things Cleopas gleaned about the third party was his tone of voice, by which Cleopas concluded that he was “not one of us” and therefore wouldn’t “get” it.

Of course, what this means for any of us is that our own hearing is not properly matched to the voice of the Lord. Insofar as he speaks to us, he is going to interrupt our self-importance and our sense that we are the ones who “get” it.

Now I’d like to bring out something even odder about the tone of voice of the unrecognisable third party. Cleopas and his mate, N, have been walking along, listening to the voice of a *dead man*.

Think about that! It doesn’t sound so odd, because, well, we’ve heard the story: we know that Jesus was killed on Good Friday, but also

that he rose on Easter morning, so he was no longer a dead man. But that's wrong.

Think about it this way. Let us suppose Jesus had been 33 on Good Friday, and that his 34th birthday would have been on Holy Saturday. However, He's killed on Good Friday, and doesn't make it to his 34th Birthday.

How old is He then on Easter Day? Well, He's not 33, because He's dead. And He's not 34, because He didn't get there. He really did die on Good Friday. It was not that he suffered from a bad dose of the flu, but he then picked up again on Sunday. His life on this Earth ended on a specific date, as the life of each one of us surely will. The Risen Lord is not the Lord recovered from a nasty bout of "death". The Risen Lord is this dead man, who lived his 33 years and was killed; his whole life-and-death is now held in *life* such that death doesn't close him down.

This is a challenging thing for us to grasp, because ordinarily being alive and being dead are two equal and opposite realities: you can only be one of them at any given time. We can imagine being talked to by someone who had a bad couple of days and then got better, or even someone who had been imprisoned for several years and was then released. We can't easily understand the sort of "being alive" that is able to assume within it, take inside itself: "a being dead" without being in rivalry with death. Nevertheless, that is what Luke is showing us in his theophanic account: Cleopas and N were not being talked to by someone who had "gotten better"; they were being talked to by a dead man.

I hope you can see that this is ludicrous. None of us has ever heard a dead man speak. Indeed, what is the point of having dead men if they can talk? Why would witnesses be "disappeared" by Mafia types if it didn't shut them up definitively? The whole point of making dead men dead is that dead men tell no tales. And yet what we have here is a dead man telling a tale. This is very bizarre. The nearest parallel we have is ghosts, the most traditional form of dead men telling stories, and yet the tales they tell are somewhat tedious. Ghosts appear, rattle chains, go "Woooooo!", and frighten people. When they stop the whole rattling and wailing bit, they say things like "The bastards got to me! Until you take vengeance on them, I won't be able to rest. So give me closure, kill the bastards!"

Such ghost stories are, classically, tales of revenge. Hamlet's father's ghost is the paradigm. The ghosts come back seeking retribution, and their story is completely comprehensible on the same level as the story of the survivors with whom they are in rivalry. Indeed, that is why we think of ghosts as essentially projections, dimensions of dreams, fantasies, bad memories or psychological quirks. It's why Herod, having killed John the Baptist unjustly, thinks Jesus is the ghost of John the Baptist come back to haunt him.

However, here (as elsewhere in the Gospels) the presence of the crucified and risen dead-man-talking is carefully distinguished from that of a ghost. In the first instance, there is no request for vengeance. Indeed, the presence does not provide the tail end of a story that all involved already know about. On the contrary, the one who is speaking is opening up a whole new story as its protagonist, as someone who was doing something deliberately all along, who was purposefully opening new things up for lots of people, not someone reacting to nasty things which other people did to him. In fact, he is *seriously unbothered* by what the other people did to him. The whole of his interpretation is entirely removed from any type of tit-for-tat.

Not only, then, is it a dead man talking, but a dead man talking without any rancour. It is someone who has been seriously victimised, as Cleopas and N know very well—someone put to death cruelly by a violent conspiracy between religious and political forces. Usually, when victims interpret things, it's to complain about how badly they've been treated. However, this is a victim telling the story, but it's not a victimary story at all. When the unrecognised third party says: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory", there is no hint of a victimary bleat. Quite the contrary: the dead man, as the story's protagonist manifests everything up to and including his own death as a deliberate project into which he purposefully entered. So he is not complaining. Yes, it is a victim speaking—but without rancour. A dead man talking—but without desire for revenge.

These are the final two elements I want to bring out of our speaker's tone of voice. They are further elements of what it feels like to have our texts interpreted to us through the eyes of our dead-and-risen Rabbi. They enable us to share the disciples' sense, quoted elsewhere

in the Gospels, that “It is the Lord!”—meaning not only that it is Jesus who is speaking, but that Jesus is in fact YHWH. For there is only one source of protagonism that is not on the same level as death, whose life and aliveness has nothing to do with death—and that is God. So a dead man communicating while being dead and yet not being bound by death is an act of communication that only YHWH could conceivably make. There is only one source of protagonism that is not in rivalry with anything that is, and therefore cannot tell a victimary story, only a deliberate story of bringing into being out of nothing. And that, again, is the Creator: YHWH.

So what we have here in Luke’s text is the ordinary shape of YHWH’s protagonism becoming a human act of communication and a living interpretative principle. This is Luke’s answer to the question: “Through whose eyes do you read the Scriptures?”

The Structure of Eucharist

I’d be remiss if I let you off of this chapter thinking: “What a nice intellectual exercise Luke set up for his listeners!” This is not a matter of clever people sitting around and having a discussion about texts. Luke structures his narrative so that it’s not merely a walk, a discussion, and an act of interpretation. It is also an inverted act of hospitality. There is a shared meal in which the guest becomes the host, and the protagonist gives himself to be known by a striking mode of presence associated with the breaking of bread. What you have, in short, is the structure of Eucharist, what we in Catholic circles usually call “the Mass” and what Protestants often refer to simply as “The Lord’s Supper”.

All the elements are there: the walking together, the texts, the *homilating*, the interpretation, the breaking of bread, and the recognition of I AM who has deliberately given himself in sacrifice for you—what we call the Real Presence. This is done not only as an act of interpretation, but as a meal. It means that part of the structure of Eucharist is the memory of a third person “out there”, coming in to disturb you. If you are two people talking together amongst yourselves, it’s easy to avoid a third person interrupting you. But what we call the Mass

is always a third person interrupting us through a particular mode of interpretative presence.

So Luke doesn't only give a technical answer to the question "Through whose eyes do we read Scripture?" He gives a liturgical answer: "We read the Scriptures eucharistically, through the eyes of Jesus our Rabbi". In other words, we read through the eyes of one who is present amongst us and who causes us to undergo a complete change of belonging to our world. We find him interrupting us, speaking to us from the periphery, from just offscreen of what we can understand, including us in a story which is *his* story, in which he is the protagonist. What we gradually find is that his story also makes much better sense of our own story. We find ourselves taken somewhere else, drawn into a bigger framework. And this requires something outside us.

This is not just text. It's text and a meal with a third person. Do you see what Luke has done here? How something appearing to be a miracle story is, in fact, a very sophisticated piece of narrative, setting forth what it is like to have the reader of our texts in our midst? This is the basic Christian experience. To this mode of presence, this dynamic of communication, we will be returning many times.

CHAPTER 3:

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?

(Part 1)

In our last chapter, we looked at how Luke answers the question “Through whose eyes do we read the Scriptures?” He narrates Jesus’s interaction with the disciples on the road to Emmaus and turns it into a living interpretative principle. We were shown a dead-and-living victim giving an entirely non-resentful account of what had really been going on all along since Creation itself. That said, let’s jump straight in and look at one of the pieces of Scripture Jesus might have been interpreting. Let’s get some sense of how this living interpretative principle can work, and what we can learn by allowing ourselves to read Scripture in this way.

The text we’re going to look at is Joshua 7. We will read it twice: once exactly as it appears in a standard translation, and once as if it were in a modern newspaper. You will see that there is no real difference between the accounts.

Just a bit of background before we start: Joshua, who is Moses’ appointed successor, is leading the people of Israel in an invasion of Canaan, the “promised land”. He and his soldiers have just taken the city of Jericho. (You may remember the story: they march around the walls seven times, blowing trumpets; the walls fall, and the city is taken).

Before the siege of Jericho, God had told Joshua that everything his troops came across was to be put under a “ban” —meaning it was declared “devoted” to YHWH and was thus to be burned or destroyed. This means there was to be no looting. That might seem a rather implausible instruction for a bunch of military men nowadays, but for those involved in a “holy war”, anything that might fracture their solidarity

and lead to soldiers squabbling among themselves over spoils really did need to be avoided.

So Jericho has just fallen, and our heroes are about to move on to the next step of their manifest destiny, occupying the land of milk and honey and driving out the inhabitants. And then we have this strange parenthesis:

But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things; for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things; and the anger of the LORD burned against the people of Israel.

Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Bethaven, east of Bethel, and said to them: “Go up and spy out the land.” And the men went up and spied out Ai.

And they returned to Joshua, and said to him: “Let not all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai; do not make the whole people toil up there, for they are but few.” So about three thousand went up there from the people; and they fled before the men of Ai, and the men of Ai killed about thirty-six men of them, and chased them before the gate as far as Shebarim, and slew them at the descent. And the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.

Then Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust upon their heads. And Joshua said: “Alas, O Lord GOD, why hast thou brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and will surround us, and cut off our name from the earth; and what wilt thou do for thy great name?”

The LORD said to Joshua: “Arise, why have you thus fallen upon your face? Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant which I commanded them; they have taken some of the de-

voted things; they have stolen, and lied, and put them among their own stuff. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies; they turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become a thing for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you.

“Up, sanctify the people, and say, ‘Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, God of Israel: «There are devoted things in the midst of you, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies, until you take away the devoted things from among you.»

“In the morning therefore you shall be brought near by your tribes; and the tribe which the LORD takes shall come near by families; and the family which the LORD takes shall come near by households; and the household which the LORD takes shall come near man by man. And he who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has done a shameful thing in Israel.”

So Joshua rose early in the morning, and brought Israel near tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was taken; and he brought near the families of Judah, and the family of the Zerahites was taken; and he brought near the family of the Zerahites man by man, and Zabdi was taken; and he brought near his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

Then Joshua said to Achan: “My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and render praise to him; and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

And Achan answered Joshua: “Of a truth I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them, and took them; and behold, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was hidden in his tent with the silver underneath. And they

took them out of the tent and brought them to Joshua and all the people of Israel; and they laid them down before the LORD.

And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the mantle and the bar of gold, and his sons and daughters, and his oxen and asses and sheep, and his tent, and all that he had; and they brought them up to the Valley of Achor [which means trouble]. And Joshua said: “Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today.”

And all Israel stoned him with stones; they burned them with fire, and stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day; then the LORD turned from his burning anger. Therefore to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor.

Now, if we were in a liturgical setting, and I had just finished reading this out loud to you, we would add a congregational response—something like the reader pronouncing: “This is the word of the Lord” and the assembly replying: “Thanks be to God.” And my guess is that many of you would feel somewhat queasy, as though there’s something not quite right about saying “Thanks be to God” after this delightful little incident. I am going to ask you to hold on to your queasiness. It is, in itself, an important guide to the task of interpretation.

Now I’m going to re-tell the story, with very slight alterations. You’ll see that it’s exactly the same story, but we can imagine substituting a variety of different proper names. Let’s start by imagining any country you can think of where a general is conducting a military operation. He’s got manifest destiny on his side, and his troops are thoroughly fired up about being on the indisputably winning side in their conquest. They’ve just had a major victory and are looking forward to the next cakewalk, a small town in their path. The general, sensibly enough, sends out scouts to reconnoitre. The scouts do their thing and come back with a report which says there’ll be no problem: “Give the troops a break, send in a platoon or two, nothing too heavy. They’ll probably receive our guys as liberators, anyway, with carnations in their rifles”. So the general follows the expert advice and sends in a modest contingent.

Except the scouts were wrong. The opposition had more troops than they thought. What's more, they misread the morale of the locals, and so had given potentially fatal advice to their own side.

The result is a skirmish of sorts. The local forces emerge, performing somewhat better than anticipated, and the insufficient troops sent by the general are put to flight. A few of them are killed—not a huge number, but that is secondary. When manifest destiny is on your side, you are not supposed to lose in skirmishes. To do so is awfully bad for morale, since the whole point of manifest destiny is that you're supposed to win. If the news gets out about your losing in a skirmish, the people in the lands you were going to conquer, and who were going to give up without much of a struggle because your irresistible superiority had overawed them, might suddenly think it worth resisting.

Having lost this skirmish, the aura of manifest destiny is in trouble, and the general is left with a real problem on his hands: seriously demoralised troops. He has two options: the first is what I call the “Jimmy Carter option”. In 1979, Jimmy Carter sent troops to rescue American hostages being held in Tehran. The expedition was poorly organised and the mission failed. Carter, being a decent, honourable man, came on television and said words to the effect of “The buck stops here. I'm the Commander in Chief. Even though the intelligence was not conducted by me personally, this is clearly something for which I am responsible, and I'm going to try to put it right”. He immediately lost the 1980 US presidential election to a sort of adolescent cut-out hero, because people don't really want generals who take responsibility for their actions.

So our General could take the Jimmy Carter option, or he could take the more normal option, which is to say: “If I am to save face, I need to find someone to take the fall. So I will proclaim: ‘Someone is at fault! Our army has been undermined by wicked people. We are going to do a thorough witch hunt to find out who is responsible’”. The General then needs to organise said witch hunt—which is precisely what Joshua does.

In the ancient world, the most effective way of organising a witch hunt was through a lottery. You need to make quite sure that the whole thing seems impersonal. If you're in a tribal setting, with lots of tribes gathered together, any move that doesn't seem to come from an im-

personal source will be taken as intertribal rivalry. A modern General might organise a purge or a show trial, or unleash the media on a hunt for “the Reds under the beds”, thus weeding out the dangerous whoever-it-is that is undermining group morale. In the ancient world, however, you get a god to organise a lottery.

Lottery organisation is, in fact, the only function of the word “God” in our passage. It is the only thing God does. God says to Joshua: “Yes, there is a mole, and I’m going to set up the means for you to find him”.

Since the general is not going to take responsibility, he has to find someone else to take the blame. Simultaneously, he has to restore group morale. The lottery process achieves both results admirably. Imagine a bag with twelve pebbles, of which one is white and the other eleven are black. The leader of each tribe comes by and blind-picks a pebble from the bag. This is actually an excellent system for restoring morale, because for each black pebble that emerges, relief starts to break out. It is quite crucial that the lottery be conducted slowly and with decorum, which is why it’s announced at the beginning that there’s going to be a lottery, so all present should “sanctify themselves”. This doesn’t mean “You should all daub yourselves with holy water”—it means “Prepare yourselves, for the end of this process is a legitimised human sacrifice”.

So as each pebble is pulled out, relief starts to build. Each group whose name is not called (the vast majority in each round of the lottery) experiences the feeling of being let off the hook for something terrible. And not only that: it is conceivable that, in contrast with the Glorious General’s claim that *someone* has disobeyed sacred orders by looting, *many* of those standing around had in fact helped themselves. Each black pebble that comes out is a guarantee that no one will go rooting around under its holder’s tents to see if they’ve been looting. So long as the white pebble doesn’t fall to your tribe, your tribe is given a pass on whatever looting you might have engaged in. That means your tribe also has a vested interest in making sure the verdict of the lottery is respected.

So as tribe by tribe passes by, eleven tribes are relieved. Only one is in trouble. The “guilty” group, in turn, becomes smaller and smaller, while everyone else feels increasingly relieved and more and more convinced of the system’s righteousness. In the end, there is only one

person who is not relieved (with, of course, his wife and children, who didn't count as real people).

You can see what has happened during this sacred time: a tremendous sense of relief has broken out, along with awe at the way everyone is coming together, and morale is being restored. Indeed, morale is being restored by the relief everyone else feels that somebody else is going to be "got"—not them.

Now, these lotteries are somewhat fragile, fallible processes. It's rather essential that the lot not accidentally fall on someone terribly significant. It needs to fall on somebody without too many people to stand up for them. The last thing a lottery system wants is the equivalent of a Florida recount, with a power broker like James Baker III being sent in to ensure his boy gets made president. That would destroy belief in the system's legitimacy. You have to make sure the finger points to someone who won't really be missed. And it is "amazing" how, in fact, these lotteries tend to have ways of avoiding potentially problematic targets.

In Joshua's case, the system has worked well. It has ground on, ever finer, and eventually the finger has pointed to someone no one has ever heard of, nor will he be heard of again: Achan, who, of course, knows exactly how this liturgy is going to end.

The general then says: "My son, give glory to the Lord, God of Israel"—which doesn't mean "Stand up and do a happy-clappy dance". Instead, it is the formal legal phrase for requiring someone to take an oath. As in any show trial, you want it to be clear to everyone that the accused is not only guilty, but that he recognises his guilt. He must be adjured to join in the unanimity of the group, even at his own expense. Someone who is under oath in a lottery or show trial is expected to give the official truth, fully confident that even if they don't, the record will be altered to show that they did. Famously, in Stalin's show trials of the 1930s, the accused were made to confess not to crimes that they had committed (since they had committed none) but to crimes which, had they been allowed to go on living, they would have committed. No further proof was needed than that their thinking contradicted that of Stalin, who represented the objective truth of history—a perfect totalitarian circle.

Unanimity is good, but unanimity minus one is even better, since the “one” is about to disappear, and the unanimity of the survivors will have been proven in a process and will have come to seem a foundational achievement. However, if it is at all possible, it’s good that the victim should agree to be sacrificed. This is why, in the ancient Greek world, a chorus was present to sing loudly during sacrificial rites. When a human was to be sacrificed, the crowd of wailers would wail especially loudly, just in case the victim forgot their appointed role. It might just be that, rather than going nobly, singing songs about how honoured they were to be offered to the gods, they were dragged kicking and screaming to the altar, protesting the injustice of their murder. Thus the screen of noise put up by the choir protected the necessary unanimity from any danger that an “unofficial” story might break through.

This is why the General puts under an oath the person pointed out by the apparently objective, impersonal finger of the lottery. Achan knows there’s no point in resisting. Whether he stole anything or not, commissars will be sent, and stuff will be found under his tent. He might as well tell them what they want to hear. It’s rather similar to districts where, if the police need to arrest someone for whatever reason, then a packet of cocaine will predictably be found in his or her pocket. Achan “fesses up”—or so the record shows—the loot is found, and the case is complete. Everyone has been brought together in agreement, the traitor has been dragged out into the open, and justice has been seen to have been done. There is just one final act of the rite before the whole process can deliver its intended result: The General takes Achan to a special place and pronounces a suitably grave sentence: “You brought trouble on us, so the Lord brings trouble on you.” This is the equivalent of nodding to the firing squad. The entire group, buoyed up by its own righteousness (and the relief of a lucky escape) joins in, and stones Achan to death.

It is crucial that everyone participates unanimously in this human sacrifice. Everyone needs to be implicated. There must be no one standing to one side saying: “This is wrong, I won’t be part of this”, because that would threaten the unanimity of the story and thus the unanimity of the group. The entire exercise would fail, since its purpose is to foster a united morale. That is one of the reasons why you must not only

get rid of the one on whom the lot has fallen; you must get rid of all his relatives as well. There must be no inconvenient brats or wives hanging around who might challenge the official version, saying: “They got my Dad, but I don’t really know why, because I saw three statues and four bars of gold under my Uncle Phineas’ tent, but they didn’t go for him”. Not only must you get rid of his family, but you must get rid of all his animals and property as well, since there must be nothing left over for people to squabble about.

The whole point of avoiding looting in the first place is not because of some principled objection to your soldiers being enriched by war. It is because looting leads to your soldiers squabbling among themselves, and this is what ultimately leads to a loss of morale among the troops, making them a less effective fighting force. So the last thing you want, once you’ve stoned your victim, is for the rest of the group to squabble about who gets his property. So everything has to go, everything is destroyed, nothing is left to fight about, and now we have the situation where everyone is implicated in the execution. Everyone is responsible, and so no one is responsible. The lottery organiser has delivered an effective, completely impersonal procedure for building morale.

It is then no surprise when, as soon as the victim is covered with stones, the text says: “The Lord turned from his burning anger.” Of course he did! If you remember, the Lord’s burning anger started at precisely the same time as the loss of morale, the moment that the people’s hearts “became like water”. In fact, the loss of morale and the burning anger were the same thing. It’s no wonder that it stops at the moment of the sacrifice, because morale has been restored: everyone is together, unanimously, at peace with each other, in agreement with each other that they got their bad guy. Now they can go on their way, fully keyed up for effective military action.

Do you see now how it is possible to tell exactly the same story twice, once as a biblical text, and once as a modern newspaper account, without any mystical bits? The only function the word “God” has in this passage is as an organiser of the lottery. In the structure of this passage, the word “God” guarantees the impersonality of the morale-building lottery and its concluding human sacrifice. The guarantor enables the general to organise the lottery. That’s it. Furthermore, this kind of sto-

ry—a story with this structure, with or without the word “God”—is entirely familiar to you from any century in any country that you know. It is something that any of us can understand without an advanced degree in theology, anthropology, philosophy, or history. It just requires a basic acquaintance with the daily news. Every single element of this story is perfectly comprehensible to us at a simple human level.

Summing up, we heard an account of God and Joshua, and then an account of the General and the Lottery. Both are exactly the same. Now here’s the question: why does that leave us slightly queasy? Earlier, I pointed out that, in a liturgical context, we would have responded to this text with “Thanks be to God” or a similar phrase. But it sticks in the craw to be giving praise to a person who set up a lottery and authorised a lynch mob.

I would like to suggest that we are *justified* in feeling uneasy about such a response. Our queasiness is not a sign that we are hopelessly secularised and incapable of taking religion seriously. Our queasiness suggests there is something about this story which prods us in the back of our mind. We could focus on that prodding by asking “Who in this story is the figure of Christ?”

There are several candidates. The obvious one might be Joshua, since after all, the names Jesus and Joshua were originally the same name. Then again, throughout the New Testament, we see Jesus referred to as “The Lord”, so the references to the Lord in this passage might prefigure Jesus. But we instinctively know that neither of these is quite right. The obvious figure of Christ in this passage is Achan: the one who was put to death. And this suggests that our unrest does not come from our being secular moderns who don’t know how to read ancient texts. On the contrary, we are moderns who have picked up on a particular reading of ancient texts, which we perform without even thinking about it: we’ve been taught to associate the word “Lord” with the one being sacrificed.

In the story as we have it, Achan is held to be guilty. The story is, after all, told by the survivors, whose survival was guaranteed by their unanimous participation in his execution. This is the account of a lynching, as told by the persecutors. We could easily imagine the General—call him Joshua or whoever—in the buildup to the lottery, saying

to any doubters “Do you not know that it is convenient that one man should die and the nation not perish?” (John 11:50). The voice we don’t hear in this story at all is Achan’s, other than as the persecutors report it. His voice, his version of events, perished with him, leaving no possible breach in the official story. We can imagine Achan, were he able to say anything at all, saying: “I don’t know why the lot fell on me, since many of us were doing the same thing”, or “I wish I could have got some loot, but others were faster and stronger”. We can imagine him saying different things, but all of them are a variant on “They hated me without cause”—words applied to Jesus at his Passion (Ps 69:4; Jn 15:25). Except here, we have no independent record of what he thought or felt or said—only the perspective of his lynchers.

In the previous chapter, when we looked at the Emmaus story, we saw the reverse of this. In the Joshua passage, the voice of the victimised one could not be heard. But in the Emmaus story, we found ourselves in the presence of one who is telling the account of a lynching from the perspective of the person who was lynched. This was a voice that had not been heard before, as indeed it is not heard in the Achan story. It is as though, at last, Achan’s version of events is beginning to pour out through the cracks between the stones which had covered him.

What I want to suggest is that, when it says of Jesus on the road to Emmaus: “...He opened up to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself,” what we are getting is the crucified victim telling the story from Achan’s point of view. The story of how a gang of people needed to find an enemy within, and set it up so that one was found, and that this was what happened to him. The dead man talking would be Achan giving Achan’s account of his lynching. And indeed, you can imagine many other similar stories where someone who is hated without cause can begin to tell their version of events.

What I wanted to bring out is that the two stories—the Achan story and the Emmaus story—are structurally identical, but told from opposite perspectives. There is the top-down version—the version told by the successful organisers of group togetherness, the persecutors’ account—and then there is the bottom-up version of the same story, told by the victim from under the stones, on the cross, or in the pit. All the elements of both accounts are the same: rivalry leading to a collapse

of morale and structure, leaders trying to find a way to recreate morale, managing to do so by getting everyone together against someone else, and when this finally works and the “someone else” is got rid of, unanimity—peace—is restored. The order is reborn, and everyone is telling the same story.

The trouble is, the moment the victim’s story can be heard, it reveals the other story as untrue. It is a lie. Its perpetrators need to believe it for it to work. They need to believe they’ve really gotten the bad guy. (After all, in their account, the bad guy even agrees with them!) The survivors needed to believe the lie because they thought it would bring them together—it won’t. In fact, they’ll soon be at each other’s throats about something else, and will soon need to go through this all over again and get someone else in the neck.

There are two entirely different perspectives on exactly the same story. One version of the story, which is a lie, is told from the perspective of the survivors, those who have benefited from the lynching. The other—the perspective which is never commonly heard, which starts to emerge into our world thanks to the crucified and risen Lord—is the perspective which tells the truth and reveals the official perspective to be a lie.

I hope you now see why I referred to the Emmaus story as not just a story but as a paradigm, or model, of interpretation. The New Testament operates by bringing to life the same old story, but told from underneath. This is what is meant by the fulfilment of Scripture (see Luke 4:21). I plunged in with the Joshua story because it is such a clear text. We read it, and as we read it, our first reaction was queasy. The root of the queasiness is that we know too much! Even as we were reading it, we found it giving itself away, being a little too transparently like things we know only too well, things which we are right not to associate with God.

It is because of texts like this that people say things like “Oh, the Bible is a really violent book. The Old Testament is full of really nasty stories in which terrible things happen to people in the name of God. Wouldn’t it be much better if we could just start with the New Testament and leave all those awful texts behind? Greek myths are so much

nicer, don't you know; the gods are playful, sip ambrosia, and have pec-cadillos. It's all much more fun than these nasty stories".

To which I say: Wrong! Mistake! In the Hebrew Scriptures, even passages like this are an enormous advance on the world of mythology. I will show this by describing two equal and opposite mistakes regarding the reading of Scripture. One, I'm going to label the Marcionite error, in honour of an early Christian interpreter called Marcion.

In a nutshell, Marcion, faced with texts like the one we've just seen from the Hebrew Scriptures, said something to the effect of "These are awful stories; it cannot be the same god as the God of Jesus that is at work in them. It's got to be another god altogether". So he proposed ditching the Hebrew Scriptures as something to do with another god. In fact, he found himself pruning much of the New Testament as well and ended up making a sort of compendium of the Gospels based on Luke, which he found to be nicer than the rest, forcing other elements to fit into it. Church authority, on the other hand, said: "No! The Scriptures are one, and we receive both Testaments as making sense of each other". So Marcion's view was rejected. Typically, in the modern world, it is Catholics who remain tempted by his mistake.

The reverse of this, which is the mistake Protestants are more inclined to make in the modern world, is a fundamentalist reading of Scripture. The fundamentalist position would be that, far from there being two different gods in the different Testaments, there is one God, and this God is the same at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. So, where the Old Testament says "God" or "The Lord", it means exactly the same as the God of Jesus Christ. Well, if you think this, then when you are faced with a text like our Joshua text, you are going to have to come up with a complicated account of how God did in fact organise the sacrifice of Achan, but only so as to show in advance how he planned to undo the whole sacrificial system later, through the sacrifice of his Son.

You can imagine the sort of rigorous mental gymnastics by which people seek to justify the word "God" in the Joshua text, where it manifestly refers to the organiser of a lottery. How do you disentangle the sort of God who does that from doing nasty things to his Son in the crucifixion? You can see why a particular reading of Jesus' death as being

demanded by his Father, with the Father punishing the Son for the sins of others, is so popular. It fits in precisely with the need to look at all the violence across Scriptures, and say “It’s the same God”.

What is difficult for both parties to understand is how the New Testament works as an interpretative key, opening up the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament allows us to see how, slowly and inexorably, the one true God—who was always making Godself known in and through the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures—was always coming into the world. And to the degree that God comes into the world, to the degree that God’s revelation of Godself as simultaneously God and Victim comes into clearer and clearer focus, what we humans do as victimisers gets clearer and more transparent, harder not to see as obvious before our very eyes. It is the growing clarity from the self-revealing victim coming into the world that leads our stories of lynching and victimisation to appear nastier and nastier, and so less and less successful at “covering things up” and “making things nice” for the survivors and perpetrators.

The Joshua text we’ve examined is a particularly good example of this, simply because it seems *so* nasty. It would be easy for us to say: “But this text is the exact opposite of the New Testament. Marcion could scarcely have asked for a better example of what he’s talking about!” And that, as I see it, is the mistake: if the living interpretative principle demonstrated at Emmaus is true, then you would also expect that, just as it becomes clear that the victim is telling the true story, so it also becomes clearer and clearer to us what is really going on in the texts which move towards lynching. Therefore, the texts will look nastier.

Now, back to the nice Greek gods sipping their ambrosia: we have, in fact, plenty of texts in mythic literature in which the gods organise things, gather people together, and produce expulsions or sacrifices while the people take no responsibility at all. In the story from Joshua, meanwhile, the word “God” is very easily switched on or off, and what remains absolutely clear whether it’s on or off is the human dimension of what’s going on. Everything is set out in anthropological terms, without responsibility being displaced onto God or the gods. You can tell exactly what’s going on; the text is teetering on the brink of giving itself away. So when we read it, our Gospel-inspired scepticism, itself

part of the gift of faith, takes us over the brink. If you believe that Jesus, the crucified victim, is God, you stop believing in “the gods”; you stop believing in weird forces revealing who is “really” to blame, and you get closer and closer to seeing things as they really (humanly) are.

What I’m bringing out here is an understanding of progressive revelation: as the truth emerges more and more richly in our midst, we cannot expect the textual effects of that emergence to get nicer and nicer. You would expect them to get clearer and more transparent—but also nastier and nastier. Finally, you see precisely the same story being told from exactly the inverse perspective, so that there are no longer even the remains of any mythical bits at work. It requires no great imagination to think either “The Old Testament is bad and the New Testament is good” or “All word values are the same in both Testaments”. It requires rather more subtlety to imagine a process by which, as the self-manifestation of the innocent victim becomes clearer, so our understanding of human inclinations becomes darker and darker—but also, more and more realistic.

Compare this with, say, the story of *Oedipus Rex*, as told by the Greek poet Sophocles. It is essentially the same story as the one we saw in Joshua. There is a plague, and social problems in Thebes, and a slightly deformed outsider—who has provoked jealousy by marrying a prominent heiress—is conveniently forced to confess to killing his father, the king, and marrying his mother, albeit unaware of what he was doing. (He almost certainly didn’t do any of this, and even if he had, that wouldn’t have caused a plague). He is then expelled, sent into exile so that the city can return to peace.

Now, on the surface, this story is much nicer than the Hebrew story. The townsfolk were not responsible for a violent expulsion; they were victims of a horrible plague and were confirmed in their horrible suspicions regarding their interloper, while the guilty one got his just reward! But the Greek version remains mired in self-delusion: the townsfolk forced an innocent man into exile for something he couldn’t control, but they’ve left no cracks in their story by which they—or we—might recognise their complicity.

The Hebrew version of the same dynamic, meanwhile, is radically more truthful. Even the editor of the text in the book of Joshua clearly

has doubts about this story; the little hints of scepticism are among the wonders of the Hebrew Scriptures. The editor starts by saying: “But the people of Israel broke faith regarding the devoted things”. It begins with a plural and then moves to a singular: “For Achan, son of Carmi (...)” and so on. And then you have the oddity of God’s behaviour: Although he might be expected to know everything, he appears to need a lottery to help find out “who done it”. And in fact, God tells Joshua that it is the people of Israel, in the plural, who have disobeyed him, before giving the instructions for the lottery that will find a singular victim. (As you can imagine, an ancient rabbinical storyteller telling this story in a liturgical context, using this text as his Expositor’s Notes—which is very probably how such texts were handled in the ancient world—would have a good deal of fun wondering aloud about these things with his audience).

Prophecy and Hermeneutic Key

The point of spending time with a relatively unknown scriptural passage is that I want you to be able to handle the Bible without being frightened. I want you to receive the texts of Scripture not as a scary trap that you must somehow accept if you are to be a “good person”, but as something much richer and more freeing: as the ancient texts through which the living God enables us to gradually learn who God really is—and who we really are. When read well, they equip us to avoid projecting our scary violence onto God, but instead realistically to accept responsibility for what we are inclined to do ourselves. If we dare allow ourselves to be freed from our violent forms of behaviour, we will find God encouraging us and enlivening us into new ways of being together. And this through the very same Scriptures that first taught us to recognize who we are.

To help this settle in, I’d like to remind you of some key points regarding the Bible. For one, there is no such thing as a “natural” way to read the Bible. There is not even a natural order in which to read the texts. The texts were not originally in one book. They were not compiled in the same order in which we typically present them in our

modern Bibles. There were texts known in ancient times, but which we no longer have. There were texts that significant groups of Hebrews in the ancient world didn't have, but which we do. And across time, there were editors collecting texts together, comparing them, using them, transmitting and transcribing them, attempting to make sense out of all that they had, working out which books should be included in the collection, and which shouldn't. On quite a literal level, there is no such thing as an "original text" of the Bible.

Our case in the twenty-first century is just the same as it has been for close to two and a half millennia: depending on how you hold these texts together, what order you read them in and in what circumstances you use them, the meanings that you give them and derive from them will change. In other words, there is no such thing as reading these texts without an interpretative key. You will always tell the story from where you start, more or less self-awarely, self-critically, and motivated by different feelings.

The reason I want to emphasise this is that people sometimes treat the New Testament, the Christian texts, as if they were an extra set of stories added on to a pre-existing set of stories. No! The Christian account is of deeds and words which together provide an interpretative key to the Hebrew Scriptures. You may, of course, choose not to accept them as an interpretative key to those texts. You might say: "There is no single story at work in the ancient Hebrew texts, only a multiplicity of different stories subject to individual interpretations"—which would be the equivalent of saying that God doesn't speak through them in a single act of communication. Or you might say: "The real interpretative principle in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Temple of Jerusalem, its initial building and destruction, its later rebuilding and destruction, and how the Hebrew people relate to all that as they imagine a future Holy Land and Temple". Nevertheless, there is no account of the Scriptures that is not already an interpretation.

I want to remind you of this, since from time to time people appeal to Scripture by saying "But it says this" or "It says that". However, Scripture doesn't "say" anything. There isn't an interpretation-free place from which we can stand outside and say: "Oh, what he's said is just a Christian (or a Jewish, or a secular) add-on, but in reality the texts

have an interpretation-free meaning of their own”. They don’t! We are dealing with incredibly flexible, malleable texts which can be read hundreds of different ways. What the text says will depend on how you, the interpreter, reconstruct it from where you are starting, and in the light of the order you tell it, in the context of the things you put alongside it. As any storyteller can tell you, you can take the same narrative building blocks and rearrange them in slightly different ways and come out with markedly different stories. That will be true of the texts of Scripture as well.

What we’ve just done—putting together the accounts of Achan and the Road to Emmaus—is thus not in principle an “unnatural” reading of the texts. This is not a weird exercise. Anyone who chooses to read the Achan story will likely explain it as part of something that comes from somewhere and tends to point to somewhere else. What I want to claim is that the historical and cultural textual trajectory shaped by the Hebrew texts, the trajectory which ultimately gives us the Emmaus story, is in fact *predicated upon* the Emmaus story, is always a movement backwards from it. It is possible to see the Achan story as prophetic of Christ, in the way I’ve described, only in the light of what is taken to be the fulfilment of the prophecy. As is your hermeneutical key, so is your prophecy. Whatever guides your reading is going to nudge you into seeing certain words and deeds of the past as pointing towards a certain fulfilment beyond themselves, and sometimes towards a certain fulfilment *despite* themselves. Reading through the eyes of the crucified and risen Messiah is a particular option—and I hope, in what comes, to convince you of its power and truthfulness.

If we are going to read with these eyes, however, we will have to imagine the Bible as something other than a long book which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, with a sort of appendix added on. Instead, I suggest you think of it in this way: there is a single interpretative centre—the dead and risen Christ. All these texts from different periods are thrown up into the air and come down at different angles to the centre. Then, remember that Christ, the interpretative centre, is *contemporary to us*. As he was for Cleopas and N, so he is, for us, a *living hermeneutic principle*. And so, all these accounts, which hang from him and flow to him, will always be read by us contemporarily. Rather than

having an “Old” Testament and a “New” Testament, I think of us as having a “Building-up-to-Now” Testament, and its interpretative key is the “Opening-up-the-Now” Testament.

I say all this because many people feel weighed down by the Scriptures, as though God made us less free through them. I want to highlight something that Jewish readers often know much better than we do: reading Scripture is a much freer, richer, and more interesting exercise than we think. However, it is one for which we interpreters become increasingly aware of our responsibility, because *how* you tell the story *is* the story that you tell.

Interpretation in the Scriptures

Having established that the struggle around interpretation we’ve been looking at is perfectly natural and appropriate for the Scriptures, I’d like to demonstrate further that this struggle is not something that only happens “outside” or “after” them. It also happens within them. As you may recall, I set out for you two Christian temptations when reading Scripture: the Marcionite and the Fundamentalist. One says: “Nasty story, different god”, and the other says: “Nasty story, same God”, but offers lots of mental gymnastics to get around the unpalatable things these nasty stories imply about God.

I want to show you how the authors and editors of the Sacred texts themselves faced exactly these same temptations. To do this, we’re going to look at one of the central discussions underlying several chunks of the Hebrew Scriptures: the issue of child sacrifice, or specifically the sacrifice of the firstborn.

Let’s have a look at Exodus 22:29b. Surrounding it, you will find a list of instructions concerning a wide variety of things, but this particular instruction reads:

You shall not revile God nor curse the ruler of your people. You shall not delay to offer from the fulness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do likewise with your oxen and with your

sheep. Seven days it will be with its dam. On the eighth day you shall give it to me.

The phrase might pass us by as we read it, since we automatically assume that it must mean something like a naming ceremony, or a baptism, or a Bar-mitzvah. But it becomes slightly more challenging to pass by when we notice the same instruction is given concerning sheep and cattle. They are not, typically, bar-mitzvahed.

It is increasingly clear that for a very long part of their history, the people we now call the people of Israel had, as a regular part of their basic culture, the sacrifice of firstborn children. And the straightforward command to do this, put into the mouth of God, would have been the standard conservative position within that society. There is considerable archaeological evidence to support this claim: the custom was popular among the people sometimes referred to as the Phoenicians, the trading people whose sphere of influence extended from Carthage to Tyre and Sidon. In the Scriptures, they are called “Canaanites”, and a good deal of Israel’s cultural baggage comes from them. Part of their religion was the sacrifice of children (through fire) to a god whom they called Moloch. (The name might sound, to our modern ears, like a byword for evil, but the consonants in the name “Moloch” usually meant king or angel. This was a rather ordinary word for someone very important).

To show that child sacrifice wasn’t something that only happened in the remote, Bronze Age past, long before the people of Israel began to treat themselves as a people, we’ll now look at two Hebrew prophets engaged in a polemic about this issue. Interestingly, our two prophets are almost contemporaries of each other: Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah, a northerner who tended to be critical of the Jerusalem establishment, was treated as a traitor. He turned out to be right, was sent into exile and eventually killed. Ezekiel, a fairly conservative Temple priest from Jerusalem, was sent into exile in Babylon. The ministries of the two prophets were not so far apart in years—we’re talking about the period between about 600 and 580 BCE. Yet when faced with the child sacrifice issue, they take rather different stances.

In Jeremiah 19:3-6, the prophet is obviously faced with a widespread presumption that God wants people to sacrifice their children. This is what he says:

You shall say: Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind. Therefore the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter.

A couple of points are in order. The first is that the word “Baal” was simply an ordinary word at the time for “Lord”. So Jeremiah is making a significant distinction, not between two individuals with different names, but between two different bearers of a potentially identical name. The second is that anyone who has to repeat their denial of something three times—“I did not command, nor decree, nor did it enter my mind”—makes it sound as though he is dissociating himself strongly from something his listeners generally thought he had always been fully signed up to.

Jeremiah’s attitude is “This child sacrifice business is awful. Such commands did not come from YHWH, they came from another god”. In other words, Jeremiah is a sort of Marcionite *avant la lettre*. He’s telling his listeners: “You’ve confused these two deities over the last several hundred years, and now I’m trying to sort out which is which to get you back to worshipping the Real Deal”.

Ezekiel, on the other hand, has the following to say (20:23-26):

Moreover, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, because they had not executed my ordinances, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their ancestors' idols. Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD.

Ezekiel seems to have the fundamentalist temptation. He's saying: "Yes, it was YHWH", where Jeremiah was saying: "No, it was Baal". Ezekiel recognises that the passage we now call Exodus 22:29b was considered an authentic word from YHWH, and so he has to find a way to circumvent the problem that God ordered something repulsive. His solution is to claim that God did command this, but only so that people would find it so awful that they would give it up. In other words: "Because I want you to give up chocolate, I'm going to command you to eat chocolate, to gorge yourselves on chocolate until it makes you sick, and then you'll give it up of your own accord".

Well, this sounds pretty capricious. It makes one wonder about all of God's commandments. If they might turn out to be commanding the very reverse of what they seem to be commanding, why pay attention to any of them at all?

My point here is to compare the mental logic in both cases. Both prophets are faced with the same problem: the presence of child sacrifice, understood as obedience to a sacred decree. Both want the same solution: that child sacrifice should stop, and that God should no longer be associated with such things. Yet both have recourse to entirely different strategies of interpretation to achieve the same result: one adopts a proto-Marcionite "wrong god" solution, while the other employs a proto-fundamentalist "same God, serious mental gymnastics" solution.

Yet had you been an ordinary, traditional, observant Israelite or Judaean of the period, you would have assumed that God wanted child

sacrifice, and that both Ezekiel and Jeremiah were, each in their own sweet way, the ancient equivalents of the leader writers at the Guardian Newspaper: dangerously secularising proto-atheists who are not God-fearing people at all. Good, straight-forward, God-fearing people will have known right away that religion is a serious business, and it involves sacrificing children: “If you don’t go along with sacrificing children, then you can’t really be serious about respecting God”.

Let’s remember that, over time, it turned out the word of God was being spoken by these very prophets who would have appeared as insufficiently religious to their contemporaries. In other words, in the Bible, it is the dangerous secularizers who win out in the end. Weird or what?

Child sacrifice was a difficult issue, both because of what was done to the innocents and because of the re-interpretation required to move beyond it. There are all sorts of signs in the Hebrew Scriptures of stories which have something to do with child sacrifice being edited in such a way as to reveal a fundamental shift in the perceived relationship between God and humans. A fundamental shift against sacrifice.

Let’s look at Exodus 4, 22-26. God is talking to Moses:

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you: ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.” On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said: “Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” So he let him alone. It was then she said: “A bridegroom of blood by circumcision.”

This is a very odd story as it stands. Here we have Moses being told by the Lord to go to Pharaoh and say to him: “Let my people go. Israel is my firstborn, so I want Israel to come out and worship me.” Here we have a benign account of what it might mean that firstborn sons are being “separated out” for the Lord. Then we get the other side of the story: the message to Pharaoh continues: “but if you don’t let my people go, I’ll kill your firstborn sons.”

You can see how this might suggest a new direction of interpretation: God is especially interested in firstborn sons, but when they are part of Israel, this is so they may be set free to worship. When they are part of Egypt, their being killed is associated with not letting the people of Israel go free. You can see, perhaps, a variant on Jeremiah's "two god" solution to the problem.

Let's look at the next verses. Moses is now on his way back to Egypt to give his lovely message to Pharaoh. And then the text says: "On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him." Curiouser and curioser. If you've just given someone a message to carry for you, why should you then want to kill them? But that's what it says, at least in our current version. The next verse tells us more:

But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said: "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then she said: "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."

Zipporah is Mrs Moses. Her reaction in taking a flint, cutting off her (and Moses') son's foreskin, and touching the foreskin to Moses' genitals (for the word "feet" here, as in some other places in the Hebrew Scriptures, is a euphemism for genitals) makes no sense at all if, as would seem to be the case from the previous verse, it is the Lord who is trying to kill Moses. It would make a great deal more sense if, in the earlier verse, it had been Moses who was trying to kill his firstborn son. Mrs Moses would then be offering a substitute sacrifice—the foreskin instead of the whole child—and quickly making a covenant of peace by means of the gesture to the genitals. (The placing of the suppliant's hand in the thigh of the other party was a customary way of making a covenant).

If that is the case, then what we have here is a story about the invention of circumcision as a substitute for child sacrifice. It is inserted into a narrative about Egypt, where twin valences of the relationship between God and the firstborn emerge—setting apart for worship on one hand, and setting apart to be killed on the other.

I am no expert in the study of the Hebrew Scriptures, but it doesn't seem entirely implausible—however you end up interpreting it—that this passage, with its grammatical oddities, is the site of considerable editing. In principle at least, it doesn't seem silly to suggest that this editing is part of a history of interpretation which deals with and ultimately moves on from child sacrifice.

Let's finish by looking at the most famous passage where this interpretative editing seems to be going on—the passage called the Akedah, or the Binding of Isaac, which is found in Genesis 22. Here is the text:

After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him: "Abraham!" And he said: "Here I am." God said: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men: "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham: "Father!" And he said: "Here I am, my son." He said: "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the LORD called to him from Heaven, and said: "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said: "Here I am." He said: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I

know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day: “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from Heaven, and said: “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of Heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the Earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

So, Abraham is instructed to take his son and sacrifice him. But when he gets to the appointed place, the whole thing is countermanded. A fundamentalist reading might interpret this as a test, as God having a bit of a dark joke at Abraham’s expense, but what we have here is actually a very good, clear example of texts being edited. As in the previous passage we looked at, the words become odd. They haven’t been cleaned up properly. This is part of the genius of the Hebrew writers and editors: their respect for their text is so great that they won’t remove the traces of earlier versions, or whitewash the story completely.

One of the oddities of this text is clear in Hebrew but much less so in English: God, under one of God’s many names, orders Abraham up the hill; God, under quite another name, does the countermanding. *Elohim* orders Abraham up the hill, and either *YHWH* or the *Angel of YHWH* does the countermanding. In most surviving Hebrew texts, the distinction is really quite rigorous.

So, you start with Abraham, who begins with a story that he clearly understood and accepted: sacrificing his son. And then, partway through, a story with which Abraham doesn’t seem familiar—a substitute animal sacrifice instead of a human sacrifice—takes over. The over-

arching narrative becomes one about Abraham's trust and obedience as he transitions from one understanding of God to another, and his subsequent blessing as a result of this movement.

The interesting thing about this is what happens when it's all over, after the ram has been caught and sacrificed instead of Isaac, and the Lord has pronounced the great blessing over Abraham. The final verse (19) says: "So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba." Well, what is odd about this verse? It's amazingly easy to pass over without noticing it: there is no mention of Isaac. Abraham comes down from Mount Moriah on his own. In fact, Isaac doesn't put in any further appearance in this story cycle at all. He comes back several chapters later in a different story—which is why many commentators have assumed that we have here a story of a human sacrifice which was doctored. Verse 19 would then be a trace of the earlier story, in which Abraham actually sacrificed Isaac. The current version of the story, as it appears in our Bibles, reflects the transition, the moving on from a God who demanded the sacrifice of the firstborn. In short, it bears witness to the same struggle evidenced by our comments from Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

So, I have plunged you into the question of interpretation, sacrifice, and the Scriptures. And I have done so by example, so that you can see how much more interesting the Scriptures are and how much more is going on in them than is often assumed to be the case. In the next chapter, I'll try to provide you with some basic outlines on how to approach the "book" as it stands, outlines that I hope will be received as a relief—and as permission to take your own study of such things much further for yourselves.

CHAPTER 4:

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Book?

(Part 2)

Last chapter, we plunged into an exercise in handling the texts of Scripture. Now I would like to set out for you what I hope are some useful hints at an overall view of the texts. This is not (and could not be) a one-session gallop through the Hebrew Scriptures. It is something like an outline of some elements, a “state of the question” which scholars more or less take for granted. Of all the chapters in this book, this is the one to which I expect to have to make the most frequent revisions over time. That is partly because I am not a Scripture scholar, and so am on a constant learning curve in this sphere, and partly because the outlines here are almost too fuzzy even to be called “outlines”. In fact, over the last few decades, the whole shape of the study of the Hebrew Scriptures has completely come up for grabs.

Until relatively recently, Scripture scholars broadly accepted a linear history of Israel, roughly corresponding to the chronology outlined in the biblical books. It has become clear, however, that there is nothing like sufficient evidence for this view. We've also become aware of just how much the “knocks” of history—moments like the Babylonian deportation and the destruction of the Temple—had an effect on the whole business of producing and transmitting texts. Finally, we have become much more comfortable with the notion that the texts we have show signs of what we might nowadays call an “ecclesial” editing process. In other words, a process by which people keen to hold onto whatever was truest and most profound in what they had received continually reimagined the whole of their belonging by recreating a narrative that made sense not only of where they were coming from, but of where

they thought they should be going. Naturally, such acts of reimagining were hotly contested by others who thought the future direction of Israel should be quite different.

While giving you a quick overview of how some of this plays out, I'm also going to try and trace with you—through the messy process of living, writing, transmission, and editing to which the texts bear witness—some elements in the Hebrew Scriptures which point to the emergence of the “other Other”—in other words, of God.

The Final Edition

If you have ever had dealings with a newspaper or with journalists, you know that the story which the journalist originally files is not the same as the one you read on the page. First, the journalist writes and sends in the story. Then, an editor revises it, cuts it, and augments it with contributions from other journalists, ensuring it fits the available page space. Finally, when all is ready, the night editor assigns a headline to the story. When you pick up the paper, however, the first thing you see is the headline to the story. You see the most recent bit of the editing process, the bit which reflects the judgment, concerns, and need to create a splash and so on of the final editor. This most recent bit of editing will very seriously colour your perception of the story under the headline. You may indeed have experienced reading a story under a headline and wondering whether there wasn't some mistake, as what the headline shouts and what the story appears to say point in different directions. You can imagine how infuriating and humiliating it must be for the original journalist to have her nuance and research traduced by the quick-grab title.

The point I'm trying to make is simple: we don't read the story in the order in which it was written. We read the most recent piece of editing first, which guides our interpretation of the process that led up to it. This is no less true of the Scriptures than it is of newspapers. We read the texts through the eyes of the most recent editors. Which means the more we know about who edited the texts and when, the better sense we will have of the different fragments that make up the whole.

As it happens, we have a rather useful guide to an important moment in the Scriptural editing process in the form of a deliberately inserted four-thousand-year span (hence the rather fanciful longevity of some characters), which runs from Adam until the dedication of the New Altar in 164 BCE during the Maccabean period. It means that a considerable chunk of what we call Scripture (some of whose texts are very much older than 164 BCE) has reached us wrapped in the packaging—the interests and viewpoints—of its Maccabean editors. We have a glimpse, as it were, of the night editor putting his touch to the story.

This glimpse into the editing also gives away something about the sense its contemporaries made of their sacred texts. It shows that they considered them a preface to the New Israel, conceived as starting from the re-inauguration of the Temple. In other words, fully two hundred years before any of the texts of what we now call the New Testament were written, the Hebrew Scriptures were already being packaged as somewhat of an “Old Testament”—as if they were saying: “This has been the story of the Lord’s dealing with the people of Israel up until now, and what a story of defeat and disaster it has been, only occasionally punctuated by moments of stability. But all that has now been brought to a conclusion, leading up to now, when we are inaugurating the new period for which all the Scriptures have been a prologue”.

A further interesting point about this editing process is the dating system used in the Maccabean period, which persists into the current official Jewish text of the Hebrew Scriptures (called the Masoretic text). The very structure of the numbers gives us a hint at the priorities of the editors: The covenant at Sinai, for example, is established at the two-thirds point of the four-thousand-year span, 2666 years from Adam. However, there is a different organisation of most of the same texts, with a different dating scheme, in the Samaritan Pentateuch. In this other ancient compilation of many of the same texts, the figure of Abraham is made more pivotal, and the two-thirds point is the establishment of the Tabernacle and the priestly rituals rather than the covenant at Sinai. As we will see later, each group of “night editors” had quite specific reasons behind their framing of the story.

A further issue has become increasingly apparent over the last hundred years of archaeological excavations in the Middle East, excavat-

tions whose interests and interpretations have themselves depended on the religious ideology of the various regional power brokers, up to and including the current State of Israel. And that is how little extra-textual backing there is for any of the purported history of Israel prior to the Babylonian period. There is, for instance, no extra-textual evidence for the existence of a King of Israel called David, or of Solomon. There is no architectural evidence from the First Temple. There are no extra-textual references to the existence of Moses prior to the Exile. Even the earliest textual references to him appear to date only from very shortly before the Exile. The first king of Israel referred to in extra-Biblical sources is Omri, who reigned around 880 BCE and appears rather ingloriously in 1 Kings 16. There is no evidence of an invasion of Canaan by a non-local people at a period that might be made to fit in with the book of Joshua. And while an Egyptian engraving from around 1200 BCE refers to a defeated collective called Israel in the land of Canaan, there is no evidence of an Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt at a time which might fit in with the chronology of the Scriptures.

Now, absence of evidence is not the same thing as evidence of absence. Who knows what wonders may yet be unearthed by archaeologists! Nevertheless, we have at least learned that the relationship between texts, historical dates, events and interpretations is a good deal more complex than meets the eye. Learning to ask in what sense these interrelated factors are bearers of something true—let alone a communication from God—also plunges us into the realisation that the ancient authors and editors were very much more sophisticated and knowing in what they were doing than we have often given them credit for.

To give just one more minor example concerning the Book of Joshua: If the book is a very ancient text, more or less contemporary with the events it describes, which reports and justifies a real conquest by a real ethnic group of lands they didn't previously occupy (and this is exceedingly improbable), then you have a powerful—and never-to-be-surrendered—divine mandate for a quite specific land grab (which is of course how it is read by modern fundamentalists in the State of Israel and elsewhere). If however, Joshua was written (or at least heavily redacted) after the Babylonian Exile by people who were planning on coming back into the land from which their forebears from

a generation or two had been deported, then maybe the purpose of the conquest story was precisely the reverse: it would have been a way of letting the current occupiers of the land know, among other things: “You needn’t fear us returning Judaeans from Babylon, for, as our text shows, so completely did Joshua extirpate the former occupiers of the land many centuries ago that, if you are there now, you must in fact be part of us already”. In other words, the account of the ancient conquest becomes a backdrop to a modern co-opting without conquest.

Having raised these points (all of which re-illustrate how we always read texts according to our hermeneutical starting point, or backwards in fulfilment of prophecy), I’d now like to rush through a few key “issues” in the Scriptures which may help make them easier for you to handle.

From Polytheism to Monolatry

Given all we’ve reviewed so far, I hope it will not come as a shock to you now to hear that the Hebrew Scriptures are not, strictly speaking, monotheistic. An absolutely clear, unadulterated monotheism only emerges in the Scriptures as late as the texts of 2nd Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), from the post-exilic period. In earlier texts, we find numerous reminiscences of a polytheistic past, in which the basic Canaanite word for God (El) is pluralised (Elohim). There are references to God among the gods (who later become “angels”). There are also hints of varied gender: traces of a mother goddess figure exist in the Hebrew imagination as recently as just prior to the Babylonian Exile, and one of the titles for God: “El-Shaddai”, may have some reference to the word “breasts” and indicate a female divinity.

What the texts do bear witness to is a movement *from* polytheism to what is called “monolatry” or “henotheism,” meaning: “plenty of gods exist, but you are to worship only one of them”. It is worth noticing that the first of the ten commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”, is a monolatrous or henotheistic commandment, not a monotheistic one. It takes for granted the existence of other gods.

We can see an interesting moment of editing in the texts when, in Exodus 6:2-4, a couple of chapters after God has revealed Godself to Moses as YHWH, this is added:

And God said to Moses: “I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El-Shaddai, but by my name YHWH I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they dwelt as sojourners.”

Ancient names fade out, and the name YHWH becomes the central name around which the worship of Israel will revolve. However, it is worth remembering that the most ancient texts we have for Deuteronomy 32 indicate that God, the Most High (El Elyon), appointed gods to all the nations, and over Israel, He appointed YHWH to be its God. So there is textual evidence of a process by which YHWH becomes not only a god among the gods, but eventually “God—there is no other” in 2nd Isaiah. What is really interesting here is the recognition, as this process developed, that “God the Most High” (of whom no image could be made, and who could not be seen in any way at all) and YHWH (who could make anthropomorphic appearances) were both identical, yet distinct. This very ancient identity and distinction persists into New Testament Judaism, where El-Elyon is the Father and YHWH is the Son. But more of that anon.

Rough History: Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom

There does seem to be ancient evidence confirming the Biblical account that there were two political entities called Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom), and that the Northern Kingdom was eventually vanquished by the Assyrian Empire around the year 720 BCE. The Northern Kingdom covered the territory in which the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) had lived and where the great theophanies of God had been reported. (The most prominent Yahwistic sanctuaries also lay in the Northern Kingdom). It may well have been in

the territory of the former Northern Kingdom that the remnants of the Northern priests and scribes began to write monuments to their religious culture and heritage, following the destruction of their sanctuaries and the deportation and forced mixing of the people, which was the result of Assyrian hegemony. In other words, the origins of a text-based religion lie in compensating for the loss of the sanctuaries. Texts are a way of producing and maintaining forms of togetherness and identity amidst the knocks of history.

Meanwhile, the Southern Kingdom, centred on Jerusalem, had its own ideological history. The choice of Jerusalem as capital (even though it was not an Israelite but a Jebusite city, and one which had no prior association with YHWH) was backed up by David's vision on the threshing floor (2 Samuel 24:16-25). The cult of God there depended on the Jerusalem Temple and the Davidic monarchy. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Judaea considered itself superior and invulnerable to whatever had gone on in the north. This invulnerability did not last long! After the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 597 BCE and the destruction of the Temple ten years later, the wisdom of the Northern Kingdom in shifting to a text-based religion may have become clearer to the deportees of the Southern Kingdom. Thus, in an incident narrated as the discovery of a scroll of the Law in the Temple during the reign of King Josiah, shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, what was very probably a northern textual artefact was granted a place of privilege in the religious world of the Southern Kingdom. We have, in fact, very little idea indeed of what the day-to-day religious or cultural life of Israel or Judah would have looked like before the destruction of the Temple in 587. However, it seems that this second fall of a kingdom, after the textual precedent had already been established further north, led to the beginnings of the text-based religion whose later version we now know as Second Temple Judaism.

Two Strong Tendencies—The Priestly Vision and the Legal Program

The Scriptures, as we have them, show at least two quite strong tendencies that are often in conflict with each other. Recovering which tendency comes from where, and why, is not easy and is, of necessity,

ty, highly speculative! On the one hand, you have an ancient priestly tendency which may have been linked initially with the prophets and sanctuaries of the north but eventually became associated with the figure of Solomon and the Temple in Jerusalem, and later with part of the programme of reconstruction that led to the Second Temple. And on the other you have a somewhat less ancient tendency which saw things in terms of texts, of law, and gradually, in the Second Temple period, became associated with the figure of Moses, the Covenant of Sinai and the development of the notion that what principally defined the Hebrew experience (on its way to becoming what we now call the Jewish experience) is the living legal way of life called “Torah” or “Law”. One of the things that has been difficult for modern readers of the Bible (even Jewish readers of the Bible) until recently is that so thoroughly was Biblical Scholarship dominated by the heirs of the Protestant Reformation that the vision of the Hebrew world which was passed on to us was almost totally focussed on the second tendency, since it so flattered the Protestant critique of sacerdotal religion. It is only recently that we’ve begun to recover a sense both of how much more important the priestly element was in Hebrew religion, how fundamental in undergirding certain things we take for granted as part of what Jewish or Christian life is all about, but also how much Jesus and early Christianity saw themselves as bringing to life elements of this more archaic tendency in the face of the religious domination of the local population by the more modern “Torah” tendency.

To put things in far too brief a nutshell: it was the priestly element of ancient Hebrew religion—no doubt working through elements from surrounding cultures, sometimes completely subverting those elements, and developing from liturgies of sacrifice and praise—which gave us the notions of Creation, and of Redemption through Atonement, with the feast of the Atonement being the principal feast of this tendency. Similarly, it was the priestly tradition that gave us the notion of God bringing into being everything that is, of the things of Heaven utterly alive and occasionally perceptible to us, of God who was perceptible, close at hand and wont to put in appearances, make his face shine upon people, allow his glory to be felt. It was the priestly element that gifted us with the liturgical sense of time in which an eternal

present is always contemporary with all the happenings of the past. But it was no doubt also the priestly element that tolerated or defended child sacrifice and other weird forms of cult, and whose temple and its endlessly costly sacrificial system of beasts was to prove, in the face of foreign invasion, such a false security for those who depended on it, and on the ideology of cultic goodness which sustained it.

The more textual tradition, associated with what scholars call the Deuteronomistic school, played down the liveliness and excitement of God, turning attention away from theophanies, angels, and the things of Heaven. It focused instead on a legally and textually viable way of life, one in which the attributes of the ancient prophets and the mantle of sacred kingship were gradually transferred onto the lawgiver-prophet, Moses. However, the power of atoning priesthood was quite explicitly *not* so transferred.

In the Deuteronomistic school, it is hearing and obeying the words, not searching for the form of God (let alone contemporary interventions of God), that is important. Creation, which in the priestly tendency was constantly contemporary, became something that had happened in the distant past, to which we now relate by Torah. Atonement, where YHWH became temporarily incarnated in the High Priest in order to renew Creation by atoning for the sins of his people, was downplayed. The Passover became much more central, a lay feast celebrating the exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, and the legal way of life that was to follow from it.

The principal editors of the central texts of Torah are, of course, of this school. They sought to recreate the cultic world of their forebears through a textual and verbal religious culture, after all the visible, architectural, and political artefacts that had kept their world alive in previous centuries had collapsed. In fact, without their moral verve, we would not have the ethical monotheism associated with Judaism. And without the painstaking faithfulness of their editing, to the extent that they did not wholly remove traces of things of which they deeply disapproved, we would not have any textual insight into the priestly world that brought them into being—the world on whose shoulders the editors and their Torah somewhat uncomfortably rested.

Three Central Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel

The book of the Prophet Isaiah, in addition to being simply and of itself one of the great wonders of the world, serves as a vital backbone to the whole process by which the Hebrew people gifted authentic monotheism to the world. A school of disciples somehow kept alive over a period of three hundred years, and possibly longer, the vision that the Judean court prophet Isaiah began to elaborate around 730 BCE. This vision was so much greater than any of the power politics surrounding the royal court at the time that it led to a deeply peaceful and critical indifference to them (see Isaiah 7-8). It was associated with Isaiah's priestly vision of the Lord surrounded by cherubim in the Holy Place of the Temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole Earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:1-5)

The school of Isaiah sat with and under this vision over the next several centuries.

Over time, it enabled them to reinterpret all the ups and downs of history that befell Israel and Judah, finally leading to the extraordinary clarity we see in what is now called Second Isaiah, the post-exilic reworking of the vision. There it has become clear organically, from within the vision, that the Lord in question is not another god among the gods, but is in fact God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods—more like nothing at all than like a god. Therefore, all other forms of divinity are put to a devastating critique, and the fullest manifestation of God appears

to be the most complete atheism, as all human forms of god (which are really projections of us) wither away in the face of the discovery that we are, in fact, projections, functions of God:

Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior. All of them are put to shame and confounded, the makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. For thus says the LORD, who created the Heavens (he is God!), who formed the Earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in chaos.’ I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right. (Isaiah 45:15-19)

Even more remarkable is the way in which the richer and more profound the Isaiah vision of God became, the more it also focused on an anthropological critique. As the perception of God becomes more fully alive and full of holiness, so it also becomes possible to critique religious victim-creating mechanisms. This is where Isaiah develops the unparalleled (and to this day deeply mysterious) “servant songs”, by which a separation between God and human victim-making becomes imaginable, alongside a generous process of being able to occupy the victim space on behalf of others. This leads, in the final part of Isaiah (now known as Third Isaiah), to devastating critiques of those who, after the return from exile, were rebuilding the Temple and establishing a new purity religion, marked by exclusions. Isaiah is key to understanding the way in which the utter vivacity of the apparently atheist God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods removes all religious justification from victimising. And Isaiah’s vision is the most central to the development of New Testament Judaism, which sees itself entirely within the working-out of the same insight.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel (whose books also reach us through seriously complicated processes of editing, redaction, and interpretation) are also enormously important figures. We looked in our last chapter at the

ways they each handled the child-sacrifice issue: Jeremiah seems to have inherited a Northern Kingdom understanding of God offering people a “Way” that was not dependent on rules and regulations concerning sacrifice, the Temple of Jerusalem and the monarchy. Coming to live in Jerusalem, shortly before the Babylonian conquest, which would see its destruction, Jeremiah was in fact bitterly critical of the Temple ideology which regarded Jerusalem as impregnable, owing to the presence of the Lord in the Temple. Treated as a sacrilegious traitor for his pains, he had the uncomfortable experience of being proven right all along when Jerusalem fell to Babylon. He and his school seem to have been particularly important in developing what became known as the “Deuteronomic” account of Israel, radically downplaying everything cultic and substituting instead the notion of a legal covenant, while telling the story of a people whose historical calamity was a punishment for their sins and the sins of their fathers. Yet this shift to a moral history was designed not as a form of fatalism, but as a form of inducement into becoming a living covenantal people.

(Late in his life, as told in Jeremiah 44, we see the prophet, now in exile in Egypt, meeting with a group of priests who had been exiled from Jerusalem not by the Babylonians, but by the forces of Josiah’s reforms a few decades earlier. He berates them by telling them that if it weren’t for their sinfulness in sacrificing to the Queen of Heaven—the goddess figure who had previously been cultivated in Jerusalem—then none of the disasters would have come about. They, reasonably enough, reply that he has it all backwards: While they cultivated the Great Lady, all was fine. It was only after the cult was suppressed that disaster came. Who was being punished?)

Finally, Ezekiel, the conservative Temple priest, centred on the vision of God in the Holy Place in the Temple. We can get some sense of how sheerly different the Hebrew religion was in Jerusalem before the exile by comparison with what came after it: Ezekiel’s visions of God, recognizably part of the same world as those of Isaiah from over a century previous, involve an untranslatable mixture of gender and number (indeed, the textual difficulties of Ezekiel are enormous). He reports two different Passovers of the Lord in Jerusalem. Yet, neither of these makes the slightest reference to what we understand as the Passover

linked to Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. Ezekiel was carried off into exile, and as a priest, managed the extraordinary feat of undergoing the vision of God, leaving the Holy Place, the Temple, and indeed Jerusalem, thus opening up the possibility that God's presence lived independently of a particular holy place. A New Temple might then be imagined.

Keeping the priestly vision whole in a time of exile has also proven to be one of the definitive structuring forces of the Hebrew experience. Curiously, for those of a modern temper, this strongly priestly bent—no less than the lay, legal bent of Jeremiah—was a way into what we now would call a secularising tendency: it is in Ezekiel (chapter 18) that individual ethical responsibility is clearly taught for the first time, breaking away from a sense that God might be punishing the children for the sins of their fathers. The priestly sense of the permanently and contemporarily alive nature of God caring now for each of God's children refuses to go down the road of making God the backer of moral fatalism.

So, three prophets. I've tried to represent them to you as key axles in movements of interpretation, adaptation and discovery—*invention*, in its richest sense—in the hopes that you might find much more richness for yourselves in each of them.

Exile, Disputed Return, Moses and Second Temple Judaism, Wisdom

We don't know what proportion of the Jerusalem population was taken off to Babylon between 597 and 587 BCE. Certainly, a considerable portion (if not all) of the courtly, political and religious leadership—the literate class. It seems that the Babylonian exile provided them with the impetus and the instruments to develop the text-based religious culture that would emerge over the next several hundred years. Key texts were written, fragments edited, and emphases altered. Much of what the Northern Kingdom had produced and which had previously been less palatable to Judaean tastes became grafted into the Judaean narrative. Whatever happened during the time of the Josian reform, in the decades immediately preceding the collapse of Jerusalem, it too was incorporated into the emerging story.

It may well be that the figure of Moses first acquired importance during the Josain reform, serving as a kind of local alternative to Assyrian royal ideology. As time went on, after Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem, a narrative developed around Moses, this great leader, lawgiver, and prophet whose covenant, writings, and wandering tabernacle existed prior to the world of Kings and Temples. Those who developed this new Moses-centered compendium were called Judahites, as they'd been carried into the Babylonian exile from Judah. They soon imagined a programme for creating the "true Israel" back in the Land and put it into action.

And yet, as is the case for any exiles returning to their former land after a period of absence, the "purified" story the returners tell of what they left behind, and what they now want to recreate, does not necessarily mesh well with the lives of those who have been left behind. Those who had remained had a very different story indeed of what had gone before, and very different ways of adapting to changing political and social circumstances. So, you have the Judahite attempt to reclaim hegemony and portray as original a particular religious and political programme that was not entirely familiar to the rest of their common ethnic group, the Hebrews—those who were the less literate and more traditional dwellers in the land.

Many texts in the Scriptures reveal evidence of how the return of the Judahites was disputed and negotiated. It may even be that the Song of Songs, now famous as a love story, at least partly originated as a coded discussion of the terms under which the exiled Judahite leadership might return to dwell in Jerusalem. Such a code would have been necessary in the face of the Persian authorities, and the language of "love" was, at that time, distinctly covenantal and political—not romantic and sexual as it is to our ears. Furthermore, it is also clear that the new Deuteronomistic moral ideology, which was being presented as the backbone of God's relationship with Israel, was not accepted pacifically: the book of Job, along with much of the wisdom literature found in books like Ecclesiastes, critiques the moral presumption that: "if you behave well, all will go well, and if all doesn't go well, then you must have behaved badly".

Yet as the Judahite “new evangelisation” of the land advanced, so attempts were made, alongside the Deuteronomistic moral and behavioural codes, to introduce teachings of racial purity. These were a serious novelty to those who had long considered themselves part of the Lord’s worship. It was during this period that the racial criterion for what we now call “Judaism” was developed: that one is Jewish who is born of a Jewish mother. The forcible divorce of all priests who had married (what were now presented as) “foreign” wives was hugely shocking at the time. Literary acts of protest emerged, serving as reminders that, even in the official narrative, Moses was married to a Midianitess. The very beautiful book of Ruth clearly critiques the reductionist purity party by reminding people that King David’s grandmother Ruth was a Moabitess, and furthermore that Ruth’s love for her Hebrew mother-in-law Naomi is clearly expressed in the formula proper to the Deuteronomist’s understanding of the relationship between God and Israel: Where Deuteronomy says: “You shall be my people and I will be your God”, Ruth says: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Prophetic writing from this period (which often means highly edited versions of previous prophetic writing, since the new Judahite establishment was not friendly to continuing prophetic utterance) often reinterpreted ancient cultic critiques, directing them towards the Second Temple priesthood and the religious system of purity (meaning, exclusion) which it had set up: no foreigners, no eunuchs, no handicapped people, and so on. And yet, memories existed of a prior cult of YHWH which had not excluded them. So Third Isaiah prophesies the return of such people, and the book of Malachi inveighs against the Second Temple priesthood in a way that can only delight modern hearts critical of Catholic hierarchical behaviour!

The Wisdom literature also kept alive many elements of the old priestly vision. In fact: “Wisdom” was strongly linked to the priestly understanding of God opening up Creation from the Holy Place in the Temple: everything that is, having been brought into being by God, is shot through with, undergirded by, and orchestrated by Wisdom, seen initially as a feminine figure alongside God at Creation. The loss of the

old priestly world was seen as a loss of sight and of Wisdom, so that things could no longer be seen as they were: tending towards their glory as created reflections of God. The opposite of Wisdom was vanity or futility, with things tending towards nothing and winding down pointlessly. Naturally, this Wisdom-inflected vision of things was strongly contrasted with the Deuteronomic vision in which “asking after the things that are above or below” was strongly discouraged, and a focus on listening to the words of the Law was asserted instead. Indeed, the book of Deuteronomy insisted that at Sinai the people did not see the form of God but only heard God’s words. Nevertheless, the protests were not silenced, and in the book of Proverbs, for example, there is a long and beautiful passage (1:20-33) in which Wisdom, speaking as a goddess who has been spurned and thrown out, complains against those who have rejected her and the vision she offers.

So, the beginnings of a textual religion, but also the creation of a much more moralistic Temple structure, a much more stringent and defensive sense of identity, the development of texts arguing with each other, groups editing the texts, arguments about which were in and which were out, large swathes of the population attuned to folk-memories of much earlier and more ancient understandings of what the worship of YHWH was about. All these are in the background as we approach the period when the texts begin to be collected into something like their current form.

The Development of the “Canon”, or List of Books in Scripture

We’ve discussed how we can “catch a snapshot” of the editing process of our texts in their use of the four-thousand-year dating system, which puts us squarely at 164 BCE. However, it is worth noting that the textual evidence we have for a compilation around that time comes in the form of what is now known as the Septuagint. This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, composed in Alexandria sometime between 300 and 132 BCE. It constitutes, in fact, the oldest version we have of the Hebrew Scriptures—and it is somewhat puzzling to many

people that the Greek translation we have is more ancient than any of the surviving Hebrew texts from which it was translated.

This oddity became clearer after the discovery, beginning in 1948, of an astounding treasury of ancient manuscripts at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. The surviving Hebrew text fragments, the oldest we possess, date from somewhere between 150 BCE and 70 CE. Those that are texts of Scripture often have a remarkable similarity to the modern texts we are accustomed to. In a number of places, however, they are closer to the Septuagint than they are to the more modern Hebrew text. The Hebrew text obviously underwent considerable revision between the third century before, and a century or two after, the time of Christ. After this period, the text becomes much more stable. Its current form, now referred to as the Masoretic Text, was finally fixed in the eighth or ninth century CE.

What this means is that the last three hundred years before our era were a period of very great importance for the development of an authorised list of Scripture. From both the Septuagint and the Qumran manuscripts, it is clear that there were a large number of other texts which circulated and were regarded as extremely important during this period. Some of these we possess, in whole or in part, and some we do not. Hints from these writings can be detected throughout the New Testament, which, curiously enough, serves as a textual witness to a richer Hebrew collection than the one Rabbinic Judaism inherited. For instance, the books of the Maccabees are clearly referred to in the New Testament, as is the book of Wisdom. Neither of these made it into the Masoretic Text. The books of Jubilees and Enoch were clearly well-accepted texts from before, and sometime after, the time of Christ. In fact, the range of accepted and disputed material, as well as the groups that interpreted and fostered them in Palestine before the Judaean war and the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, were extensive indeed. Although such books were not treated as part of Torah, this was not necessarily because they were regarded as heretical. In fact, they were sometimes kept separate because they contained specialised priestly or mystical knowledge. It was only over a long period of time that the list of books now known as Tanakh (Torah, Nevi'im wa Khetuvim—the Law, the Prophets and the Writings) became an exclusive list, a period

of time which was considerably foreshortened by the catastrophe of 70 CE. Suddenly, those who hadn't accepted New Testament Judaism once again experienced the urgent need to re-found the project of a Temple-less Israel with clear ideological boundaries. The list of Scriptures that made that possible—the canon held to this day to be authoritative by Rabbinic Judaism—was only closed after the advent of New Testament Judaism, and in part in reaction to it.

Thus it is that, in a modern Christian Bible as well as in many modern translations of the Hebrew Bible, you will also find the many whole or fragmentary “deutero-canonical” books which have been held in liturgical honour since very early days by different Middle-Eastern Christian Churches. Until a generation or so ago, it would have been assumed that if there was a conflict in a text between the Masoretic Hebrew and the Septuagintal Greek, then the Hebrew should be preferred, since it was assumed to be more ancient. The Greek was suspect (and possibly dependent on Christian tampering). However, now the Greek has emerged as being in many cases a better ancient textual witness, and many of the modern translations available reflect this.

Monotheism, Creation out of Nothing, and Resurrection

One of the oddities of this scriptural process is that the book which bears witness to the final consequences of Isaiah's great monotheistic breakthrough is not in the Jewish canon. Hold with me as I take you to that breakthrough text!

Far earlier, and safely in the canon, Isaiah had testified to a God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods—that is to say, a God who is more like nothing at all than like anything that is. This is the God whose utter aliveness and vivacity is not in rivalry with anything that is. Instead, everything that is, is a function of God—depends on God. Nothing in existence is God's enemy, or even capable of being God's enemy. It is rather we, whose hearts and minds are bowed down by fear and violence, who tend to attribute to God an involvement in death and in our attempts to construct order.

The final working-out of this Isaian vision leads to a double conclusion. First, Creation is not any sort of structuring order over against some form of chaos, as it tends to be for us. What we call Creation is prior to any form of order or structure, which are purely human issues, and is over against nothing at all. Thus, for God—who is not in rivalry with anything that is, Creation comes from nothing. Furthermore, death, which is so obviously part of the human experience, to the point of structuring it entirely, is one of the things that God is not in rivalry with at all. In short, God does not know death as an enemy, merely as the parameter of our biology by which God holds us in being. In short, for God, death is something that is not.

Now, the first text we have in the Hebrew tradition, which speaks unequivocally of both Creation out of nothing and of the resurrection of the dead, comes in 2nd Maccabees. There, the mother of the Maccabee brothers urges her sons to accept martyrdom at the hands of a wicked gentile king, rather than yield to his blandishments to disobey the Law of Moses. She adduces, as her evidence, an understanding of God who brings into being out of nothing and who holds in life those who are dead:

I beg you, my child, to look at the Heaven and the Earth and see everything that is in them, and recognise that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers. (2 Maccabees 7:28-29)

It is noticeable that, as in Isaiah, it is this facing-down of a persecuting human order, a moment of victimisation, that enables the fullest witness to the inexhaustible life of God. It is also clear here that when we talk about the doctrines of “Creation” or of “Resurrection from the dead” we are not talking about processes which are somehow internal to things existing in the Universe. Instead, these are aspects of God’s singular vivacity.

It was, of course, in such terms that Jesus answered the Sadducees (in Mark 12:18-27 and parallels). The Sadducees were a rather elite

group which held that there is no resurrection of the dead. They invited Jesus to comment on the issue in a manner which was clearly taken from the story of the Maccabees, the “poster boys” for popular belief in the resurrection (hence the question they pose to him about seven brothers who die, one after the other). Jesus’ reply to them—“Is not this why you are gone astray, for you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?”—brings to light the fullest consequences of monotheism—Creation out of nothing, and the deathlessness which flows from God—which we have been glimpsing throughout our exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Reading the Great “I AM” Text

The Sadducees had couched their question ironically, within a familiar Maccabean backdrop. In reply, Jesus gives as his example of the Scriptures and of the Power of God the story of Moses and the bush from the book of Exodus:

Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!

Jesus’ point is that for God, who knows not death, those people—long dead in terms of the supposed historical chronology of Moses’ life—were alive. If they were alive to God—contaminated, as it were, with God’s utter aliveness, held in presence by one whose presence is beyond time—then they are, purely and simply, alive. God’s aliveness is what counts in understanding all these things.

Let us then conclude our quick attempt at befriending the Hebrew Scriptures by reading through that wonderful text of the bush from Exodus (3:1-14), so that you can get a sense of what sort of thing the Jewish monotheism which emerges from the Biblical tradition really is:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Here is Moses, a Hebrew exile from Egypt, married to a foreigner, tending to sheep.

And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush (...)

By angel, please don't understand the modern "messenger with wings". In this ancient understanding, the word "angel" was used to refer to a particular instantiation of the Lord—the Lord as becoming locally perceptible.

...and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

Please notice the extreme delicacy of the Yahwistic theophany: because God is the creator of everything that is, and thus not in rivalry with anything that is, this is an exceedingly appropriate symbol for an appearance of YHWH—something completely altered yet left entirely the same. Something so abundantly created that its destruction doesn't destroy it.

And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."

Indeed! If you want a definition of God in a nutshell, it might be this: "...this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." This is the same as "something out of nothing", which is so central to the Isaiah vision.

Notice, too, that this theophany appears as something peripheral to Moses—not something straight in his face, but something towards which he must turn aside: "When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush." Once again, the delicacy is remarkable: God has had to catch Moses' attention and has managed to

do so. It is only after catching his attention that the symbol can become an act of communication, for that is what is meant when it says that God was *now* able to call to him from out of the bush:

“Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.”

God calls Moses by his name. His is a real, personal act of communication to a particular person, not a general abstract communication of divinity. And Moses’ reply—“Here am I”—sets him up for the reversal that is about to come upon him. Whatever he meant by the “I am” who is “here” is about to be turned completely upside down by the I AM in whose face he will be given to become.

Then he said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Moses, having drawn close and hearing something which seems to smack of familiarity, is now pushed back, a sign that the opening of the communication may be familiar. Still, the full force of it will be closer to a complete turnaround in his life than to something familiar:

And he said: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Here is the verse that Jesus quotes, and we can see, first of all, that it is already uttered within the context of a past. God is showing himself as the undergirding continuity of a living narrative, into which Moses is going to find himself called and inserted:

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Again, please notice the wonderful Yahwistic delicacy. First of all, God appeals to Moses by a visible sign, which pulls Moses in by the eyes. This sign is described as “the Angel of the Lord”. But then, as the fullness of what is being communicated becomes apparent, visibility is too excessive to be bearable and Moses hides his face:

Then the LORD said, “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”

God continues God’s self-revelation, one of heartfelt interest in, involvement with, and compassion for a particular group of people on the underside of a particular political and historical situation. This is far more shocking than it appears to our accustomed ears. For a god to be tied to the interests of a people, in harmony with the structures of power and authority and close to a place of sanctuary, would have been par for the course. But here was a god disclosing love for a people not tied to place or sanctuary, indeed showing itself as independent of place, subversive of political structures, and historically active in bringing something new into being from the underside of history. It immediately becomes clear that God’s personal address to Moses is not a simple communication of fact; it is a summons. It will involve Moses’ person, and the people he is to lead, in the process of becoming a new reality:

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

Moses’ response is exceedingly reasonable: he wants assurance that there is something about himself that makes him the right person for a task like this. He wants some sort of security. And of course, God does not play along with him. In fact, God’s non-answer is in itself a miracle of delicacy:

He said, “But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.”

God’s protagonism will be enough for Moses, even though Moses can’t grasp onto it. Furthermore, the sign he asks for is only going to come in the future: it’s only at the end, when Moses has brought the people to the mountain for the covenant, that he will have the assurance that it really was YHWH working all this through him. Instead of an assurance he can grasp, something from his past or his person, Moses is going to have to settle for the assurance that he is being grasped, and that he will come to be someone he can’t yet imagine—someone received from a future he doesn’t yet possess:

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

In the ancient world, a name was a source of power, something that could be grasped onto. A “he”, even an “it”, can be talked about, conjured, wielded in the face of various enemies. Reasonably enough, if the people of Israel in Egypt are to be talked into facing down Pharaoh, they will ask Moses what trump cards he has up his sleeve.

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”

This, then, is the answer of answers—and at the same time, the ultimate non-answer. For the same God who is not in rivalry with anything that is—who is proposing to bring about something new through exceedingly unpromising material, quite outside standard forms of godly behaviour—is also refusing to be a “he” or an “it”. “I AM” or “I Will Be Who I Will Be” (which may well be a less misleading translation of a very mysterious phrase) cannot be grasped, even as it is coming towards you. So, the “not-being-able-to-be-grasped” is essential to what is going on. I AM turns out to be the real protagonist, the one who brings everything into being. It is thus only in the degree to which anyone stops

attempting to be the I AM in the face of God, trying to make God an “it” or a “he”, that a person or a group can begin to receive their real “self”, their real but subsidiary “I am” as a group and as individual persons.

In the face of I AM—of pure, deliberate, unhurried protagonism, creating and moving—all of us are peripheral symptoms: “its” and “theys” being turned into a “we” and an “I” through an historical process of relationships in which we find ourselves being called into worshipping the Lord.

And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, «I AM has sent me to you.»”

What a non-starter this is as a useful instruction!

Consider its grammar. The whole point of I AM is that it is not an “it” or a “he”, so a third personal singular verb makes no sense. The only possible way that Moses will be able genuinely to communicate I AM sending him will be by himself becoming ever more visibly a living sign of I AM:

God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. (Exodus 3:1-14)

God adds that the people of Israel are to interpret everything that is happening to them now, at his hands, from within God’s unitary protagonism. The name I AM or “I Will Be Who I Will Be”, is revealed as the *least* misleading name for the one who has been the protagonist of their history all along, under different names and titles. These can now be shed, as the Creator of all things, working through an experience of victimisation and bringing into being a new people, provides the paradigmatic shape of the Hebrew experience.

I hope it will not have escaped your attention how much there is in common between the basic structure of the Emmaus theophany with which we began, and this story of the bush: A bush which burns,

but is not consumed; a man who is dead, but who is yet a living, communicating act of God's unitary protagonism. In both, we see the same non-rivalry between God and everything that is. The same being-guided, through interpretation into transformation, of those who thought they were protagonists but now find themselves becoming delighted symptoms of a far richer, deeper, and more powerful protagonism.

I hope that you have some hints, now, of how the "big bad book" is anything but a weapon for moralistic thugs. It can, when held in un-frightened hands, become the playground of an awe-inspiring and wonder-producing act of communication of God.

CHAPTER 5:

Stand Up and Be Godless! On Receiving the Gift of Faith

In the last chapter, we managed a somewhat breathless romp through the Hebrew Scriptures. I hope this has left you with a sense of the long historical process by which the human perception of God (or “the other Other”, in my jargon) underwent a process of pruning. A process by which it became clear that God is not a god at all. So now, I’m going to ask you—at least initially—to take off your theological hats and stick with some pretty basic matters of anthropology, because we’re going to look at what is meant by the word “faith”.

Let’s take that word out of its religious wrappers: try and imagine its use in ordinary human language and forget the religious overtones which the word has come to have for so many of us. I want us to work through and escape from the ways this word has come to trigger a sense of emotional blackmail in our lives. You know what I mean by “emotional blackmail”: there is a whole discourse about faith which tells you that you need to “believe” in order to be saved, and that if you don’t believe, you’ll go to hell. The rhetoric gives a fairly strong incentive to believe, even if you’re not quite sure what it is that you are supposed to believe or why. So you find yourself bullied into making a sort of moonshot: firing off a rocket of desire, or intention, or wishful thinking, towards some supposed celestial body which, unlike the moon, might or might not be there. And you just have to hope that your moonshot lands. The result is that so-called “faith” becomes a very stressful matter, something you have to work at and even feel. Something very demanding. Something you are constantly on the verge of losing.

Contrast this with the notion of faith as it operates in an entirely non-celestial sphere, the sphere of everyday interaction between hu-

man beings. Let us imagine, for instance, two kinds of meetings: one is an encounter with a benign elderly relative who has known you since childhood, and the other is a job interview. The first of these finds you relaxed. Why? Because you know Aunt Mildred likes you and wants what is good for you. When you are with her, you don't need to impress her or convince her of your worth. In fact, when you are with her, you can let your masks down and allow yourself to be teased, your little foibles giggled at. You know that she is trustworthy, that she is not out to get you and won't hold things she learns about you against you. In fact, it is she who, over time, has produced in you this disposition of *faith* in her. The emotional correlate to this disposition is a certain relaxation when you are with her.

Not so at the job interview. There you are, one of a number of candidates. You don't know your interviewer, and you are not entirely sure by what criteria he will be judging you. You go as smartly dressed as you can manage, with a C.V. as polished as the bounds of honesty will admit, all the wrinkles in your history dutifully ironed out. You psych yourself up to be as impressive as you can possibly be, ready to make your sales pitch for yourself. This, too, is a kind of moonshot. This process—all the hard work of putting on a good front—is the emotional correlate of a lack of faith: you don't know much about your interviewer, and you're not quite sure what he's out to get, or whether you have what it takes to give it to him.

Do you see how ironic this is? The normal human framework for words like 'faith' and 'belief' is one of relaxation. Yet when those words turn "religious", they suddenly become demands which inspire the exact inverse of relaxation. What I hope to be doing in this chapter is showing how the normal human sense is right—especially in the religious sphere!

The Priority of the Other

You may remember that in the first chapter, I spent some time setting out something you already knew: how what I call "the social other" is prior to us at every level of our being. Long before we come into being, there are others—human others—who are already viable, have already

lived within and extended some human culture to us, have established things like shelter, language, some sort of medical system and other structures to ensure us the regular availability of safe food and drinking water. All of these things pre-exist us, and we are entirely dependent on them. Part of that dependence is the freedom not to have to think about such things too much. Even when we do have to concentrate on one or other of them—finding somewhere to live, learning a new language, taking part in a preventative medical health campaign, getting flu jabs, for example—we are normally able to take a vast amount of other things for granted. And we are justified in doing so. Part of what makes us viable as human beings is the regularly dependable certainty of things just being there, thanks to those who have come before us.

Now, what would you say if you were to come across a person who, every time they opened a door, before stepping through it, checked carefully to see if there was a floor on the other side? You would regard them as seriously troubled. If they were to say to you: “I don’t know how you can be so blithe about stepping through doors: faith and doubt are equal and opposite realities, and I’m always tortured as to which one I should go with”, you would react with justified concern. They are talking nonsense: faith and doubt are not equal and opposite realities. Faith is the habitual disposition which knows and trusts the regular certainty of what is about us, without any need to see it or think about it at all. Doubt, on the contrary, is a very highly developed and skilled subsection of faith in the regular certainty of things, thanks to which, from time to time, we may question whether the normal certainty holds in this or that situation.

By the same token, any of us would regard it as quite sane for a person visiting a building site, in addition to putting on a hard hat, to check whether there was a floor on the other side before stepping through a doorway. This is because a building site, by definition, is the sort of place in which the normal certainties concerning completed buildings don’t necessarily apply. There, the capacity to doubt is exercised as a sane and sensible skill.

In any field at all, there is a huge seedbed of unexamined certainty prior to our viability as humans. Doubt is, really, a very small (and as I say, very skilled, highly developed) subsection of that viability. To make

the point even more obviously: think of the first words you address to someone in the morning. You do not typically spend any time or emotional energy at all worrying about whether or not words still mean the same this morning as they meant last night, or whether some celestial, infernal, or government-backed agency has not secretly rearranged all words and meanings during the night so that you may find yourself saying things which mean the reverse or nothing at all. Your early-morning linguistic muddle might depend on how long it takes you to wake up or how much alcohol you had to drink the night before. But eventually, words like “coffee” and “Pass the toothpaste” will emerge as having much the same meaning as usual.

We live most of our lives like this. When you leave your front door, you will typically give no thought at all to whether the railway tracks which bear you to work still head in their usual northbound direction, or whether they have been secretly shuffled around in the night so that you may find yourself heading helplessly further and further away from your destination. You take it absolutely for granted that these, and a thousand and one other things, will be where they usually are, functioning as they usually do. Occasionally, you will be surprised by some alteration within that regular certainty—a fire in a tunnel somewhere may cause the trains to be temporarily rerouted. Still, neither you nor anyone could possibly cope with a world in which language changes meaning in the night and railway lines are shuffled around arbitrarily, the clear liquid emerging from your kitchen tap was sometimes H₂O and at other times H₂SO₄. Furthermore, before every breath you take, there is a question as to whether you will be breathing air or some noxious gas, or whether breathing was in any case something that you should be doing. Faith and doubt are not equal and opposite realities at all!

Now, none of this is to say that everything is always regular, certain and secure. On the contrary, we know enough about our world to recognise that it is a dangerous place, with phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruptions, and their (until recently) unpredictable effects on weather patterns and food availability in places far removed from the epicentres of such events. We know that there are a large number of pathogens in just about every climate, which can be

dangerous, even fatal to humans, as well as no shortage of other animals which can poison, eat, or trample us. And even more dangerous than any of these, the social other which we constitute for each other is by no means always a safe or secure environment. In fact, we humans are, and always have been, extraordinarily dangerous to each other.

And not merely dangerous physically. We are inducted into a world in which we are typically in rivalry with each other, take revenge upon each other, need to despise some people, conceive of our security and well-being as something which depends on others being excluded from it, and mislead and abuse each other. However, perhaps even more important than this is the accidental, non-deliberate dangerousness by which we affect each other very greatly. Think of this example: you are a small child, and your parent is playing with a teddy bear. One of the things that adults do, as is perfectly obvious to small children, is enjoy playing with teddy bears. And so, since you want to please the adult, you join in and play with the teddy bear with them (adults are usually quite easily pleased). Now imagine that, after a few minutes of happy playing with the teddy bear, the adult seems to lose concentration and starts to play with something new—a shiny metal object that they put just out of your reach. They then press some sort of button and disappear into a back room.

You don't know it, of course, but they've put a kettle on a stove, turned on the heat, and gone to the larder for a teabag. From your point of view, you merely want to please them, as you did with the teddy bear, by joining in their play with the new shiny metal object which has caught their attention. They, your model, have designated a new object for you to desire. As you reach up to it (mercifully, the stove top is out of your reach), the adult comes back into the room, sees you reaching towards a flame and a very hot kettle, and shrieks in anguish, rushing towards you and pulling you away. Well, from your point of view, what on earth has happened? One moment you were happily playing along with them, basking in the glow of approval; next you suddenly find yourself cast out of approval and banished to anger and loss. Why? First, you received and went along with a clear instruction: "Imitate me". Then, suddenly, without warning, that instruction became, "Do not imitate me".

The result is complete shock and paralysis. Two contrary instructions, on the same level, at the same time! It's incomprehensible!

Part of being a very small person is the inability to distinguish between "Imitate me here", and "Do not imitate me here yet, because you are not yet strong enough to cope". The skill necessary for distinguishing between the levels—"Imitate me" and "Don't imitate me here, for the moment, for your own good"—is a very highly developed one. And the result is that, without anyone having been malicious or cruel towards us, we yet find ourselves locked into double binds, forms of paralysis, which may tie us into repetitive patterns which will make us, in turn, less competent and more dangerous than we might otherwise have been.

It's not so much that we humans are brilliantly intelligent, but really quite evil towards each other. Really, we are not all that bright. Our intelligence often remains quite underdeveloped. We are often as dangerous to each other through incompetence and confusion as through malice and rivalry.

Yet all this danger and uncertainty, real as it is, is just a tiny tip of a huge, invisible iceberg of regularity and certainty. Even when we feel this dangerousness very strikingly, it is because the hugely regular realities—which we may not feel, but which have enabled us to feel at all—are just there, functioning normally. Just have a go at imagining what must have gone right, how much must have been massively dependable, for you to be a viable, English-speaking adult who is able to read and make some sense of this page!

A huge seedbed of certainty, of that which we take for granted and which precedes any capacity for doubt, is absolutely normal in our becoming human at all. Riding on that, in a comparatively superficial sense, is the reality of ambivalence, uncertainty, danger, and insecurity, which is everywhere part of our experience. Thus, the social other is this massively faith-inducing, certainty-teaching underpinning to our viability, and yet it is also somewhat ambivalent, sometimes giving us a sense that it is out to get us, is a bad, or a cruel joke.

The Emergence of the “other Other”

It is only from here, when we begin to get some sense of the huge priority of certainty to doubt, that the whole question behind the issue of religious faith emerges. That question goes something like this: “Given that we recognize a social other, and that it is basically benevolent but can also screw us up, might there be another Other who is entirely benevolent, entirely and unambiguously for us, and not in any way part of that mixture of benevolence and screw-up which is the normal pattern of our lives?”

This is the question which, as you will remember from the last couple of chapters, the Hebrews were asking. They cast it as the difference between “gods” and “God, who is not-one-of-the-gods”. When they talk of “gods”, they are talking about projections of our forms of violence and screw-ups as ways of holding onto what little we’ve got, in case worse comes along. These are gods like Baal or Thor, “National Security”, “Disaster Insurance” or fertility rites. Collective projections like these have a way of acquiring what seems like an independent reality, usually one requiring that we sacrifice this or that inconvenient other for some supposed social good. Thus, we can wage battles against each other by proxy. That’s the world of the gods.

The Hebrew question is “OK. We know there is the social other, and within the social other, there are gods—collective fixations and projections which help us structure and protect ourselves (or so humans typically like to think, even though all they do is leave us further in the dark). Now, is that all that there is? Or is there *another* Other, who is *not-one-of-the-gods*? Who is not on the same level as any of those things, not in rivalry with anything that is, who is completely benign, holding things in being without there being any “out to get you” or handle by which they can be manipulated or negotiated with?”

Here I would like to bring out something concerning this other Other, which is often confusing: that little phrase, “not in rivalry with anything that is”, means more than we imagine. It does not mean: “So much bigger than everything else as to trump even the biggest thing or force that there is”. It means simply: “Not in any way part of the world of things that are, not on the same level as them at all, and therefore able

to occupy the same space as they do without being an extra ‘thing’”. It means being able to move them from within, as it were, without in any way displacing them.

This means that, when we talk about the other Other—about God—we are not at all talking about a large being outside the social other, a different “being” in a different “place”, as though our only access to this God were by some escape from the social other which forms us and is the universe of our life and experience. That would be the moonshot model of faith: a fragile desire fired off from an independent self towards a large, invisible space-deity.

Instead, we are talking about “another Other” that can only be discovered at the same anthropological level as the social other. The only way of discovering “another Other” is by undergoing an alteration in your way of being tied into the social other. The social other is not intrinsically the enemy of the other Other. In fact, it is through the same process by which we are brought into and held in being by the social other that we find another Other trying to get through to us, at the same level as us, without making any demand that we try to step outside it all and make a moonshot. The other Other works through the same things that bring us into being normally, and because it is not in rivalry with anything, it is able to undo from within the various forms of screwed-up-ness by which we are inclined to project and so deceive ourselves.

So, when we talk about faith in God, we are not referring to a piece of information about an extraterrestrial being. Instead, we are talking about being inducted, thanks to an act of communication from another Other who is not in rivalry with anything that exists, who is not over against anything at all. Being inducted, that is, into undergoing a huge psychological turnaround, of the sort which we began to look at in our last chapter, when Moses had his gaze drawn to a burning bush.

On the Oddness of the Centrality of “Belief”

With that in the background, I’d just like to make one other point about our uses of the words “faith” and “belief”. And that is how very odd it is that we’ve come to assume “religions” are centred around the notion

of faith. In fact, in a bizarre piece of unwitting Christian imperialism, we talk about other “faiths” and of “interfaith dialogue”. However, it is simply not true that most of the social and cultural forms of life we call “religions” are centred around the notion of faith. Nor is the notion of faith important to their self-understanding.

If you were a decent, law-abiding, pious, and devout member of ancient Roman or ancient Greek society, piety would have meant offering sacrifices to your house gods, the gods of your family. It would have meant, occasionally, taking part in public cults in temples, perhaps to the Emperor or the city. Your piety would be shown in going along with the way your ancestors did things (piety is, quite specifically, the virtue of respect for and docility towards fathers). At the same time, there would have been no shortage of stories about Jupiter and Hera, Minerva and Poseidon—the gods of Olympus, whether under their Greek or Latin names. However, no one would have thought that it mattered at all whether you had any personal sense that these beings really were cavorting around on Mount Olympus. There would have been no orthodoxy tests as to your degree of personal commitment to Apollo or to Zeus. You would not be expected to have a close, personal, subjective relationship with any of these divinities.

In fact, if you did have such a personal relationship, people would regard you as probably mad—and certainly dangerous—since having a personal relationship with one of these divinities probably meant getting sucked up into a frenzy in a cult and becoming possessed by the spirit of Dionysius, or whoever took you over. Decent members of Roman society would be well aware that the stories of the gods serve a purpose in the social scheme of binding people together. They’re like the Tooth Fairy and Father Christmas: you don’t need to believe in them or have a close personal relationship with them, but it’s quite essential that presents get delivered and coins get found under pillows.

If we look closer at our own religious background, the very religion which gave birth to Christianity—Second Temple Judaism—did not centre itself around faith, but around Torah. The central notion of what Judaism is about is a word we usually translate as “law”. Now, the word “law” should not be understood in a legalistic way, but as a dynamic, legally structured pathway to life. Nevertheless, it is quite

clear that it is the following of Torah, rather than being continuously concerned with what God thinks or does, that is important. It is a commonly repeated sentiment in rabbinic circles that, once God had given the Torah and left it up to humans to interpret it, the Almighty lost His right to give His opinion on this or that matter or to interfere with the interpretation.

A further example: the central concept around which the followers of Mohammed gather is Islam, a word whose most frequent translation is “submission”. (Different Muslim voices give different readings as to whether “submission” is the most accurate rendition of the word in modern English, and I don’t wish to enter into that fray). Nevertheless, the word has quite different connotations from the word “faith”, not the least of which is that, in the majority, Sunni Islam, once you are on the inside of the group, you have made your formal act of submission. You are in. Thereafter, the degree of your subjective involvement in the Muslim form of life is not of any great significance. There are practices that you should carry out but simply doing them is what matters. This is, of course, less true in the Sufi tradition, where subjectivity matters greatly. But it is worth remembering that this is a tiny minority within Islam, one which has long been considered suspicious by the majority of Islam precisely because some of its elements are seen as being somewhat like Christianity.

I suppose I’m glad that we don’t talk about “intersubmission dialogue”, but we pay a hefty price for the word “faith” having become an alternative word for “a religion”. And this is because Christianity has a rather dim view of religion, precisely because its central principle is faith. If what is absolutely central is not certain practices, but the process over time by which someone else shows themselves as trustworthy to you and enables you to relax into their trustworthiness, then this is necessarily going to downplay a whole lot of things that seem culturally important. What matters is not so much what *you do* as what someone else is doing, altering your subjectivity and producing a new you.

One of the consequences of this is that the form of knowing and trusting which we call faith tends to lead us to becoming *incredulous* concerning the value of apparently important sources of “religious” goodness, like fasting, mandated dietary regulations, the need for par-

ticular pilgrimages, god-given forms of dress or hair covering. Those are the equivalent of the highly polished shoes and stretched CV of the candidate who doesn't know his interviewer. But if Aunt Mildred is interviewing you, you know she's not really interested in your shoes or CV, but in you—who you are and what you are becoming—and so you relax into a response to her.

So please remember the oddness of the fact that *faith* is the gateway disposition by which you are or are not Christian. Not a one-off profession, or an act of submission, or some ritual mutilation, but you being inducted over time by someone who is not in rivalry with you in any way at all, into knowing them and relaxing into their loving of you, such that you find yourself becoming someone more than you knew yourself to be.

Sticking With this Level

We've seen that the process of God's revealing Godself to the Hebrew people as not-one-of-the-gods took a long time, and was experienced by them as the undoing of certain ways of being held together. These undoings were also signs that a new form of being-together was being created. And we've seen that all of this has incidence at the anthropological level: the more God reveals Godself, the more we learn about who we are. Now we will begin discussing Jesus—and I will still ask you to remain firmly at the anthropological level.

This may seem difficult, since often enough in presentations of Christianity, it sounds as though everything was going along as normal, when suddenly a bunch of half-crazed individuals from within the Hebrew cultural universe started talking about Jesus as though he embodied the demand for yet another moonshot: now, in addition to the other Other, you've got to believe certain implausible things about this individual, and since you can't see either him *or* the other Other, you must just make a moonshot. Indeed, *because* it's a double-moonshot, it's especially meritorious.

This is a serious misreading of a crucial point, namely the role of the apostolic witnesses in our faith. The apostolic witnesses—Peter

and company—were a group of people at our level, chosen by Jesus, to be his witnesses. They were chosen to accompany him throughout the time of his public ministry, from his Baptism in the River Jordan until his Ascension into Heaven. Although Jesus did indeed give them certain teachings which they have passed on, much more important is the way they underwent what he did. Jesus acted out something in their midst at an entirely human level, and they are the witnesses to that acting out, and as a result of that acting out.

I like to use the illustration of a meteorite and its crater. Many of you will have seen satellite pictures of the Gulf of Mexico near the Yucatán Peninsula. Those pictures reveal a massive concavity on the seafloor, and both geologists and astronomers say that this is where a significant meteorite hit the Earth many thousands of years ago. (There was a time when this was thought to have something to do with the end of the dinosaurs). Now, there are no bits of meteorite left that anybody can find. However, by studying the concavity, scientists are able to determine the dimensions, size, weight, speed at which it was travelling when it hit the Earth, its density, and so forth.

In other words, the concavity—something entirely at the level of this Earth—delates, gives away, the force that produced it: something which came, literally and physically, from outside the Earth's atmosphere. Well, the same, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said about the apostolic witnesses. Think of them as the concavity in whose midst something happened such that they began to bear witness to it, in part by telling people about it but in part by being the observable remnant of what had happened. These were people who found themselves undergoing a complete change in their perception of who God is and what their own culture was about. This was not so much because they had been given extra information, but because somebody at the human level had done something in their midst which included going to his death and being seen by them thereafter, even if somewhat mysteriously, in such a way that they found themselves completely re-oriented in their picture of who God is, what it means to be part of Israel, what it means to be human.

So, it was something that happened to them at the anthropological, human level that they bear witness to. And what they are doing

when they pass on their faith to us is not saying: “This happened to us, now close your eyes and make a moonshot”. They are saying: “This has happened to us, and it is producing this and this and this effect in our lives. If you believe that we are trustworthy witnesses, then please step alongside us and allow yourself to become part of the same concavity we find ourselves becoming. As you become part of this concavity, you will find that the same happenings that we underwent will surely and faithfully reproduce themselves in your lives as well. So, the concavity will get bigger, and there will be further ripples out from it.”

This is why, in the Creed, Christians say: “We believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”. It is not a demand for loyalty to an exclusive club; it is a statement about the place within which we are brought to faith. We are brought to faith inside and as part of an anthropologically structured concavity. It is very definitely the other Other alone who is the protagonist of our faith, the one who induces us to relax into knowing ourselves loved and held by him over time. However, this process of relaxation occurs because we can trust the apostolic witness as being a truth-bearing concavity. It is our listening and beginning to undergo something at this horizontal level that opens us up to undergoing something genuinely more than anthropological—vertical, if you like, but without ever being less than thoroughly anthropological. Rather than being subjected to the emotional blackmail of a transcendent demand for a moonshot, we are encouraged to enter a space where we regularly find ourselves able to pick up a communication from “elsewhere”.

Turning the Equation Around: Jesus’ Ministry as the Creation of Belief

With this in mind, I hope we can start to see what Jesus was about in a richer way. And one of the things that Jesus was about was creating faith. He was doing something so we could believe. Effectively, he was saying, if you will allow me to paraphrase:

I know that you are susceptible. I know that you find it very difficult to believe God loves you. I know you are inclined to be

frightened of death. And because of that, you are inclined to run from death, mete it out to others, and engage in various forms of self-delusion and self-destruction. You find it difficult to imagine that things really will be well and that you are being held in being by someone who is utterly trustworthy. All this I know. But I want to nudge you into trusting that the One who brought you and everything else into being is actually trustable—not out to get you. You can believe God. Believe in God, believe in me. In fact, I am going to act my life out in such a way as to make it possible for you to believe: I am setting out to prove God's trustworthiness for you.

In fact, in John's Gospel the very phrase appears: "Believe in God, believe also in me...and now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe." (John 14:1, 29). John actually frames Jesus' speech before the Passion as an explanation of how he is inducing belief.

When I think this through, the image I have is of Evel Knievel. I know it dates me, but he was a major motorbike stuntman of a generation or so ago. In any case, you can imagine Evel Knievel with a group of novice bikers: he is saying to them: "OK, I'm going to drive up a ramp, shoot over seven double-decker buses through a hoop of flame, and then come down the other side safely". And the novices say: "It can't be done". So he goes ahead and does it. Some of the novices then say: "Oh, well, maybe it can be done after all!" And after a bit, one of them plucks up courage and does it. And then more people come and do it, and it becomes ordinary. So suddenly Evel Knievel says: "OK, now, I'll jump over fourteen double-decker buses, and a hoop of flame, and the Grand Canyon!" And everyone says to him: "You've lost your mind". And then he does it, and guess what: after a bit of stopping and starting, the novice bikers get used to the idea that it is possible after all, and then they find themselves doing the impossible once again. (In fact, this is a standard human thing. Once someone has broken a record, it won't be that long before someone breaks it again. The record gets stretched over time, since what used to seem impossible has suddenly become ordinary. Around the world in eighty days, anyone?)

Well, this is the sort of image behind what Jesus is talking about in John's Gospel. He says: "You are going to do greater things than I, because I have gone to my death." In other words: "I am going to do the equivalent of Evel Knievel. But rather than a silly hoop and a sillier star-spangled motorcycle suit, I'm going to go and actually inhabit the space of death, that which so frightens you, and which you think is impossible to get through, so that you will no longer be run by fear of it. Because I'm doing that, you will be able to do the same and much more. Greater things than I did you will be able to do, because you will no longer be run by fear. It is to your advantage that I go to my death, not because you will then have me out of the way but because, on the contrary, I will have opened up for you the possibility of no longer being run by this bugbear of death".

Do you see what he's doing? He's setting out to produce faith. His idea is not: "I need you to have a list of propositions that you must believe", but, on the contrary: "I do wish I could get it through to your susceptible, paranoid, numbskull minds that you can trust God and trust me. I'm going to act in such a way as to try and prove this to you, so that you will thereafter be free of your fear of death".

This is, incidentally, very exactly how the epistle to the Hebrews expresses this same reality:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Another image: many of you will have seen more or less cheesy films, such as *The Exorcist*, which often feature deathbed scenes. In these, some photogenically gowned priest, usually a Jesuit, comes up to the dying person with a crucifix to hold before their eyes while they are dying. And of course, in the cheesy Anglo-American film tradition, the purpose of this is to produce repentance in the sinner. The priest holds the crucifix over the dying sinner so that he may repent—a typically modern, moralistic reading of such things. In fact, the whole point of

holding a crucifix over the eyes of a dying person is much better understood from the Evel Knievel model. It is to say: “He has been there before you, so it’s OK. You needn’t fear. Relax. Allow yourself to be taken through this time”.

I hope you see that this shifts the whole burden of faith. Rather than an imperious demand that you should try to believe seventeen impossible things before breakfast, this is a picture of someone desperately trying to get across to you that they are trustable. They are not making a demand on us so much as doing the work of inducing us into relaxing. And this is central to what I’ve been talking about all along: the whole burden of faith is on the person who is trying to get you to relax, not on you! Faith is the disposition in you which someone else has worked hard to produce—a gift in you from the person who did the work of producing it. This is a complete reversal of the way in which we are accustomed to hearing such things presented.

The Place of Death and Resurrection Within the Gift of Faith

I want to bring out two further dimensions of what Jesus was trying to prove to us by going to his death in the way that he did—two things he was trying to get across. The first of these concerns the power and the deathlessness of God. By occupying the space of death and not being run by it, which is what Jesus did, and being shown thereafter not to have been dominated by it, Jesus was making available to us something about God, which is that God has nothing to do with death at all—is not involved with it, is not moved by it, is not frightened by it. It is not a serious blip on God’s radar screen. It is merely one of the contours of being the sort of creatures we are. Of so little concern is it to God that God is not in rivalry with death in any way, nor is God’s life. God is not frightened of death, contaminated by death, or touched by death at all. So it was that Jesus, in going to his death in the way he did, was able to show up the complete non-involvement of God in death by being a dead man held in life. A dead man for whom the life of God had rendered his death moot. In other words, Jesus assumed death into life and thus rendered it non-toxic forever.

Please notice what this means: Jesus' death and Resurrection is God's way of proving that he is able and willing to hold humans in being through death, starting here and now. We can already begin to live as though death were not. We can start to trust that God will hold us in being through death. And a key result of this is that our view of everything need no longer be shot through with futility. After all, if death really were a definitive reality, then why bother with life? Why bother with a whole lot of things if we're all dead in the long run? Why bother to stand up for justice? You'll only be killed. There doesn't seem to be much of a project going on, so why bother to stand up and make cultural change, paying a price now so that others will reap the benefits later? You might as well go along with the rich and powerful who run the show, and let them get away with organising things to suit themselves. It's safer that way. I mean, why risk anything? At least I can save my skin for a bit.

When Jesus occupies the space of death for us and makes it non-toxic, it has everything to do with revealing the utter aliveness of God. This aliveness makes everything that is into part of a vibrant project heading for something much bigger than we can imagine. Furthermore, it is a project in which we can come to dare to participate. It is actually worthwhile to learn how to want things, long for things, and start working to bring them about. You can start to discover yourself on the inside of a project that has no end. So it's worth standing up for the weak, the vulnerable, those who are being cast out and hurried to death; you can afford to be generous, since you are part of a project that is being fulfilled beyond the scope of your life, and that participation is imperishable.

You can see how justice, for instance, can become more important than being alive, because justice is part of the Creator's plan, and you can be involved in that. Being dead is no obstacle to that. You can begin to glimpse, perhaps, why Jesus says things like: "The one who believes in me has eternal life". The very fact of believing that Evel Knievel could and did go through the hoop over the double-decker buses was already the beginning of the draw that would take the novice biker through and over. So the very fact of believing in Jesus, who occupies the space of

death, is already the beginning of the draw that takes you into the same space, where you find yourself growing and expanding through it.

The Place of the Forgiving Victim Within the Gift of Faith

It is not only the power and deathlessness of God that is made visible, manifest—three-dimensional, if you like—in Jesus’ going to his death. For us, death is also inseparable from the realities of shame, powerlessness, pain, failure, and loss. Jesus didn’t only go to occupy a space of death in some abstract, hygienic sense. He went to occupy the space of one who is thrown out in order that others might survive. In other words, he went to his death as a victim, as the sort of person whom others gang up against. The reason this is important is that it catches us at our worst, as it were. The space of the victim is the kind of place none of us at all ever wants to occupy, and if we find ourselves occupying it, it is kicking and screaming. More to the point, we spend a great deal of time pointing fingers and ensuring that other people occupy that space, not us.

By going into and occupying that space deliberately, without any attraction to it, Jesus is not only proving that we needn’t be afraid of death. He is also proving that we need not be afraid of shame or disgrace, or of the fact that we have caused others to experience shame and disgrace. It is as if he were saying: “Yes, you did this to me, as you do it to each other, and here I am undergoing this, occupying its space, but without being embittered or resentful. In fact, I was keen to occupy this space so as to get across to you that I am not only utterly alive but utterly loving. There is nothing you can do, no amount of evil that you can do to each other, that will stop my loving you. Nothing you can do to separate yourselves from me. The moment you perceive me here, on the Cross, occupying this space for you and detoxifying it, you will know that I am determined to show you I love you, and I am in your midst as your forgiving victim. This is how I prove my love to you: by taking you at your very lowest and worst point and saying: “Yes, you do this to me, but I’m not concerned about that; let’s see whether we can learn a new way of being together”.

So, it's not merely that Jesus was the visible acting-out, on this human, anthropological level, of the way that the other Other is not run by death, and wants to make it possible that we, completely human as we are, should not be run by death. Jesus was also visibly acting out (again on this human, anthropological level) that God is not frightened of us, not scandalised by our cruelty, our violence, our incompetence, our stupidity. In fact, God loves us so much that God wants us to understand how, unlike with us, there is no "over against" or "out to get you" in God at all. Instead, he wants us to live much richer, more fulfilling lives than those we manage while survival by scapegoating is our default game plan. In other words, Jesus wanted to make it three-dimensional for us that God *loves us*.

On Being Spoken Into Being by One Who Loves Me

Now I'd like to look at some effects of the other Other having entered into the social other in this way. The other Other has become present as a protagonist at the human level, and we find that, little by little, he speaks us into being. And the one who speaks us into being loves us. Normally, of course, it is the social other that speaks us into being, gives us identity. And, as we have seen before, there is an element of love in this, and an element of stability. But it is hardly definitive. We know how easy it is for us to depend entirely on the social other for approval, for identity, for a sense of who we are and what we are worth. And we also know how easily we can lose ourselves, sell ourselves out, in order to win or keep the approval of people. The regard of the social other is a highly ambivalent thing: often it allows us to feel a sense of importance and belonging, but only temporarily—and only when it is convenient to others who seem to have our best interests at heart, but who don't really.

With Jesus having occupied the space for us, which he did, in the midst of the apostolic witnesses, we find ourselves being nudged into another daring act: letting go of our need for immediate approval. Instead, we are empowered to discover ourselves as being liked and loved into being by someone who has no ulterior motive, no convenience. I

find that I am being spoken into a being that is not run by death, given a “self” that is much, much more than anything I could have come up with on my own account, because I am now able to trust that someone who does not know death is bringing me into being out of nothing, and holding me in being, so that I need have no fear of ever being nothing. In other words, faith is what enables me to relax enough to be stretched, until I become something much more than I could ever imagine.

One of the odd consequences of this is that, as it happens in your life, it ceases to become so important to be good. And this is something very odd about Christianity compared with the world of religions in general: its presupposition, its starting point, is that we’re in a mess. We don’t start being good and then screw up; we are screwed up from the outset. And, as we find ourselves loved, so we are able to let go of our attempts at being good, which are usually very dangerous and hurt other people. In fact, as we find ourselves loved, and so able to give up manipulating people into loving us, so we also find ourselves able to do genuinely good things out of generosity rather than out of a need to make ourselves presentable or to justify ourselves.

Remember Aunt Mildred and the job interviewer! This is what the Reformation meant when it said that we are not justified by works, but by grace through faith. If you need to justify yourself, it is a sign that you are not relaxed about how loved you are, which means you don’t know the love that your interlocutor has for you. When someone needs to justify themselves, it is a sure sign of lovelessness—they don’t know they are loved for who they are. Whereas the sure sign of someone who knows they are loved is that they don’t need to justify themselves at all. The Reformation was quite right to insist that, because somebody loves us gratuitously, we’re able to let go of the need to do good things. The pity, from a Catholic point of view, was that they didn’t go far enough. It’s precisely as you stop *having to do* good things that you may find yourself wanting to respond to love by doing something good. It’s when you no longer have to give somebody a bunch of flowers out of duty that you may suddenly discover a longing to make such a huge statement of love on your own.

The collapse of your forced self-presentation, the dropping of your mask, is also the beginning of the ability to give because you—a

you that you didn't even know was there—wants to. You find yourself doing things out of love, and those are the sorts of “works” which show that faith is alive.

On Sitting Peacefully With Not Being a Truth-teller

To continue in this somewhat strange vein: all this suggests—and I think it is true—that once people start relaxing into the gift of faith, they apparently become worse people. Why? Because they are no longer so concerned with tidying up their story. If you're constantly aware that at any time, cops may come by and you will be vulnerable to them, you will always have a story ready. Your self-presentation will be tidy, complete, and well-defended. However, if the cops are not going to come along and find you, then you don't need to prepare your story; you don't need to have your tidy-up act right.

One of the first fruits of the relaxation which comes with faith is a loss of a story of goodness, a loss of a defensive story, a self-innocenting story about “how right I am”, because you no longer need a story about how right you are. You are being told a story about how much you are loved. And this is what it means to see yourself as a sinner: far from being some moralistic demand that you browbeat yourself into coming up with a list of alleged failings, being able to see yourself as a sinner is merely the sign that you are able to hold yourself peacefully and realistically as being who you are, non-defensively, because you know yourself loved. You are no longer frightened of being seen to be—or actually being—a failure.

And of course, there flows from this one of the things we saw in our first chapter, which is that you start to tell a much richer and more relaxed story about yourself: you are able to become a much more flexible revisionist historian. You no longer have to iron out the inconvenient wrinkles in your own account of why you did this or that, fleeing from certain glimpses into your motivations, fearful of others who remind you of an ugliness that you would rather not see (but still suspect is in you, so you repress the suspicion). The whole need to de-

fend yourself, to give a defensive, self-justifying account of yourself, starts to disappear.

Part of undergoing this being-loved is the realisation that I have been telling lies. I have been giving an account of myself, have bought into it and elaborated it, in a way that has not been truthful. In other words, I am a liar. And the strange thing about the gift of faith—the ability to relax into the entirely sure trustability, truthfulness, and loving kindness of the other Other—is that it hugely increases in us our awareness of not being truth-tellers. And it enables us to become more relaxed about that, as we find ourselves being given elements of a story about—and including—ourselves, which is much richer, but also much more realistic, than the one we held onto before.

This element of the gift of faith is especially worth dwelling on by those of us who preach in Church, or teach in religious spaces, and therefore are more strongly tempted to “get it right”. We can all distinguish between someone for whom faith is an ideology (and who therefore tells lies while being convinced that they are being truthful) and someone who is undergoing the gift of faith, and thus actually finds herself speaking more tentatively, with more discernment about how involved she has been in lies. We can distinguish between these two and detect that there’s a certain narrowness that goes along with having to stick to a line, and a certain spaciousness which goes along with finding yourself held in the midst of truth. And we can tell when someone is being a charlatan.

When we see someone who is obviously undergoing something that is not from them, part of the truthfulness which emerges is their ability to sit peacefully with themselves as liars. This seems odd, but it is significant for those of us who are asked to give witness in some way or other. I’m not advocating being dishonest; I’m advocating relaxing and not being too disturbed as we discover how dishonest we are.

Doubt, Crises of Faith, and Occlusions of the Self

I hope that as we have advanced, it has become ever clearer what the role of doubt is within the gift of faith. You may remember the picture with which we started, with faith as some ideology to which one

must adhere very tightly and make a moonshot. In that picture, what we call a doubt appears as some sort of weakness—a failure to send up a strong enough moonshot, or an insufficient verve in my partisan conviction about our ideology. Well, within that sort of world view: “doubt” is something equal and opposed to “faith” and to be regarded as an enemy—and potentially a devastating one.

But if the picture I have been developing with you here is true, then a completely different appreciation of doubt emerges. What we call doubt would be something perfectly normal and indeed to be expected. If someone else is speaking you into being, you will quickly find that, despite an initial familiarity with yourself, over time you’ll find that things are no longer quite the same. You will find yourself strangely unaccustomed to yourself. Bits of familiarity will be stripped away, and unknown bits will start to appear. Rather than finding yourself in a well-known home, you will begin to find that, here and there, you are on a building site. And this will mean finding yourself slightly lost, from time to time, as regards who you thought you were. You’ll have to learn anew how to distinguish between things you thought firm and confident about yourself, and things which are only now becoming clear, between floors and stairs already in place, and floors and doors which are yet to be finished.

In other words, doubt is a constitutive part of faith, not an equal and opposite threat to it. It is *because* you find yourself becoming something different that *you would expect* there to be bumps. If we start by thinking of our fixed selves making a moonshot towards God, then on the occasions we find ourselves being shaken up, we imagine we are undergoing a crisis of faith, as though it is somehow God who is suffering the consequences of our being shaken up. In fact, this is getting things exactly the wrong way round!

What you would expect to happen, as the other Other nudges you into daring to become something rather more than you thought you were, is that you will have crises of self, times when you will undergo a “loss of world”. Things will not appear as they were; you won’t know quite how you’re oriented. You will lose certain feelings which you have become accustomed to thinking of as “religious” feelings. However—and this is very important—faith is not a feeling. Faith is the disposition

that keeps on even when you no longer have any feelings. Feelings are part of what assures us of familiarity. But the gift of faith is what enables you to stretch beyond the familiar when our feelings don't give us their customary reports.

What we call crises of faith are, more often than not, far better described as “occlusions of the self”. They are bits of us cracking up, and because of that, we are a bit unmoored as to who we are and how we belong. But this is exactly what you would expect if someone is nudging you into a bigger world! You would expect to undergo a loss of world—your own, smaller world—and therefore a temporary loss of vision as to how trustworthy it all is. However, these moments of loss, of discombobulation, are internal to the process of someone gifting you with faith. They are not a threat to that faith.

This was understood rather more clearly until the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Starting then, the notion of faith as a certain propositional rightness (one linked to a particular kind of partisan belonging) began to take over the more old-fashioned view of faith as a process of being given an habitual disposition to let yourself be taken somewhere else. It was the time of the Wars of Religion, around the same time as René Descartes was elaborating his philosophy. This was the period in which it became important for religion not to be about a virtue (and a virtue is a habitual disposition) but about a belief. A belief that made you one of a party—the Catholic Party or the Protestant Party, for the king or against the king. Religious orthodoxy became the sign of being fully signed up for your party. The propositional and the ideological take on “faith” began to take over from the habitual.

Nevertheless, the habitual is the more reliable and more traditional understanding of faith. And within the habitual understanding, doubt and the crisis of the self—what we call crises of faith—are normal. They are not at all the end of the world. They are exactly what you would expect! It's precisely because you are relaxed about being held in being by someone who is bigger than you that you can also be relaxed enough to undergo crises of self. If there isn't anyone bigger than you holding you in being, then you have to hold tight to yourself, and not allow yourself the luxury of being re-worked from within.

On Infants and Zimmer Frames: Looking at Faith through the Eyes of the One Who Gives It

I want to leave you with an image which I hope makes sense of various things we've talked about. It's a ridiculous image of infants and Zimmer frames (which I think in the US are called "walkers").

Let us imagine a room full of infants—infants without any adults. In fact, there are no adults around, and the infants have never seen an adult. All they've ever seen are other infants. So they crawl around all over the place, on all fours. They've never seen anybody standing on two legs, so all that they know is that one wriggles on knees and bellies as best one can.

Well, let's imagine that, in the midst of this infantile mayhem, one of the infants starts to perch on two legs and even tries to stand up. You can imagine the reaction from all the others: "Who do you think you are? Think you're better than us? Getting up on two legs is quite ridiculous! Get down on all four like the rest of us, or we'll bring you down to size. This is something up with which we will not put! If God had meant us to stand on two legs, he would quite clearly not have given us four".

Well, we can imagine the kind of attitude this would inspire—a severe attack of "tall poppy syndrome" as it's called in some parts of the world. But this is not, of course, the human experience. The experience of infants is that there are adults around, and if they weren't, the infants wouldn't live. So from a very early age, and long before they can do such things themselves, infants see adults walking on two legs. Then there comes a certain stage when adults start to help infants learn to walk. Let's remember that, at this stage, these little bundles don't yet have the muscles to walk, and walking is actually physically impossible. Never mind having any theoretical understanding of how it is one day going to be possible—no infant is going to learn the theory of ambulatory locomotion before they walk.

So the infants do not know it is possible. In fact it is clearly impossible for them, though unbeknownst to them they are primed to do it. Yet little by little, adults will start helping them, holding their hands, leading them, with the adult walking or knee-shuffling backwards. This

will last a few steps, and then the bundle will collapse on the floor in a giggly heap. The adult will repeat this, and the few steps will grow into more steps. All along, the adult will keep looking at the child, so the child can see the adult looking at them. If they look down, they will fall; but as long as they look towards the adult looking at them, they will keep going.

Then, after a certain time, the muscles begin to acquire the requisite density. (And please remember, the baby doesn't know it needs muscular density—it is being inducted into the practice of developing the muscular density that will enable it to walk). So then the adult no longer needs to hold on to the infant's hands, but only to stand back a bit, and the toddler can launch itself with ever-increasing confidence across the gap to the adult. Then the gap gets bigger and bigger, the toddling becomes more and more reliable, until suddenly, as more than one parent has told me, there's a sort of "click" when the infant gets it and is able to walk without incentive from then on. After that, the little bugger is basically going to be out of control forever.

So there is an initial stage when it is normal for the adult to take quite seriously the business of looking into the eyes and holding the hands of the infant. They are not only encouraging the child to do the impossible, but also inducting them into believing it is possible. Later, there comes a moment when it no longer occurs to the child that there was ever a time when it couldn't do this thing. It never questions or even thinks about walking. Walking has become second nature, something completely reliable and trustworthy. This is an entirely normal process. The adult has inducted the child into a habitual disposition to do what was once impossible.

Now, let us imagine a lazy adult, one who doesn't really like children. This adult might say: "I can't bear children. I really can't be bothered to hang around and induct this awful thing into being able to walk. It will interfere with my social life. I know what I'll do: I'll have some infant-sized walkers (or Zimmer frames) manufactured. Then I'll put the blighter in the frame, make it hold onto the side, and leave it to look after itself".

You can imagine a whole generation of children who've never seen an adult walk, never actually learned to walk themselves, and instead

have merely learned to manipulate Zimmer frames. They may come to know Zimmer frames very well, and develop wonderful fencing matches with Zimmer frames, become really adroit at all sorts of yet-to-be-invented Zimmer sports. But the fact is that they would have been given a crutch rather than a habit, a prop rather than a disposition. And they will come to associate their adult state with the crutch. The lazy adult will have deprived them of the possibility of freedom.

A generous adult inducts the child into doing something which will leave the child independent, so that the child thereafter no longer needs to rely on the adult. The lazy adult would have short-circuited that possibility. The generous adult will have inducted the child into the habitual belief that it can do something which, at one stage of its life, was clearly impossible: to walk. And because of that induction, it's walking may take it on treks to the Himalayas, or to becoming a football player, a billiards champion, or simply someone who walks to work. Endless possibilities will open out for it, none of which the adult will have prescribed.

In other words, the child received a habit as part of belonging to a relationship. Things would have been quite different if the one who might have had a relationship with it had opted out of the relationship, saying: "I can't be bothered to spend the time with you, here's this substitute". Ironically, the adult who gave the child the frame and then disappeared from the picture, all the while justifying themselves by saying they've left the child freer to do his own thing, has not actually left the child more free. In fact, they've severely crippled the child and made it much, much less free. The one who stays in the picture and induces the disposition to try impossible things is actually the one who gives the child what it needs to be free—free to be entirely different from the adult if it wants to be.

This image goes to the heart of the polemic which St Paul wages in the New Testament concerning the Law. If God says to God's children: "You know, I can't really be bothered to induct you into freedom, so instead I'm going to give you a law. You grasp that law, you practice it, and that will define who you are as human beings. However, I'm afraid that I don't have the time to spend looking you in the eye and getting you to practice walking freely. I'd rather spend time wandering round

on a celestial safari, taking pot shots at minor divinities in other cultures and scalping them”.

When Paul talks about the law of Moses, he’s saying: “Yes, the law is perfectly fine, it’s perfectly reasonable. It’s a frame, a good thing in itself, not a bad thing. Children occasionally have carts that they can stand up with and push at the same time as they learn to walk, and these are temporary educational toys. But we would all be worried if their grasp of their cart was so great that they never learned to walk. The problem is not with the cart; it’s with how you grasp it. Instead, they must be nourished into learning how to walk” (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, 13:11).

And this is the point of the gift of faith. It is the disposition produced in us by someone who really, really wants us to be free, not bowed down or crippled. Someone who is prepared to go to great lengths to induct us into a habit, a disposition of being able to walk freely, not to be trapped by gods or frightened of death. “For freedom he has set us free” is Paul’s great cry in the epistle to the Galatians (5:1).

Do you begin to get a sense of how strange it is that the gift of faith is absolutely central to Christianity? How absolutely it is linked to the notion of freedom? For just as a parent does not induct a child into the habit of walking so that the child will thereafter follow it around and do exactly what the parent does, so the other Other who produces in us the habitual disposition not to bow down to gods and not to be run by death doesn’t do these things so that we will “behave properly”. Instead, the attitude of someone who seeks to give you faith is someone who is not in rivalry with you, is not concerned with the inevitable mistakes you will make, knows that perfectionism is the enemy of learning and of growth and wants you to be able to discover for yourself what is good for you, where you will take it, what you will make of the adventure.

So faith is the habitual disposition induced in us by the other Other, which allows us to relax and be stretched beyond our possibilities, and this turns out also to be something like a huge, happy, bracing challenge to freedom: “For God’s sake, stand up and be godless!”

CHAPTER 6:

Undergoing Atonement: The Reverse-Flow Sacrifice

This chapter is the midpoint of our course, so I've structured it somewhat differently from the other chapters. We are looking at what is sometimes called the Atonement, a central claim of the Christian faith: that Christ died for us, or more specifically, for our sins.

As many of you are aware, there are various ways of talking about this, not all of which are helpful. In fact, many are downright scandalous, they make God out to be someone whose wrath needed satisfying by some sort of blood payment, and Jesus turned out to be that blood payment. In other words, these are theories that begin with an image of a God who requires vengeance and then work out ways of reconciling Jesus' death with the satisfaction of that vengeance.

I want to be much more conservative and old-fashioned than these so-called "atonement theories". I want to take you back to something which is difficult for us to remember, because we have so little imagination of these things: long before "Atonement" was a theory, it was a liturgy. And the whole purpose of a liturgy is that it is something that people *undergo*—something is done for, towards, or at them.

For this reason, I'm going to ask you to occupy three different imaginative positions within three different stories, so that you can sink into the very strange sense of something being done for, towards, or at you. Typically, when we start thinking and theorizing, we imagine an "it" out there, and an intellectual structure we need to put together to hold it all in place. Here, however, I'm going to ask you to imagine yourselves in a position where something is happening to you, in front of you. It is rather different from grasping something. Instead, it is al-

lowing something to unfold towards you, and to affect you as it unfolds towards you—or enfolds you into it.

There are going to be four different imaginative exercises, and in three of them, I will be asking you to imagine yourself as part of a different ethnic group. In the first case, we will be looking at a liturgical movement towards us; in the second, a political movement towards us; the third will be a personal movement towards us. As a cumulative result of these exercises, I hope you will perceive how Jesus going to his death brought together the liturgical, the ethico-political, and the personal in a highly creative acting-out of something towards, at, or for us. An acting out which is entirely removed from any notion at all of vengeance in God.

Ancient Hebrews

The first ethnic group I would like you to imagine is the Ancient Hebrews. And I mean really Ancient Hebrews, from the time of the first Temple in Jerusalem, the Temple of Solomon, and so some time before the destruction of that Temple in 587 BCE. I want you to imagine yourselves attending the rite of the Atonement at the annual festival of that name in the Temple. This is, admittedly, going to take quite some imagination, since we don't know where the first Temple stood, or what it looked like. All the references to it and imagery derived from it come down to us from the Second Temple period, so from after about 500 BCE, and those references and images come from people who had fragments of memories of the more ancient rite and looked back to it, wanting to re-enact in their own time something that would be a worthy successor to what had gone on in the Solomon's Temple of their imaginations.

For the rite of the Atonement as it was performed in the second Temple—and of which we have textual evidence—was already, even at that time, an attempt to remember how things had been done in a much earlier period. People looked back to that earlier period as a time when such things were really real, and done exceptionally well, in contrast to their own time, when it seemed somehow second-rate. Any

of you who are Catholics know what I mean: some young people have convinced themselves that the Tridentine Mass, authorised by Pope Pius V, was somehow more real and more holy than the rite of the Mass authorised by Pope Paul VI in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, which they regard as somehow shoddy by comparison. Never mind that more elderly folk who well knew the Mass from before the council don't at all share their nostalgia, remembering it as just as shoddy and banal as anything subsequent generations have come up with. For many, evidence doesn't matter in the face of the enchanted imagination of a golden past.

So let us imagine the people of the Second Temple period as somewhat similar: they were imagining a golden era in the past when everything in the Temple had been as it should have been. In light of that, they imagined their own Temple, when they finally rebuilt it, as what I would call Diet Pepsi in comparison with their memories of the Real Coke. In the original Temple, the Real Coke, there had been a real Holy Place, inside which were various sacred objects, all of which had disappeared when the First Temple was destroyed. None of them survived into the Second Temple. These objects included the Mercy Seat, the Throne upon which King Solomon had been crowned and worshipped as King and as god, sitting as he had between the two cherubim, which was the place of God's Presence. There were also held to be present the original Ark of the Covenant, a Jar of Manna from the wilderness wanderings, Aaron's Rod, and a perpetual lamp or fire. None of these were in the new Temple, whose Holy of Holies was completely empty. Indeed, part of the expectation of many faithful Hebrew people close to the time of Christ was that God would eventually bring back the Old Temple, along with all the ancient sacred objects. And we will see, later on, how St Luke interprets God doing just that in some of the passages of his Gospel.

However, you are Hebrews of the First Temple period. In other words, we're engaged in reimagining a re-imagining, remembering something that happened long before anyone had living memories of it. And you are in the Temple. Now consider this: being in an ancient Temple was not like being in a modern Church or Synagogue. It was much more like being in a slaughterhouse, an abattoir. The most obvious visi-

ble function of the priest was as a butcher. The High Priest might make a ceremonial stab at some animals. Still, the regular priests and Levites would spend a great deal of time slaughtering beasts, draining their blood, and dividing their carcasses according to prescribed formulae.

So, one of the first things you might imagine would be a very smelly and noisy place. Blood, grease, fat, smoke, squawking, lowing, baah-ing, moo-ing, and so on, as well as the smells proper to agricultural environments. Remember that, to supply the many animals needed for slaughter, there would have been significant corrals beside the Temple. Corralled animals that are going to be slaughtered tend to get frightened and defecate all over the place. The role of incense in the Temple would have been vital indeed! It was not only God's nostrils that needed a pleasing odour rising Heavenwards. Everyone else needed a good dose of disinfectant and hygiene as well.

So, not the parish Church of Our Lady of Secularisation, but an abattoir, in which regular, persistent killings of vast numbers of cattle, sheep, goats and birds were carried out on a daily basis. There would have been a complex system of sluices allowing blood and other remains to drain away and be washed out, all of which would have required care and attention. Not a nice, clean, clinical, hygienic holy place. If you have ever attended a bullfight in Spain and visited the area where the bulls are kept before the fight, or the area where they are butchered afterwards, you may have caught a glimpse of what an ancient temple would have been like.

Now, as part of building up your imagination of the Temple, it would be good to have a notion of its purpose. Here you are, in an outer court. Up ahead of you, on a raised area, there would have stood the altar of sacrifice, and then beyond that, further away from you, the Holy Place, containing the Holy of Holies. A veil surrounded it, so you could not see into it or see anything that was going on in it.

Given our modern imaginations of such things, it might have seemed as though the Temple was a place where certain specially dressed people went to offer sacrifices to God, who dwelt mysteriously and invisibly at the centre of it all. Nevertheless, that would have been a mistake. That would be what I call the Aztec understanding of Temple sacrifice: priests offering sacrifices to a bloodthirsty deity. The Ancient

Jewish understanding of the Temple and its purpose was quite different. In that understanding, the Temple started at the centre, from the Holy of Holies, and extended outwards from there. The whole point of the Temple was that it was a microcosm of Creation, because it was not *a god* who was being worshipped, but God the Creator. So the Holy of Holies was taken to be the place of God “outside” Creation, and so outside time, space, and matter. This “space” was beyond place, prior to the foundations of the world, forever. And this was where God dwelt with God’s holy angels and with Wisdom, a goddess-like figure with whom God created everything, brought everything into being, starting at the Holy Place. The Holy Place is, if you like, the Portal by which something on a totally different level to anything that is, is able to come among created things.

The idea is that, starting from the Holy Place, the movement of God and of Creation is outwards towards you who are standing in the court, about to witness the great ritual of the Atonement. Moving out from the invisible centre, the first sign of Creation would have been the Veil of the Temple surrounding the Holy Place. There were four acacia trunks (a type of flowering tree), and suspended from them was the Veil—an extremely rich, multi-coloured single piece of woven cloth without any seam. This veil symbolised the beginnings of materiality. So the Holy Place is outside matter, outside Creation. Matter starts at the Veil of the Temple. Material existence begins there, where you can see it.

From there, coming out towards you, would have been different objects symbolizing the different days of Creation. Close to the veil would have stood the lampstand, the great-grandfather of the menorah lamp stand which is used at Hanukkah festivals to this day. This lampstand symbolized the first day of Creation, the separation of light from darkness. Not far on, there would have been a large Holy Water stoup, called the Sea, indicating the separation of the waters from above from the waters from below. Beyond that, coming outwards towards us, would be different symbols and signs and statues representing the different days of Creation.

So the movement is from outside Creation, into Creation, starting with materiality and then gradually moving forwards to take in every-

thing that is being brought into being, with us participants and spectators at the outer limit of this movement. The movement is towards us.

The major feast in the first Temple was the feast of the Atonement, held once a year. In the Second Temple period, the Passover commemorating the Exodus from Egypt acquired greater importance, but not in the earlier period. The more ancient rite was that of the Atonement, and this rite presupposed various things which are not obvious to us now. The key idea was that God, YHWH, would come into materiality, vesting himself in the flesh of the High Priest so as to perform a sacrifice for God's people. This in itself presupposes something we glimpsed very briefly in Chapter 3, which is that the Ancient Hebrews understood there to be both a distinction and an absolute unity in God. On the one hand, God was the Almighty, the Invisible, the ancient of days, who could never be seen and of whom no image could possibly be made, of whom no anthropomorphism was possible and who was referred to as El-Elyon. On the other hand, God was YHWH, sometimes referred to as El, who might put in an appearance: walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, appearing with friends to Abraham at Mamre, or having his hindquarters glimpsed by Moses at Sinai. This distinction in unity is going to be very important in the rite of Atonement, since in that rite, YHWH, the Lord, is going to offer himself in sacrifice for his people, and the priests in turn are going to raise the portions which symbolize the Lord's sacrifice in thanksgiving to the Most High.

So, YHWH is going to come into materiality, vested in the flesh of the High Priest who will become YHWH for the day. He will come through the veil from the Holy Place, out into the court of the Temple, and offer sacrifice on the Altar of Sacrifice—YHWH coming out of Heaven towards us, as it were. And this rite will be the happy occasion on which the Creator restores Creation. This is well worth our understanding a little better, since we are so inclined to limit atonement to paying for someone's sins, but no: to make sense of the rite of the Atonement, we must start with the understanding that Creation itself gives witness to, points up, and shines with the glory of God. When all is well, everything that is sings and zings with vibrant delight in the glory of the Creator. The Creator, after all, made everything with wisdom. So when all is well, functioning and flowing according to wisdom, Wis-

dom can be seen as almost a separate person orchestrating, harmonising, and conducting everything to give praise to the Creator. However, our human experience is that our transgressions and failures actually cause everything that is to be trapped in futility, or “vanity” as it was called, so that rather than everything giving off sparks of God, we tend to live in a Creation which is bowed, tied down into futility. Futility has ensnared things so that they don’t tend to reflect the glory which they could and should. We humans, as part of Creation, are caught up in this futility. At the feast of the Atonement, the Creator comes into the midst of Creation to unsnarl Creation from within, to make everything flow anew towards giving glory to God. As though God were a divine Drano, coming in to clean out the sluice system from within and getting it all to flow and open out again.

Please notice two very important features of this understanding. Firstly, the rite is to do with Creation. It is the Creator coming into an unfinished or a tied-down Creation, so as to untie it—unleash its full potential, as it were—and make Creation full. Secondly, this ancient rite far, far precedes any of the lists of sins and transgressions with which we are familiar from the Bible. In other words, it is not the case at all that first there was first a list of sins, and in reaction to our disobedience of everything on that list, someone had to come in and pay for our mess. Resolutely the reverse: the notion of the Creator coming in to unsnarl Creation far predates any of the lists of sins we have. It is the process of atonement or forgiveness which enables us to imagine the ways we might have fallen short, or still *be* falling short, of what we are called to be and to become. Transgressions, “sins”, are derived from forgiveness, which massively precedes them and enables them to be understood at all, as that which can be forgiven.

So, having glanced at some of these elements, please take your places in the Temple Court in order to participate in the great rejoicing that is central to this feast—a memory of rejoicing still preserved in English when we refer to the Friday of Holy Week as Good Friday.

Actually, speaking of Good Friday, we’ll start our imagination on the night before. On the night before the Feast of Atonement, the High Priest was supposed to take himself to an Upper Room, preceded by a water bearer (or aquifer), where he would spend the night in prayer

and lamentation, allowing his soul to be troubled very greatly over the transgressions of the people. This was the sad, bleak moment of the feast. Probably others around the city would have joined in the mourning and lamentations, accompanied by appropriate psalms and songs. The actual feast day, however, when it dawned, was a happy occasion. For on this day, YHWH would come among his people to offer atonement for them.

At the beginning of the feast day, the High Priest would sacrifice a bullock for himself and his family. This was to make him ritually pure; after all, he was about to become YHWH for a day. Next, the High Priest cast lots over two identical sheep or goats. They needed to be indistinguishable, without any sort of blemish, for one of them was going to stand in for YHWH, and the other was going to stand in for Azazel, or the demon. The one chosen to stand in for YHWH was then sacrificed, its blood drained and collected, and its carcass divided up among the other priests. (We'll come across this again soon).

For the moment, the blood is the crucial part. The High Priest is going to take this into the Holy Place. There, he will sprinkle the blood over the Mercy Seat and other parts of the Holy Place, which will symbolise, in a priestly gesture, YHWH offering himself in self-sacrifice for the people. The lamb itself is a stand-in for the priest, who in turn is a stand-in for YHWH.

At this next stage, the High Priest is going to get into a brilliant white robe or tunic: pure, glistening white. This is because he is about to acquire angelic status—not as an angel in the modern sense, but in the more ancient sense of the “Angel of the Lord”, a localised instantiation of YHWH. It is as the “Instantiation of the Lord” that the High Priest will emerge from the Holy of Holies, in glistening white, with the Tiara bearing the Name YHWH—the tetragrammaton—upon his head, and maniples (or cufflinks) also bearing the name. Of course, we have a memory of this ritual moment in the narrative of the Transfiguration, where Jesus is revealed as the instantiation of YHWH in resplendent white. Naturally, Peter and the other disciples want to stay with this bit of the rite, so Jesus has to insist from then on that he is going to head down the hill and up to Jerusalem to perform the sacrifice, which is the next part of the rite.

In any case, the ancient Hebrew High Priest, clothed all in white, is about to enter the Holy of Holies. He has a cord attached around his ankle in case he dies, so he can be hauled out without anyone else having to go in. He is fully decked out in the Name, which only he can pronounce, and when he does so at the end of the rite, people will greet his coming among them by singing “Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord” (please take this literally, as it refers to the one bearing the Name). So, we who are standing outside see him go in, bringing with him a vessel of some sort containing the blood of the lamb that he is to sprinkle over the sacred objects in the Holy Place, symbolizing the Lamb who was slain “before the foundation of the world” (remember that the Holy Place symbolized very exactly “before the foundation of the world”).

Now the High Priest is in there, and we, standing outside, are full of curiosity, waiting to see him emerge and watching for signs of God’s interaction with him. Would there be a vision? Would there be sounds? This curiosity would have been significantly muted during the Second Temple period (the time of Diet Pepsi), for it was the common perception by then that the Temple Priesthood had become a bunch of corrupt kleptocrats whose families had bought or inveigled their way into the office. And thus it was also commonly held that YHWH no longer appeared, or gave visions to the High Priest in the Holy Place. In fact, it was remembered that the last High Priest to receive a vision in the Holy Place was Zechariah, the son of Barachiah, who was then killed as he came out of the Holy Place before he could go up to the altar of sacrifice. Since then, all was silence.

It is very significant, then, that Luke’s Gospel has as its very beginning a scene in which a priest called Zechariah has an angelic vision in the Holy Place. It is as if Luke is saying “The time of Diet Pepsi is over; the real Coke is coming back: the Temple is being restored in all its fullness in ways that will take everyone by surprise”. Thus, Mary, after the Annunciation, goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the Hill country of Judea. Elizabeth, as soon as she hears Mary arrive: “shouts out with a great shout”—the same Greek verb as the shout by which the Levites greeted the Ark of the Covenant when King David brought it into Jerusalem. John the Baptist, still in her womb, dances with joy in the same

way as David danced before the Ark. In other words: the missing Holy Objects are all coming back into the restored Temple, a process which will be complete when the Fire returns, at Pentecost, and the wall of separation between Gentiles and Jews comes down shortly thereafter.

Anyhow, back to the First Temple: there is the High Priest, in the Holy Place, with us outside, and he is being ministered to by Angels—he is communing with the Angels who were with YHWH at the beginning of Creation. He is spending time in prayer, for it is during this period that he expects to become interpenetrated by YHWH, who he is going to incarnate for the rest of the rite. So, he will pray to become one with God, and that God will become one with him, so that he can perform the sacrifice and glorify God by making God's people one. This is what At-one-ment is all about. Experts in these matters have long recognised that, in John 17—where Jesus engages in a lengthy prayer concerning the Father being in him, and he in the Father, and him praying that his disciples may be made one—we find the essence of the High Priestly prayer in the Atonement rite. So we can imagine the ancient High Priest praying in these same terms and becoming interpenetrated by YHWH. We, meanwhile, on the outside, are waiting anxiously to see what will happen: what will his face be like when he emerges? What will it bode for the upcoming year?

And then the High Priest does emerge. He comes through the seamless veil, pushing through the entrance, where one side has lapped over the other. The brilliance of his white, angelic persona is made even more brilliant by the rich, many-hued backdrop of the Temple Veil. This is what we would have been waiting for: this is YHWH coming into Creation, entering into materiality.

As soon as he appears, other priests rush up to him and put on him the High Priestly Tunic. This, too, is a seamless garment, made of exactly the same material as the Temple Veil, but with one slight difference: it is shot through with gold filament, indicating that the one wearing it has come through from the “other side”.

Now, please notice what this symbolizes: by putting on the tunic, which is in fact part of the veil, it is being shown how YHWH has entered into materiality. The one who is in principle invisible can now be seen. It is not that the veil hides anything. On the contrary, it is because

of the veil that the invisible can be manifested in our midst. This is not Harry Potter's Invisibility Cloak, which, when he puts it on, makes him invisible. It is much more like Casper the Friendly Ghost—who is, in principle, invisible—flying into a sheet so that the sheet gives away his form, thus making what was invisible, visible.

This is hugely important for us, since the entire sacramental understanding of Christianity flows from this notion: that the material elements (such as bread and wine) do not conceal a secret divine presence, so that if only we could peel away the disguise, we would find the real thing. Quite the reverse: materiality is not a disguise, but what enables the invisible to be seen. The old Methodist hymn has it precisely right: “Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see”.

SoYHWH has come into our midst, vested in the tunic of the High Priest. The Creator is in the court of the Temple, making the whole place redolent of glory. At this stage, the High Priest will climb the steps to the Altar of Sacrifice, the main altar, located between us who are watching and the Holy Place. Remember that, at an earlier stage, the blood had been drained from the lamb which had been slaughtered—the lamb standing in for YHWH—and some of that blood sprinkled in the Holy Place. At this stage, the High Priest will either hand out or hand back portions of the lamb to the other priests. This symbolises that he is giving portions of himself to them. The priests will have then been required to eat (or gnaw at) the part of the lamb known as the Lord’s portion—the entrails. This rather unpleasant-sounding activity was made slightly more palatable by the accompaniment of vinegar. (Of course, it is no accident that immediately before his death on the cross, Jesus was given vinegar to drink).

There would also have been other portions of the lamb, which the priests would not have eaten, but would have later held aloft in thanksgiving and then burned in sacrifice. A little note about these portions: these portions of the lamb were only given to the priests. The blood was to be sprinkled over different parts of the Temple courts, and over the laity as well. This may help us remember what Jesus was doing at the Last Supper. There is a meaningful distinction in the words of institution between “my Body given for you” and “my Blood, shed for you and for all”. By giving portions of his “Body” to all his disciples, as well

as the cup, Jesus was indicating that, henceforth, they were all priests. In fact, every baptised Christian is baptised into the High Priesthood of Christ (baptism is a priestly ordination) and every communicant Christian receiving the Body is a Priest taking part in the High Priestly ritual of the Atonement. So all those who receive such portions are priests. This means that there are no lay people in Christianity, in the strict sense of the term, since every baptised Christian is a sharer in High Priesthood. Our system of ordination and clerical status, with all the rows and problems that ensue from the different ways it is lived out, is at a different level of meaning from the underlying and more important reality, which is that we are an essentially priestly people.

So, the priests have their portions. Now the High Priest, ably helped, would start to sprinkle, probably with great whiplash movements, the blood of the lamb over various bits of the Temple Court, and so over us in the congregation, who would have been waiting for this. We would want to be covered by the blood of the lamb. In fact, the Hebrew word which we translate as “Atonement” has its origins in a word meaning “covering”, the notion being that the Priests were weaving, or casting, a protective covering over the people to protect them from any possible wrath of the Lord. Just as some of us quite enjoy getting a little splash of Holy Water on us during the Easter Rites, when the priest “asperges” the people, it would have been even more important for us as ancient Hebrews to be covered by the blood of the lamb.

There is thus a great moment of irony in St Matthew’s Gospel, when Pilate brings Jesus out before the crowd. First of all, in a thoroughly priestly gesture, he washes his hands, declaring himself “innocent of this man’s blood”, and all the people answer: “His blood be upon us and upon our children”. Now, we have typically interpreted this in an anti-Semitic sense, as though the “Jews” were calling a curse down upon themselves. However, it makes much more sense if we read the passage as ironic. What appears to be a bit of political bargaining is in fact the unfolding rite of the Atonement. Those present are in fact willing participants in that rite and are calling a blessing upon themselves and their children: they want to be covered by the blood of the lamb, covered by the protective skein which YHWH is weaving for them and for us.

At this stage, back in the First Temple, the High Priest would likely advance upon the other lamb—the identical unblemished lamb or goat which was to stand in for Azazel, the demon. He would lay hands on the lamb or goat, thus transferring to it all the sins and transgressions of the people, and the beast would then be driven with sticks and staves outside the Temple precincts and probably to the edge of a precipice, from which it would have been encouraged to launch itself into space. This is the lamb or goat that has become known in English, since Tyndale's translation, as the scapegoat, or in French as the *bouc émissaire*—the buck that is sent out. It is probable that after the priest had laid hands on it, no one else was to touch it, since it had become a seriously taboo object by that point.

This was probably somewhat different from what happened in some ancient Greek cities in the same time period during the rite of the *pharmakos*. In that rite, a young nobleman, captured from another city, would be kept under pleasant house arrest, against the day when he was to be sacrificed. Then, when a time of crisis arose, this young man would be dressed in lavish finery and walk through the city streets, with everyone wanting to touch his garment, so that all the bad vibes of the city would be absorbed into his person. He would then be marched up to the top of a precipice, and the people would advance against him. They would form a semicircle and move closer and closer, tighter and tighter, so that he had nowhere to go except over the edge. If at all possible, no one should touch him, so that it was no one—and therefore everyone—who had pushed him. Indeed, he had become a “voluntary” sacrifice.

With the Hebrews, it was a four-legged victim, and the sheep would have been driven outside the city or the camp to its death. Of course this is part of what is going on in the Gospel narratives of the crucifixion, where Jesus is simultaneously both sheep—both the self-giving YHWH, and the tortured and driven-out victim—as the rite is both fulfilled and brought to an end forever.

After driving out the sheep that stood in for Azazel, the High Priest, now fully clothed in his robes and Tiara, bearing the Name amidst great music and rejoicing, would have brought an end to this great rite by standing before us, the people, and himself intoning, or chanting, or ululating, the Name. He was the one person who was allowed to say

the Name, once a year, on this feast. As he did so, all present would bow down and worship him, the High Priest, in whom the Name had been successfully liturgically incarnated: YHWH had successfully come among his people to atone for their sins, set them free, and restore Creation. Thus, the rite was achieved.

To show that I'm not making any of this up, I invite you to look at a very late account of this rite from deep in the period of Diet Pepsi. This is an account from the book of Sirach, a text that exists in Greek in the deuterocanonical part of our Bibles. It probably dates from a century or so before Christ and recounts an event that occurred 200 years or so before that: the High Priest Simeon performing this rite at the time of Alexander the Great. So this is an account from 100 BCE remembering someone performing the rite 200 years previously, and that someone is himself looking back to something, performing something, that hearkened back to six or seven hundred years prior to that. (I say this to point out what may not be obvious: whatever the "original" rite was like, by the time of Jesus, the version as performed was at least as far removed from the original as Queen Elizabeth II's coronation rite was from that performed on King George III, itself looking back to the rite as performed on William the Conqueror. The difference is that we have a comparatively good paper trail from 1953 looking back to 1760, and from there back to 1066, while we have no such trail of evidence going back between 100 and 300 BCE or from there back to around BCE 950...)

In any case, Simeon was High Priest at the time Alexander the Great was garnering himself an Empire. Although this was deep in the period of Diet Pepsi, Simeon was widely considered to have been one of the best of the Second Temple High Priests—he had made significant engineering improvements to the water system in Jerusalem, which was of considerable public value. He had shown himself a brave man when Alexander had come through Jerusalem on his tour of conquest. Simeon had managed to face down Alexander from a position of vulnerability. He had resisted Alexander's demand for a statue of himself, as a god, to be installed in the Temple; and he had done so, diplomatically, by renaming some of his sons Alexander, so that there would always be a few Alexanders in the Temple, offering Sacrifice. Alexander of Macedon had bought this and went off to continue his conquests elsewhere.

So here is an account of Simeon performing the Second Temple version of the First Temple rite that I have just described to you (8 Sirach 50:5-16 RSV):

How glorious he was when the people gathered round him as he came out of the inner sanctuary!

So we start at the moment that the High Priest comes out through the veil, and of course, the first thing to notice is his glory:

Like the morning star among the clouds, like the moon when it is full; like the sun shining upon the temple of the Most High, and like the rainbow gleaming in glorious clouds; like roses in the days of the first fruits, like lilies by a spring of water, like a green shoot on Lebanon on a summer day; like fire and incense in the censer, like a vessel of hammered gold adorned with all kinds of precious stones; like an olive tree putting forth its fruit, and like a cypress towering in the clouds.

You might be forgiven for thinking that this is overkill! How can someone look like all those things at once? But that would be to miss the point. The point is that the Creator has come into the midst of Creation. So every element of Creation has come alive and is resplendent:

When he put on his glorious robe and clothed himself with superb perfection and went up to the holy altar, he made the court of the sanctuary glorious.

So here is Simeon, now vested in the High Priestly tunic, and in him YHWH has come into the Temple Court, which is itself now redolent of glory, moving up to the altar of Sacrifice:

And when he received the portions from the hands of the priests, as he stood by the hearth of the altar with a garland of brethren around him, he was like a young cedar on Lebanon; and they surrounded him like the trunks of palm trees, all the sons of Aaron in

their splendour with the Lord's offering in their hands, before the whole congregation of Israel.

The previously divided portions of Lamb are now in the hands of the priests. Would the High Priest have given them to them earlier? Not clear! What is clear is that these portions were the Lord's offering—that is to say, were offered by the Lord, for it was the Lord who was making this Atonement Sacrifice:

Finishing the service at the altars, and arranging the offering to the Most High, the Almighty (...)

(At this point, you can see the importance of the distinction of the names, since now the remaining portions of the Lord are going to be offered in thanksgiving to El-Elyon, the Most High):

...he reached out his hand to the cup and poured a libation of the blood of the grape; he poured it out at the foot of the altar, a pleasing odour to the Most High, the King of all. Then the sons of Aaron shouted, they sounded the trumpets of hammered work, they made a great noise to be heard for remembrance before the Most High.

It is not clear what the relation is between this pouring of the blood of the grape and the rest of the rite, involving the blood of the lamb, but clearly, this is part of a boisterous and joyous ceremony:

Then all the people together made haste and fell to the ground upon their faces to worship their Lord, the Almighty, God Most High.

And here we can see that, as part of the rite of Atonement, the distinctions in God are reunited. Thus, we have the Lord and the Almighty, God Most High, YHWH and El-Elyon, coming together again. Part of this rite was celebrating the coming together of God as One. We get a reminder of this in the Prophet Zechariah when he prophesies

something which Christians take for granted was fulfilled at the time of Christ's Passion:

On that day the Lord will be one and his Name one (Zechariah 14:9).

Meanwhile, the joy at this happy feast is ongoing, and we can imagine the singing and praying while the sprinkling with the blood goes on, as well as the consuming of the portions and the driving out of the other lamb:

And the singers praised him with their voices in sweet and full-toned melody. And the people besought the Lord Most High in prayer before him who is merciful, till the order of worship of the Lord was ended; so they completed his service.

At this point, we get the great ululation of the Name, the moment when the rite was concluded, atonement had been made, and the Lord's Name had been instantiated on Earth.

Then Simon came down, and lifted up his hands over the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, to pronounce the blessing of the Lord with his lips, and to glory in his name; and they bowed down in worship a second time, to receive the blessing from the Most High.

The rite ends with the people bowing before YHWH, instantiated in the High Priest, who is bringing to them the blessing of El-Elyon.

So far, so good. I have invited you to enter imaginatively into the world of the First Temple and asked you to undergo a liturgy. This activity commemorates and brings to life someone who is purely benevolent towards you, revealing God who comes towards you, doing something for you. Reasonably enough, however, you might think: this seems just like some antiquated barbecue. What's it got to do with us? In response, I would like to ask for your patience. Next, you will become a different ethnic group and begin to see what it might be like to undergo this

movement towards you in a political or ethical sense, as opposed to a liturgical one.

Gibeonites

Now you are going to be Gibeonites. Given that some of you may just conceivably never have heard of the Gibeonites, I'm going to ease you into your new role by means of a more familiar parallel.

Let us imagine ourselves somewhere on the Great Plains of North America in the nineteenth century. You are a member of a small and fairly insignificant tribe of Native Americans. Your tribe are cousins of bigger groups like the Cheyenne or the Cherokee, the Sioux or the Lakota, but it is not itself a very big group. However, you are conveniently—or inconveniently—located pretty much in the path of White Man, who is coming along with his steam horse, and his metal tracks. In fact, it looks very much as though White Man, in order to conduct his manifest destiny over the rest of the plains, is going to come smack-bang through your territory.

Not being stupid, you decide that discretion is the better part of valour. Rather than be on the receiving end of all this manifest destiny, it is in your interest to sue for peace. Which you do: you make a treaty with the head honcho of White Man, with his trains and his guns. Effectively, you are saying: "Listen, we know you are on a rampage across the Plains, and we are powerless to stop you. We also know you don't really want us or our territory; we're just on the way through to somewhere else for you. So please, don't mind us: go on and wage your manifest destiny elsewhere, amongst our cousins, and we won't get in your way or stab you in the back. But we'd be very grateful if you would leave us alone and not kill us".

Well, the head honcho of White Man thinks: "This is a perfectly reasonable deal. I'll sign up for it. It saves me time, energy, money, and troops for other ventures". So he signs up to it and moves further on into the plains, where he engages a great deal in smiting the Cherokee, the Sioux, and so forth.

In fact, so carried away does he get with his highly successful smiting of all your cousins that he forgets he's signed a peace treaty with you. In his great wrath and might, and in a fit of zeal and frenzy, he turns around and smites you, killing a number of your tribe.

This puts you in a very embarrassing situation. It's obviously unpleasant to have lost a number of your relatives, but it's doubly problematic in that you have a treaty with White Man that he is supposed to honour. That means he is obligated by treaty to make some sort of reparation to you, since he has incurred bloodguilt by killing some of you unnecessarily. That bloodguilt needs to be satisfied.

The problem, however, is that you really don't want to press the matter too hard, since he really is very much more powerful than you. And who is to tell at what point he might decide that it's more convenient for him simply to smite all of you rather than pay you what he owes?

The result is that you live in a sort of uneasy half-truce with encroaching White Man: not at all keen to remind him that he owes you a big debt, but uncomfortably aware that he does owe you something, and that relations are not going to be good in this part of the world until the matter is sorted out.

Well, that gives you an idea of who you are as Gibeonites. The Gibeonites were a small subsection of the people known as the Amorites. The head honcho of Israel, a man called Saul, had made a treaty with you which freed him to smite the Amorites more effectively. But unfortunately, and being a somewhat unstable person, he got carried away in a frenzy, and smote a number of your tribesmen as well. So he owed you a debt of blood.

With that background in mind, let's look at this charming little story from the second book of Samuel (2 Samuel 21:1-9):

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said: "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death."

So here we are: there is a new head honcho in Israel, and something is not quite right in the land, the sure sign of which is famine. The head honcho wants to know what he can do to sort this out. He consults the Lord, and the Lord makes his only appearance in this story as a sort of outside auditor or consultant.

The Lord's function in this story is limited to pointing out that there is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, and the new head honcho has inherited the consequences of this bloodguilt:

So the king called the Gibeonites. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to slay them in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.

That's you: you have been summoned into the court of the King. You are a minority people with a thoroughly justified chip on your shoulder. Why on earth should you trust anything this man says? His predecessor was thoroughly treacherous, and who is to say what is up the sleeve of the successor?

And David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make expiation, that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?"

Here is the head honcho sounding all friendly towards us, but once bitten, twice shy: we know he has second intentions, and is in some way out to get us, so we are not going to allow ourselves to be manipulated. We are not going to make demands, because that will give him an excuse to go after us.

So we will answer very circumspectly, just to make it quite clear that none of us can be accused of trying to get anything out of him:

The Gibeonites said to him, "It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel."

You make quite clear to the King that you are not biting: you are not going to make any demand that will expose you. However, rather to your surprise, the King is insistent, making very clear that he's not out to get you:

And he said, “What do you say that I shall do for you?”

Effectively, the King is saying: “No, no, please don't be so susceptible. Trust me. I know that my predecessor had anger management issues, and you've got no reason to think I'll be any better. However, I'm genuinely not out to get you at all: I really do have a problem on my hands. The only way I can sort it out is by doing something for you, so please, please stop second-guessing me and help me help you by letting me know what I can do for you”:

They said to the king, “The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them up before the LORD at Gibeon on the mountain of the LORD.”

So we come up with a proposal. We recognise that a blood debt is owed us, that we have legitimate demands for vengeance, a wrath that needs to be assuaged. We make a simple, mathematically limited request for payment, one that is circumscribed to the family members of the individual strictly responsible, and will have no overspill into other areas of our cohabitation. Thus, we'll avoid what usually goes wrong when vengeance escalates and runs amok.

And the king said, “I will give them.”

What the king effectively says to us, with barely disguised glee in his voice, is: “What a jolly good idea! What sensible negotiators you are, and how conveniently you have asked me for something that it is in my interest to do! For you see, I usurped the throne of Saul, and any of his sons might have a more legitimate claim to the throne than I do. In fact, I have been

remarkably gentle, by the standards of my age, in not putting to death all the potential rival claimants upon my accession to the throne. (My son Solomon will not imitate his Dad in this, since when the time comes, he will massacre all of his half-brothers just to make sure that there are no other claimants around). So you are offering me a chance to do legitimately something that it is very much in my interest to do anyhow”:

But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul’s son Jonathan, because of the oath of the LORD which was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul.

(Mephibosheth was born with deformed feet; that he had reached adulthood at all was already a sign of mercy. But it must also be said that he didn’t represent much of a threat in the succession stakes, lacking the appropriate macho military physical attributes for kingship). Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites...

In any case, David didn’t have too much trouble in coming up with seven of Saul’s heirs, and he hands them over to us, whose just wrath needs assuaging:

...and they hanged them on the mountain before the LORD, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

And so we do our thing, accepting and then publicly executing these offerings, who have been given to us in expiation for the sins of Saul, on our mountain. Thus, we let everyone see that this entire episode of mutual unease and distrust, which has had consequences for all our harvests, has come to an end.

But in fact, this isn’t quite the end of the story. Maybe the outside consultant wasn’t entirely clear in his original audit and plan for balancing the books. The famine doesn’t end immediately. Saul’s concubine Rizpah—the mother of two of the seven sacrificed sons—demonstrates

real love and grief, making a public display of the awfulness of what has been done by camping out at the place of execution for several months, not allowing the corpses to be devoured by animals. King David is eventually shamed into getting the message that he needs to do a little more than what seemed convenient. So he gathers together all the bones of Saul and Jonathan from the different places where they have been scattered, and honours them, along with the recently executed seven sons, with a decent burial. Only then does the famine come to an end.

The story's conclusion, however, is not so important for our purposes. What I want to ask you, who have been present as Gibeonites, is this: in our story, who sacrifices whom to whom? What's the transaction being described here?

I hope that it is more or less obvious that it is David who is making a sacrifice to us. It is David who is making expiation, and we who receive the offering. His sacrifice, somewhat conveniently, consists of someone else's sons, but the purpose of his offering is to assuage the wrath which is the result of the blood guilt owed to us Gibeonites. We Gibeonites have a right to this; it is our need for vengeance that must be requited.

Please note that there is an angry divinity in this story, one that requires sacrifice—and it is us, the recipients of its satisfaction. The angry divinity doesn't appear to be the Lord, who merely gives accounting advice at the beginning, and doesn't, in fact, immediately stop the famine once the hanging has taken place. In this passage, David has to get across to us that he is well-intentioned and not out to get us, before he can offer a sacrifice to the wrathful divinity, which is us Gibeonites and our need for appeasement. David, the well-intentioned king, comes towards us, offering a sacrifice to appease our wrath.

Strangely enough, this curious little story makes two appearances in the New Testament, in ways which are going to help us understand more about how Jesus' death was seen as a giving of something towards, at, and for us. The first is Romans 8:31-2, where Paul says the following:

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?

For many years, people assumed that the reference behind “He who did not spare his own son” was the story of the binding of Isaac, where Abraham eventually does spare his son.

However, the Greek text of Romans doesn’t make allusion to the Septuagint version of Genesis, where, in any case, the emphasis is on Abraham’s only son. The text does, however, mesh perfectly with the Septuagint version of II Samuel, and we can get a good glimpse at how Paul reads the passage we’ve just been looking at. Paul is effectively saying: “You remember David, and you remember how, when the Gibeonites went in to see him, they didn’t know whether he was for them, or whether there wasn’t some bit of skulduggery up his sleeve? Well, he showed them that he was for them by giving them some sons. (As it happens, someone else’s sons, which made it easy for him). His giving over someone else’s sons was his way of proving that he meant well towards them, that he wasn’t out to get them. Well, God is even more than David. Whereas David was a politician, offering someone else’s sons, God, in order to prove that he likes us and is not out to get us, offered his own son (in other words, for a good Jewish monotheist—Himself, for this is what would be meant by El-Elyon empowering YHWH’s self-offering to us). So stop being so susceptible! God is really for you in every possible way, really not out to get you, and his generosity is utterly beyond second-guessing”.

Please notice that this presupposes the II Samuel passage being read in just the way we have done. That just as David was sacrificing Saul’s sons to the Gibeonites, so it is God who is sacrificing God’s own son (in other words, Himself) to us. Yes, there is a wrathful divinity in this equation, as I have mentioned—and it is us. There is also an entirely nonviolent, non-demanding and non-ambivalent source of generosity in the equation, and it is God. If we are to use the language of sacrifice appropriately, we must remember that, before it is anything else, it is God offering sacrifice to us. Not the other way round.

Can you see now how this is the same as the Temple Liturgy we looked at in your previous incarnation as Ancient Hebrews? There we have the Holy One coming out of the Holy Place and offering the sacrifice on the altar for, towards, and at the people. Here, instead of a liturgical background, we have a people not guilty of any liturgical trans-

gression. They are, if you like, in a state of social disruption because of what has been done to them, with a justified need for vengeance to be assuaged. And once again, the movement is from un-ambivalent goodness towards us, the human group needing our vengefulness assuaged.

Just in case you think that this is a weird piece of Paul's exegesis, and that only he thinks like this, the same way of thinking appears elsewhere in the New Testament. You may remember the scene in John's Gospel from singing the Passion on Good Friday. Pilate has been having a dialogue with Jesus, but the wrath of the people is putting pressure on Pilate to satisfy their demand for sacrifice. So, Pilate "brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, and in Hebrew, Gabbatha" (John 19:13). The giveaway is the word Gabbatha (which is in fact Aramaic, rather than Hebrew), and it means "the mound of Gibeon". You can see how beautifully John has transported us: Pilate has been pushed by the wrath of the crowd into acting in the same, rather unpleasant, way as David did. He has just been told: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above", and is in fact, frightened of losing face with Caesar if he doesn't execute someone. He is represented as standing in both for David—handing over someone else's convenient son to satisfy the wrath of the Gibeonites—and, entirely unwittingly, standing in for God, in being the person who enables God to give his own son into the hands of wrathful humans to assuage their wrath. The whole purpose, flow, and direction of the imagery is to point out that this is not a sacrifice God is demanding of us. On the contrary, it is an entirely benevolent generosity offering a sacrifice to satisfy our seething, human, vengeance-seeking wrath. That's how the New Testament sees these things.

A Brief, Meditative Pause

Just before you enter into your final ethnic identity, I'm going to ask you to do a very short meditation, for a couple of minutes, in which I'm asking you to be yourselves. I want you to do something which I, at least, find rather difficult: remember a moment, an occasion, a process of time, when you have been forgiven by someone for something.

Often, when we hear the word “forgive”, we go immediately into a sort of overdrive, whipping ourselves up into a state of “I must forgive, I must forgive!” This is because we know that forgiving is something good Christians must do, and so we need to work up our feelings appropriately. Well, I was hoping you could do something much more difficult than that. I’m asking you not to think about forgiving someone else, about a heavy demand made on you to do something good. I’m asking you to sit in a time, a moment, when someone forgave you; to recover what it felt like to be forgiven, to be let off. In other words, to remember what it felt like when someone else did this strange thing to you.

The memory of being forgiven can be as banal as something that happened when you were a kid. For instance, perhaps you went to your regular corner store and stole a Mars bar. Unknown to you, Mrs O'Reilly, the owner, sees you. She rings up your Mum and says: “Little Johnny was in here today, and he stole a Mars bar. He's usually so friendly and well-behaved, and this is so unlike him. I'm a little worried: is there something wrong? Is he going through something bad? I'm not really concerned about the Mars bar, but I think you need to talk to him to see if something's wrong”.

Well, Ma grabs little Johnny by the ear and drags him straight down to the corner store. Little Johnny knows precisely what's going to happen to him now, because he knows he stole the Mars bar. He knows that it was wrong, and that he's going to have to pay in some way—grounded for a week, pocket-money docked, sent to sweep the floor for several days—something like that.

So imagine little Johnny's amazement when, as he's dragged into the store, Mrs O'Reilly comes towards him brandishing another Mars bar, and by her demeanour it becomes clear that she's offering it to him as a gift. She's clearly much more concerned about him than she is bothered about the Mars bar. Even Ma, who was expecting that Johnny would get a proper drubbing for this, is a little thrown by Mrs O'Reilly's friendliness. Mrs O'Reilly, however, is unbothered by all this. She wants to see little Johnny well and happy and is concerned that he may be going through a bad patch, and she wants him to be able to relax. From little Johnny's point of view, this is really quite disorienting, be-

cause every little Johnny knows that right is right and wrong is wrong, and if you do something wrong and get caught, you pay. That's the way the world works.

Mrs O'Reilly is really muddling up the system, which disorients and confuses you. One of the reasons it disorients you is that you can't control it. The normal system of fault and punishment is within control, but here is someone approaching you in a way that's not playing tit for tat with anything you've done. She's not defining herself over against you and is refusing to invite you to define yourself over against her. This seriously pulls the rug out from under you. It's inviting you into becoming something much bigger than you thought you were, because you're being invited into a new kind of friendship, a new kind of "we" where your sense of being the "I" you thought you were, is being given you by someone not within your control, whose behaviour towards you is quite gratuitous. And you may well experience this as terrifying. Maybe you would rather say: "No, I don't want to be forgiven for this, I want to be fined, or grounded, or sent to bed without dinner, because that's a world I can understand."

Or, maybe, you can allow yourself to be forgiven, which means finding yourself being re-created by a power much bigger than you can dominate.

Your memory of being forgiven might be something as banal as this. Or it may be something much more adult, from marriage or military experience, for instance. In any case, I'm asking you to allow yourselves to sit in that strange place, that memory of being approached by a forgiving other, who is letting you go. What did it feel like?

After a couple minutes of silence, continue on, and I'll take you into your third and final ethnic transformation of this chapter.

Venezuelans

We've now looked at two different dimensions of Atonement, two different movements towards, for, or at, us: a liturgical movement towards us, as Ancient Hebrews, and a political or ethical movement towards us, as Gibeonites. Now I would like to bring out the personal dimension of

this movement towards us, since the genius of Jesus brings all three dimensions together in one act. In order to bring out this personal movement towards us, I'm going to tell you a story about Fernando, set in Venezuela.

Some background: I have a friend in Venezuela who is, as I am, a student of René Girard's thought. Shortly after a conference at which we met, he asked me if I had written anything of a more or less Girardian sort in Spanish. As it happened, I had just finished translating a chapter of my book, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, into Spanish. The chapter was called "Clothed and In His Right Mind". It is a reading of Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac, drawing heavily on Girard's own interpretation of the same story in his book, *The Scapegoat*. By the wonder of email, I was able to send a copy of this chapter to my friend.

Do you remember the story of the Gerasene demoniac? (Mark 5:1-20; Mathew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39). Jesus crosses a lake and comes to the land of Gerasa, which in some versions is called Gadara. We know the inhabitants are not Jews, for the simple reason that they keep pigs—the detail most people remember about this story. As Jesus comes up the beach, Crazy Joe (as we'll call him) comes down the beach to greet him. Crazy Joe is, as it were, the town weirdo. He lives among the tombs, in the rubbish tip, in the most run-down part of town. Previously, Crazy Joe was treated very roughly by people in the town. They would bind him up, put him in chains, tie him down and try to subdue him. But he would have fits of great energy and break through the chains, so they would have to beat him up some more. After a bit, they learned that they didn't really need to beat him up, because he was perfectly good at beating himself up—at self-harming. He had learned to introject into himself all their violence towards him. He could be relied upon to hang around as a satellite, hitting himself, gashing himself, giving himself a miserable time—acting out, in fact, all their own weirdness at a safe distance.

So they left him alone doing just that. He was a handy cultural marker for them. When he was around, they knew what "bad" was: he is bad, so we are good. Because we have craziness around, we know that we are sane.

(Some friends who had visited a mental institution in Alabama made a similar point to me: the nurses there knew that, in many cases, the inmates were no crazier than their relatives. They were simply weaker. They live out in wacky ways the things that their relatives more or less keep under wraps, which is why they are so frightening to their relatives, because they're so like them. The fact that they are in an institution is what enables their relatives to think of themselves as sane: thanks to the crazy one, we can think of ourselves as normal).

In any case, Crazy Joe comes rushing down the beach towards Jesus, crying out: "What have you to do with us, Son of the Most High?" So we have a possessed gentile recognising Jesus with a Jewish—and more specifically, a High Priestly—title. Indeed, in the New Testament, it is often the case that the possessed or demonised are able to see clearly who Jesus is, while ordinary people, driven by crowds in ordinary ways, have much greater difficulty in grasping who He is. Crazy Joe then begs Jesus not to torment him, and you can imagine why: being caught up in the patterns of self-harm and self-destruction which define his relationship to his community is extremely painful, but at least it is a form of existence. To be set loose from that would be the equivalent of falling into an abyss of nothingness: who would he be?

Before casting the demon out, Jesus asks: "What is your name?", and the spirit replies: "My name is Legion, for we are many." A perfect description of the multiple personalities which push and pull this person this way and that, preventing him from having a stable self. A perfect illustration of this man's status as the satellite absorber of all the bad vibes in his community. He knows very well that to come into contact with the Most High—towards whom he is drawn and, simultaneously, from whom he is repelled—means something terrible for his desperate attempts to hold these personalities together. So when Jesus is about to cast out the spirit, the spirit begs not to be sent out of the region, aware as it is of its geographical dependence on the unresolved vibes of the community, of which it is the symptom. To be too far removed from that place would mean going out of existence. So it begs to be sent into the pigs instead.

"Fine," says Jesus: "Into the pigs you go." So the spirit rushes upon the pigs. Now, the pigs suffer from an enormous drawback compared

to the people of Gerasa: they are not human. If the pigs had been human, once they had been whipped into a frenzy by this onslaught of an evil spirit, they would have learned, after a bit, how to sort out their problem. They would have ganged together as some leading pig pointed a trotter at a particularly weak pig, or one who stood out in some way, and all would have designated that pig as a crazy porker. After much righteous snuffling towards swinish unanimity, the crazy porker would have been chucked over the edge of the precipice into the lake, and the pigs would have re-established the peace and order of their society. They would have invented civilisation through murder, and with it all those other things of which we humans are so proud.

But they are pigs, and don't know how to form their unity over against one of their own number, cast him out, and thus secure order for their group. So, when the spirit is unleashed among them, they all imitate each other in their frenzy, without any braking mechanism. They rush down the hill together and are drowned.

This unnerves the swineherd somewhat. So he heads back to town, scratching his head, and tells the townsfolk: "Something's happened to my pigs". They come out to see what's going on, and what they find is formerly Crazy Joe sitting, clothed, in his right mind and talking to Jesus. And they are afraid, very afraid, because something has happened here that is way bigger than anything they're used to. They knew how to survive in a world in which Joe was crazy and they were sane. However, now he's sane—so what are they? Joe has been made human: he's sitting, a position more peaceful than he usually adopts. He's clothed, which is a novelty—before it was all rags and gashes. And he's in his right mind, which is unimaginable. Some great power has come among them, and by making their cultural marker human, it has completely pulled the rug from under their feet.

So they turn to Jesus and very courteously ask him to leave. They don't try to beat him up—they're more shocked than angry. And Jesus doesn't reply with anger. He makes to go. This is curious: he doesn't threaten the people of Gerasa, or upbraid them by saying: "It will be worse for you on the day of judgment than for Sodom and Gomorrah" (exactly what he says to the people of Capernaum and Bethsaida when they fail to receive his disciples). But then, those cities were Jewish;

they had no excuse. They had the Law and the Prophets to teach them how to get beyond building their community life over against weak others. The people of Gerasa, by contrast, did not have the Law and the Prophets. By turning up and suddenly humanising their whipping boy, Jesus has perhaps challenged them too much, too soon. They've no way of coping with the loss of their crutch, and are now deeply at sea.

So Jesus makes to leave, but formerly-Crazy Joe wants to come too. And Jesus says: "No". This is a bit of a surprise. Jesus usually says things like "Come follow me", but here he says: "No, you go back home to your friends and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you". You can almost hear formerly-Crazy Joe say: "Oh no! Home!? Come off it! Do you know what my home is like? And friends! Like I have a lot of friends, having lived as I have. At least you didn't order me to go to my family; they're the worst of the lot. Couldn't you squeeze me in on an apostolic journey to say, Melanesia, or Patagonia? Some-where a really, really long way from here?"

But no. Going far away would be too like the expulsion Joe has been living out all this time. Instead, Jesus gives him what is, in fact, one of the toughest apostolic assignments in the New Testament: go and be an ex-crutch in a society that is going to be very, very challenged as it learns to live without a crutch. They're used to having good and bad, insider and outsider, pure and impure, sane and crazy, all with the help of Crazy Joe as their cultural marker. But if he's no longer the marker, they're going to be at sea, and he's going to be in a perilous position, being human in the midst of such deficient humanity. They'll be awfully tempted to gang up on him again, or do something else to re-establish their order, their sense of boundaries.

This is the story I sent to my friend in Venezuela. I had read it as a gay man, using it as an example of the disconcerting effect Jesus has when he makes human those whom society doesn't regard as really human. I didn't think my friend, who is straight, would really mind. In these ecumenical days, one has to reach out to one's straight friends. So, I sent off the chapter by email, and was astounded by the reply I received a few days later.

My friend shared a story from his high school days—not that long behind him, since he was a young doctoral student at the time of our

correspondence. “When I was at school”, he wrote: “we had a great time. Our class group was great, a fun group of people, and we all got along well—my memories are of a great time. In fact, we also had a class fairy, Fernando, who everyone picked on, and teased, and bullied, and made his life hell”.

(I’m calling this guy Fernando, but that’s just made up. I’ve no idea what his name was, and in any case, based on your experience of life at that age, I’m sure you will remember the name of someone who you can slot into this same space).

So Fernando was the guy everyone picked on. And everyone else had a great time. At some stage, Fernando must have persuaded his parents to let him leave that school and go somewhere else. Maybe he just dropped out. In any case, he left. And, as my friend told me:

We were completely bereft. Suddenly, we no longer knew how to play together, we couldn’t work out how to be together. We had no idea what had kept us together so well for so long, and how it worked. So for about three weeks, we were completely at sea, lost as a group. And then we managed to find another class fairy from another class, and we sort of borrowed him to be our class fairy, and everything returned to normal again. All was well. Only now, as I take on board the way the people of Gerasa depended on their demoniac, do I begin to see why it is that we felt so bereft when Fernando left. How important it was for us to have this social marker who we are not, but who tells us who we are. At whose expense, if you like, we live and get our togetherness.

As you can imagine, I was very struck by the way he’d “got” the passage, and seen so clearly how it applied to his own life experience. But thinking about it, I wanted to take the matter further, so I asked him to look again at the story he had told me.

It seemed to me that there were two ordinary perspectives in that story, and one rather subtle one. I am going to look at each in turn. The first perspective is Fernando’s. For him, this is a horrible, devastating story. It will have been a “sink or swim” experience. He could be completely destroyed by the bullying and teasing. Maybe he will have com-

mitted suicide. Maybe he will have turned in on himself. If he is in the United States of America, perhaps he will have gone out, gotten some guns, and returned to shoot up his school. In any case, it would have been a terrible experience. Or, another possibility: it's just conceivable that the whole episode will have made him much more resilient. Something which I've seen on the gay scene since I've grown up is that some of the toughest people you meet are the guys who, as kids, were very effeminate—who, unlike me, couldn't pass as straight. They went through a hell of a time as kids, but amazingly have grown through it and become much stronger than anybody else as a result of it. So that's another conceivable outcome—but by no means a guaranteed one.

The next obvious perspective from which this story can be told is that of the “boys will be boys” group (though girls can be every bit as brutal to each other as boys). The point of view of the class jocks, for whom life at school is mostly rugby by other means. You are at school to play with a ball. There are official playtimes when you kick a ball around on a pitch. And then there are unofficial playtimes—when boring adults suggest you should be in class—when you kick Fernando around instead. And strangely enough, awful though this is, there is something impersonal about it. Those involved are scarcely aware of what they’re doing; there’s no personal animosity involved, nothing deliberate. To call it innocent would be to go too far, but it just appears to be the way things are. These kids populate the other perspective of the story: those for whom Fernando scarcely registers as he is bullied and teased.

But in between these two extremes—Fernando on the one hand, and the class jocks on the other—there is another group of people, another angle on the story. These are the people I describe as the “al-*so-rans*”: people who were vaguely aware, as many of us are or were on our school playgrounds, that there is a kind of invisible hand hovering over us all, whose outstretched finger is fatally going to point to somebody. So I’d better make damn sure that I’m not that somebody.

Indeed, when the finger has settled on somebody else—on Fernando, for instance—I’m very keen to make sure it stays pointing at him, since the hovering hand is very unstable. The finger might always dislodge from its current target and swivel round to me. I find myself very tempted to become a kind of ideological booster for the finger

staying in place. While the class jocks couldn't give a damn why it's Fernando or anybody else who gets it in the neck, the "also-rans" find it very important to sidle up to their bigger, more popular classmates and provide reasons for the finger to stay pointing just where it is. Hence, the gossip, the shaming pranks, and the building up of solidarity at the expense of Fernando. All of these help the "also-rans" to ensure that they stay on the right side when things go wrong.

This strange place of half-knowing and half-not-knowing—or half-not-wanting-to-know—what you're doing as you navigate playground survival is, for any of us, a watershed of moral life. It actually forms the sort of people we are becoming. Through learning how to survive this sort of dynamic, we become socialised, and our school reports get to describe us (unlike Fernando) as "well-adapted, sociable, makes friends and plays well with others". Which just means: "Has survived"; "Has not become the butt of group humour and anger"; "Has learned to dance with others around the place of shame, close enough to get the benefits from someone being there but not so close as to be the person in that place". Thus, we are equipped for survival in an adult world where the same game will be played with a wide range of very different backdrops.

What I suggested to my friend in Venezuela, and now suggest to you, is that we imagine a strange development in this story. Some six months after leaving school, suddenly, and without explanation, Fernando comes back. We don't know where Fernando has gone in the meanwhile, but let us imagine some different possible scenarios for his return.

In the first place, let's look at what I call the "big stick" scenario. There has been a revolution or a coup in Venezuela between Fernando leaving the school and his coming back. At the time he was a student there, he came from a non-distinguished family and was of no particular social importance. However, let us imagine that a coup inspired by a mythical oil-guzzling country to the north has overthrown the government. As the new government is installed, Fernando's family comes to have great significance. Indeed, Fernando's dad becomes Governor of the State in which the high school is located. So guess what: Fernando returns to visit his former high school in the Governor's Cadillac with motorcycle outriders. As he draws up to the school, we can imagine the

reaction of his former classmates: “Oh shit”. They know very well what will happen next: “When we had a big stick, we used it to hit him, and now he’s got a much bigger stick, so he’s going to use it to hit us”.

So the classmates send out ambassadors: “Hey Fernando, great to see you back! Whoa, cool car, awesome motorbikes, amazing uniforms—where can I get one of those? But hey, really sorry about the awful things that used to happen to you when you were here before. In fact, we were trying really hard, behind the scenes, to get it all sorted out and stop it. Pity we failed, but hey, it doesn’t matter any longer, you’re back—it’s going to be great!”

In other words, the Brown Nose Brigade is out in force. When the big stick was elsewhere, they learned to get onside with whoever threatened to wield it. Now the threat of the big stick is firmly in Fernando’s hands, so they want to get on his right side. Nothing has been learned.

Here is another scenario for Fernando’s return. Let us imagine that, despite all the best efforts of the State Department of the mythic oil-guzzling country to the north, there has been no coup in Venezuela.² In fact, it wouldn’t matter at all if there had been, since Fernando’s family was of no significance before, and is of no significance now. Let us imagine instead that Fernando has to return to the school because he needs a certificate to satisfy a requirement at his new school, a certificate that must be picked up in person. The last thing he wants is to come back and visit that hellhole in which he spent so many unhappy months. However, he’s got to turn up in person at the school secretary’s office to receive the document. So he waits until about 4:50 on Friday afternoon in the hopes that everyone will either have gone home, or will be out playing sports. He skulks around the back corridors, trying to find his chance to get to the school secretary’s office unseen by any of his former classmates.

However, someone does see him. He cringes, shrinks back, and the key thing his former classmate picks up from the cringe is that the old magic is still working. Fernando looks hurt; Fernando seems ashamed. In other words: God is in his Heaven, all is well with the world, because the place of shame is still the place of shame and Fernando is still in

² This scenario was imagined, as a darkly humorous improbability, decades before the events of January 2026.

it. All that half-knowing stuff, all that strange construction of our social identity in which we participate and which makes us who we are, still works. The system is intact, because Fernando is still run by it. No doubt, in the six months since Fernando left, someone has replaced him in the place of shame, but it's curiously comforting to know that he still bears its marks—skulking around, making a quick grab for his certificate, and off out of there as soon as possible, fueled by shame.

This is another scenario in which nothing has been learned. There has been no real shift in anything. The place of shame was toxic when Fernando was in it, and he's still showing signs of being run by that toxicity. It still matters to him, and it still matters to us.

Now, a third scenario. In this scenario, as in the previous one, there have been no political or family changes in Fernando's circumstances. He is no more important now than he was before. He comes back to visit the school after six months—and is just happy to be there. He's relaxed, unbothered. He doesn't look pained; there's no resentment or anger. He just appears pleased to be back. You can imagine him turning up, and as he arrives, some of the class jocks are on their way out to the sports field. As they see him, they say: "Oh, Hi Fernando! That's curious... Thought you had left, but you're clearly back now. Oh well, never mind! Good to see you... Bye!" In other words, they hadn't really noticed him when he was there. They hadn't really noticed him going, and they haven't really noticed him coming back, because, unpleasant as it had been for Fernando, there hadn't really been much that was personal in their whole dynamic towards him.

But then there are the also-rans. They do indeed notice that Fernando has returned, and it's very odd, since he seems happy to be back. He must have something up his sleeve, some form of revenge. "Let's hope he doesn't stay too long", they say. But curiously, he does stay, and after a bit they begin to feel rather uncomfortable: "He's actually disrespecting us, because if he's happy to be here, and has got nothing against us, then what does that say about the toxic place which it was so important for us not to be in? He's dissing us. Let's hope he goes away again soon". But bloody Fernando stays, and keeps on being there, clearly happy, not a hint of some revenge up his sleeve (at least revenge would be the sort of happiness we could understand). The longer he

stays, the more it pulls the carpet from under our feet and disconcerts us. After all, why is the place of shame not important to him? It's important to us; we invested an awful lot in being not-him, so this can't be right. It can't be so OK to be him. Why is he not run by the same power that runs us? There's something terribly wrong here; god is not in his Heaven, and all is not well with the world. But Fernando carries on, and it just makes us more and more queasy.

Then a rumour starts going around. A wicked rumour to the effect that Fernando had only really come to the school in the first place so as to be thrown out, and then come back with a thoroughly superior attitude. It sounds like some super-über-Nietzschean revenge scenario: "They threw me out, but I've picked myself up, and now I'm stronger than ever! So I'm going to go back into their midst and just be stronger than they, and even hint that I was always stronger than they, so strong that I let them throw me out! And I've come back to let them know that they can't get to me, and to rejoice in their discomfiture". The ultimate piece of one-upmanship: coming back showing no signs of the battle.

So Fernando explains that it wasn't quite like that. "In fact," he says:

I did choose to come to school so that you could do this to me, and I did make that choice in advance. And just so you know that I'm not making this up, I wrote an account of what I was going to do, dated it, signed it, and left it sealed in the safe of a lawyer's office downtown, so you can tell there's no clever revenge story here, made up after the event. (Or, in Gospel terms: "On the night before he was betrayed, he took bread...and said, 'This is my body given for you.'")

But yes, I did come to school deliberately—because I like you and want to play with you. I noticed that you only have one game, and you seem to be somewhat stuck in a rut with it. The only game you know is the game of all ganging up against someone. It's the only game in your repertoire, and it's a seriously demeaning game for all of you, making you all so much less than you could be. So I knew before I came that somebody was going to get it in the neck, and I thought, well, it might as well be me, so that I can show you there are other games we can play instead.

So I came. I won't say I enjoyed occupying that place, though I was deeply glad to, painful and awful as it is. But I knew that it was only by occupying that place, and showing you that it doesn't really matter, can be occupied without running its occupant completely, that I would be able to offer you the chance of not being so frightened of it, and thus be free enough to imagine another game. I didn't at all do this so as to show off my strength, or to teach you a lesson, or to rejoice in your discomfiture, and I'm not at all interested in holding anything against you. It's just that I've always really liked you and wanted to play with you, and I'm so keen that we play a game which is fun and free and good for all of us. So that's what I was about—setting things up so we can play a new and more fun game together. Please play with me!

Well, you can imagine the shock of this in the world of the al-so-rans. It is disturbing on so many levels. Before, it had been clear what was going on: we had been protagonists, and he had been our victim. We can imagine a reversal of that, whereby he becomes the protagonist, and we the victims. That's perfectly straightforward. But here is something quite different. All along, he has been the real protagonist who, unknown to us, was already working at taking us out of the game whose rules we understand. And where we had thought of ourselves as in charge, we are beginning to see that, all along, and without him in any way wanting to diminish or humiliate us, it is we who were on the receiving end of his protagonism.

Not only that, but consider the strength of someone able to occupy the place of toxicity without being run by it. The one thing we know for sure is that we should never be in that place; that being in that place is the ultimate sign of being a loser. Winners, by definition, are the people who don't occupy that place. So we know the difference between strength and weakness: being strong is not being in that place, but being able to put others in it; being weak is being unable to avoid getting put in that place.

But here is someone whose strength is totally off our radar, because they're so strong that they can lose and not mind losing. So strong that they can make losing into a positive gift for us. That's not even in ri-

valry with our understanding of strength; it's entirely off the scale. And that is really freaky. What does it do to our sense of what's good and what's bad, what's right and what's wrong, who wins and who loses?

Perhaps we could get used to this sheer, unimaginable display of power, so great that it's able to lose, and look at it from afar with a kind of abject humility. But it turns out that there is something even more bizarre than the off-the-charts strength involved: all that strength, all that power displayed in the extreme gentleness of occupying the place of the loser, is a power that likes us. Fernando went through all that because he likes us, and always liked us. He wasn't trying to rub our noses in anything; he wasn't out to get us, or to teach us a lesson about the noble mournfulness of our human condition. He did this because he likes us and enjoys us so much that he wants to play with us.

Think what that means! Even when we could see the tears in his eyes, the bruises, the pain and shame that he was going through, even though we felt secretly comforted that it was him and not us; even then, the eyes that were looking at us through genuine tears, produced by real hurt, were liking us. They were not the regard of someone who enjoyed being tortured, no masochistic gaze or Stockholm Syndrome. But the regard of someone who liked us, who saw us as himself, even when we saw him as not-us, someone who longed to take us into a richer enjoyment.

How the hell do we sit with this knowledge, sit under this regard? As you can imagine, some people will say: "Actually, this is freaking me out. I would rather go back to playing the good old-fashioned game of 'we all gang up and somebody gets it in the neck', even if that someone happens to be me, because at least it's a game whose rules I understand and it gives me some sense of security, some identity. Better to be a loser in a known game than an unknown player in a game whose rules can scarcely be grasped".

Still, others may say: "Well, let's see where this takes us. Let's see what it is like to be given our selves back by our forgiving victim, and led towards another game". This is, of course, the response that the Gospel seeks to produce.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude with two short texts by St Paul, texts that always figure large in discussions of the Atonement. I hope you will see how, if we read them as referring to the same dynamic we have just seen in the Fernando story, they make much more sense than if they are talking about God needing to zap someone innocent in order to satisfy his wrath towards the guilty. So I'm going to run the risk of kitsch by substituting the word "Fernando" for the word "Christ", to bring out the dynamic behind Paul's words.

First, from 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, with my paraphrase alongside the text:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; (...)

This is what God's initiative looks like: the story of Fernando coming among us as our cast-out one, so that we need no longer take part in such games, but learn to have a way of being together that doesn't require casting someone out.

...that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

In other words, that whole Fernando story—his coming amongst us, being thrown out, and coming back again non-resentfully—is the shape of God's affection towards us: bringing us back to God, not looking to settle scores with us in any way, but wanting us to become the multipliers of this new game.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

So we have received the charge of being multipliers of the self-giving class fairy. God makes God's appeal through us: we, who act on behalf of Fernando, implore you to join us in playing a new game.

For our sake, he made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

You see, it was entirely for our benefit—to get through to us—that God charged Fernando with occupying the space of the class fairy in our midst. He did it so that we, by joining Fernando and sharing his life and friendship, could step out of our self-demeaning game and be taken into a hugely enriched life.

I hope you see how the dynamic behind Paul's words makes sense! Allowing the dynamic to be seen even more clearly, here's the Epistle to the Romans 3:21-26:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, (...)

The sheer goodness and rich, abundant love of God has been shown by a three-dimensional acting-out in your midst. And this acting-out is way beyond anything that could be described by a system as two-dimensional as the law, even though the law and the prophets were indeed pointing towards that goodness.

...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

The sheer goodness of God can be perceived by anyone who glimpses the benevolence and power of what Fernando was doing by coming into our midst.

Once you grasp what Fernando was about in his coming towards us, you can see for yourself quite how utterly benevolent, un-ambivalent, and totally for us God is.

For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (...)

There is no distinction anymore between goodies and baddies, class jocks and also-rans, Jews and Gentiles. All have been caught up in

the same demeaning game. Fernando has caught us all at our worst, all in the same schoolyard, ganging up against the class-fairy.

...they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, (...)

And yet, Fernando hasn't caught us at all, because he actually occupied that place deliberately for us, freely, as a present for us, even at our worst. That free coming-towards us—saying: "Yes, I know you do this to me, and I don't hold it against you"—sets us free to play a quite different game.

...whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

The very same Fernando, whom God empowered to come into our midst as a sacrificial offering to us, enabled our wrath to be assuaged. Once we see that this is what God's generosity looks like, then, rather than beating ourselves up about being murderers, lynchers and liars, we can trust that we are liked as we are, even in the midst of all that we typically do.

This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance He had passed over former sins, (...)

The whole purpose of this exercise was to get across to us that God really is good—not out to get us, not trying to show us up for what we are or to settle scores. In fact, God is entirely uninterested in whatever part we played in the drama of Fernando.

...it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

God really wants to get across to us that he is good, and that his goodness is a vivifying, invigorating force. Anyone who comes to see that goodness acting out three-dimensionally in Fernando's coming

among us will find themselves radically re-vivified and reinvigorated, taken into an entirely new game.

In both passages, it really is as though Paul wants to stress that God has a terrible time getting across to us that God is basically good and for us. God had to come up with this way of showing that he really is for us, that God actually likes us, loves us, wants to be on our side. He's saying:

I do want to play with you. I know you're a susceptible lot, and the only way I can get it across to you that I like you is by occupying the very worst space that any of you can come up with, a place which you typically think I like to put people in. I don't. It's you who put people there, you at your very worst. I'll occupy that space to show you that I'm not out to get you, that I really do like you. The moment you see that, then you can relax and trust my goodness. Then you need no longer engage in that awful business of making yourselves good over against or by comparison with each other. You can relax about being good, and as you relax, you will find yourselves becoming something much better, much richer in humanity than you can possibly imagine.

Jesus, in going to his death, brought together the liturgical, the ethical, and the personal in a totally benevolent movement towards, for, and in the face of us frightened, violent creatures who find it so difficult to imagine ourselves as loved.

I hope that these three different imaginative exercises come together for you. In our next chapter, we will be looking at what has been opened out for us, as humans, by Jesus coming into our midst in this way.

CHAPTER 7:

Induction into a People

In the previous chapter, we looked at the Atonement. I guided you, imaginatively, into a number of different movements towards us: a liturgical movement towards us, in which the High Priest came through the veil, offered a sacrifice, and sprinkled us with blood. Then a political movement towards us, in which a politician sacrificed several convenient others for us, thus assuaging the wrath provoked in us by unresolved bloodguilt. Finally, we saw how the same dynamic can be personal, when Crazy Joe and the Gerasenes morphed into the returning high school class fairy, Fernando, and his classmates.

You may remember that, before they were rudely interrupted, the Gerasenes and Fernando's classmates had something in common: a way of keeping their unity. They were able to come together in a certain way because they had somebody who was not them. Crazy Joe was useful to the Gerasenes because he was not-them. His being not-them enabled them to know who they were and what it was to be good and to be sane. The same was true of the high school class: everyone could play and be normal while the class fairy was around. And in both cases, the making-human of the one who was "not-us" shook "us" up. With Joe being found clothed and seated and in his right mind, the whole way the Gerasenes created unity was put into doubt. Similarly, we left Fernando's classmates stymied as to how to react to Fernando's peaceful, non-resentful presence among them.

The members of these formerly united and now discombobulated groups face two options. One is to walk off in disgust, saying: "I don't like all this uncertainty. I prefer the old world where good and bad, pure and impure, inside and outside are stable realities, where real decisions about who we are get made when people are designated as not-us. And

I'm prepared to fight to make sure that's the world we keep". The other option is to say: "Well, we can't in good faith go back to the old way of maintaining unity, because we've now seen that the one we thought of as 'not-us' was in fact very much 'us', and thanks to him we've glimpsed the possibility that we might learn to play a different game".

Both these options have in common that their ways of being together depend on a victim. It is the perspective on the victim that is different. In one case, a group is reconciled over and against a victim. That is a form of building up unity you may remember from our third chapter: the slow, gradual buildup to unity achieved over against Achan by means of the lottery process. The other group is beginning a process of reconciliation that comes from the generosity of a forgiving victim. This one is saying: "Yes, I did occupy this space for you, so it is possible for you not to have to do this sacrifice thing again. You don't need to be frightened that you aren't going to know who you are anymore. You are going to be who you are, starting from me, and it's going to be a much richer experience than you can imagine".

What we are going to be exploring in this chapter is the very strange space of being inducted into a people. For this is the root experience of what the project that came to be called Church is all about.

Being Called Into a "Being Together" - 1 Peter 2:4-10

Just in case you think I'm making up this stuff about the perspective on the victim being central to the whole project, I'd like to ask you to look at a chunk of Scripture from the first epistle of Peter. Here it is spelt out as clear as can be:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; (...)

First of all, Peter (and for the sake of argument, let's stick with the traditional attribution of authorship) points to Jesus, the forgiving victim, as the one who is central to what is to come. And, immediately, he introduces the two valences which the victim has: on the one hand,

“rejected by men”; but, on the other, “in God’s sight chosen and precious”. So there follows directly, from this double valency of the stone, the sort of life project which is coming upon those who are beginning to accept their identity from the forgiving victim:

And like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

They are going to become, like him, people who are not frightened to occupy the toxic space of victimhood. And because they are not frightened, they will be able to give themselves away, rather than grasping onto identity. It is in giving themselves away that they will be found to be who they really are, which is Christ.

Peter then goes on to explain the logic behind this exhortation, finding some appropriate quotes from Isaiah and Psalm 118 to show what he means:

For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

So, first of all, it emerges that there is a positive, creative project: something deliberate and willed. Please note that this project already assumes in advance that we humans typically have a place of shame that is central to our being and our togetherness.

The place of shame into which the group puts someone, a someone of whom everyone can be ashamed, and thus who will be not-them. That’s how the sacrificial model to which we are accustomed works. The deliberate project Peter is talking about imagines the complete reversal of the sacrificial model, such that by standing alongside (and receiving identity from) the apparently shamed one, empowered by the real honour and reputation that is His, we will be enabled to move entirely beyond the entrapment of shame:

To you therefore who believe, God is precious, (...)

Please note how the understanding of “believing” and faith we looked at in Chapter 5, and our recognising the one who chooses to occupy the place of shame in Chapter 6, come together here. Faith is the habitual disposition by which we are relaxed into the surety of God’s goodness towards us, made manifest in the positive project of his Son occupying the space of shame for us. The word here translated “precious” is, in fact, the noun and article “the honour”. We might translate it as “He is honour itself” or “the very source of recognition”—that which empowers reputation in others.

Peter continues:

...but for those who do not believe: “The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner”, and “A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall”; (...)

Isn’t it curious that he doesn’t say “For those who don’t believe, it’s as if nothing happened”? That would be the case if all we were talking about were a shift in people’s perception. But no, he’s talking about something real, which has happened, and once it has happened, it can’t be undone. Even those who don’t know it has happened, or don’t want to recognise it, can’t escape its consequences. In fact, he’s referring to a genuine anthropological event, something that has had a profound impact on humanity and has not left everything unchanged.

Once it has happened, once the class fairy has returned as the possibility of a new unity, there is something vaguely threatening about it for those who don’t want to line up for the new game. In fact, whereas the old game seemed to be all there was, it’s becoming clearer and clearer that the old game is a stumbling block even for those who don’t want to leave it—a repetitive mechanism which just grinds on and on, tying people into self-diminishing patterns of behaviour as they try more and more desperately to hang on to something which doesn’t actually produce the promised results:

...for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

Please notice this use of “the word”: the anthropological event is described as an act of communication.

The coming-into-the-world of this forgiving-rejected-one was itself the communication which has opened up ever more vivacious patterns of living. By contrast, failing to keep up with the new game means being stuck in the rigidity and fixity of necessity or “destiny”. For those who accept the honour that comes from the one in the place of apparent shame, Peter describes what the whole project is about:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

It is to be what Israel was always supposed to be from the beginning: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. In other words, from the very beginning, God had something in mind: bringing to birth a wonderful way of being human that would look entirely different from the ordinary ways of the nations. In fact, all the elements proper to understanding Project Israel have been recast and given a whole new depth by their source, having come into the midst of the people as the rejected one.

This is what it is like to obey the word: to undergo the act of communication which inducts us into a new people. And the Greek here hides a little hint of the project we call “Church”, for where it says “He who called you out”, the Greek has the two words “*ek*” and “*kalesantos*”—“calling out” or “summoning”. These two words run together give us the word “*ekklesia*”—the calling out, as when God called the people of Israel out to assembly at Horeb to listen to Him. (In Deuteronomy 4:10, the Greek *ek-kaleo* translates the Hebrew, *qahal*).

Once again, we see something happen at an anthropological level: the new way of being, the new identity of the group, will be the result of a very particular act of communication entirely at the human level. According to the richness of this human-level communication, so will be the richness of the group summoned by it. And this act of communication is a very rich, complex human dynamic of the sort we saw with

the returning Fernando. The group that is summoned by such an act is nothing less than a new form of humanity.

Peter firms up his point by making a reference to the Prophet Hosea, a reference which is worth our while to pursue a little:

Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy, (...)

You may remember that God ordered Hosea to go and marry a prostitute called Gomer. Gomer bears him three children, of which the last two are a daughter named "not-to-receive-mercy," and a son named "not-my-people". They are a prophetic sign of God repudiating his covenant with the people of Israel. Where the covenant said "You will be my people, and I will be your God", the child is called "not my people".

Of course, the whole point of the prophetic gesture was that "not my people" and "not pitied" should act as reminders to those who thought of themselves as "my people" and "I have received mercy" of what it really looks like to be God's people. And this would culminate in the prophecy which Peter sees as having been fulfilled at last, the covenant definitively restored:

...and I will sow him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Not pitied, and I will say to Not my people, "You are my people"; and he shall say "Thou art my God." (Hosea 2:23)

What Does it Mean to Say that Jesus Founded the Church?

Why do I start with all this? Typically, when we hear the word "church", we are inclined to think of a more or less voluntary association of people who have certain beliefs about Jesus. What I want to point out is how far away that is from what was originally understood! Early on, it was quite clear that Jesus had effected a massive change at the anthropological level—something to do with the very conditions of being human—and that the whole point was to bring into existence a new

way of being together. So, not a group of people with an interesting idea (e.g. “Jesus died to save us”). who come together and form a new association. Instead, the interesting idea and the new form of association becoming available are absolutely simultaneous and inseparable from each other. From the outset, the project aimed to establish the possibility of reconciliation for all people.

In other words, it is not the case that Jesus did certain things which you’re supposed to believe, then each of you individually gets an indelible brownie point on your forehead, and then you join up with other people who have similar brownie points on their foreheads and work out how to be good together. On the contrary: it is because Jesus is to be found in the place of shame, wherever that is in any of our societies, that it becomes possible for us to start realising what we’ve been doing, to see what has been done for us so gratuitously, and thus be empowered to form a new sort of togetherness that is not over against anyone at all.

Do you see how the Atonement and the birth of a new people are two different yet interconnected dimensions of the same thing? I want to stress this here, since it is very common to hear sentiments like the nineteenth-century witticism: “Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, but what came along was the Church”. This is taken to mean that Jesus never founded, or wanted, the Church which has been foisted onto him. Rather, he was all about the Kingdom, which was all mercy and light, and Paul was the one who invented the Church, along with all that ecclesiastical obscurantism and hypocrisy of which we are so rightly wary.

This picture is nonsense. Of course, Jesus didn’t sit down with a corporate lawyer and draft the deeds for setting up the institution which we call the Church. But this is because the Church is not an institution in that sense. Jesus was fulfilling the gathering which began around the Presence on Sinai with Moses. And it turned out that the fullness of the Presence wasn’t the frightening presence of God as had been perceived at Sinai. It turned out that the presence of YHWH at Sinai had been that of a forgiving victim, the scapegoat come back, the class fairy shown to have been actively creating this breakthrough all along. All the wrath perceived round Sinai had been projected from wrathful people onto a

voice that could scarcely be heard breaking through to them. Instead, it turns out that Presence is a victim, one who is forgiving us, and we are starting to say “Oh, so that’s what I’ve been involved in—and now I can become something else”. Hearing the voice of the forgiving victim automatically inaugurates a new sort of relationship. The coming into being of the Church is not an add-on, but central to the entire project.

So, when I say that Jesus founded the Church, it means something very definite. It means that, starting with his words in the Eucharist—“This is my body which is given up for you”—Jesus was deliberately enacting the “laying in Zion the new foundation stone”, as Isaiah had prophesied. He was demonstrating in advance, by means of a solemn mime (which he urges us to extend in time and space), that he was about to become the victim around whom the new unity would be created. In fact, the Gospel says this very clearly indeed—so blindingly clear that it is almost invisible. In St John’s Gospel, there is a meeting of concerned parties trying to work out what to do about Jesus: He is creating such waves that they fear the colonial power, the Romans, will take advantage of the disruption as an excuse to destroy the Temple and their nation (Jn 11:49-52). Caiaphas, who was acting High Priest, says to the meeting:

You understand nothing at all. You do not conceive that it’s expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.

Well, we’ve all heard this before: it is the classic statement of sacrificial political ethics. What we rarely remember is what follows:

He did not say this from himself, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

In other words, the same double valency of sacrifice that we saw in Peter’s Epistle was familiar to John and set out clearly: a person going to his death is, on one hand, described as a temporary political solution, creating unity in a threatening situation. On the other hand, it is de-

scribed, in the very same words (and, despite himself, by the very same mouthpiece), as the project that YHWH is deliberately inaugurating to bring about a new sort of unity.

What is being founded, for those enabled to enter the perspective of the victim, is the possibility of being forgiven—literally let go—from the victimising way of creating and maintaining togetherness. Thus, they begin to relate to other people without the need to gang up in order to survive.

How Does a Sacrifice Build Unity?

I would like to point out here that we are not discussing something “churchy” or apparently “religious”, but rather something universal in human culture. Our Joshua reading was a classic account of how sacrifice builds unity when the demoralised troops were brought together over against one who is blamed and destroyed. It seems to be a fairly effective method, and one that is by no means restricted to ancient religious texts. When the Argentine military junta was falling apart in the early 1980s, it was awfully convenient for them to invade the Falkland Islands as a means of creating national unity in support of their regime. A significant series of protests and riots had occurred, and their control was slipping. What better way to find a distraction and enthuse people about something else? Their only mistake was to assume that the British Government wouldn’t really be interested in defending the islands.

Many commentators have pointed out how dependent we all are on our “evil other” over against whom we can unite. A stunning loss of identity threatened the West after the sudden collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989-1990. Along with that threat came the realisation of how cosily reliable our enemy had been in giving us a sense of safety and security. It actually took quite a long time before militant Islam (whether in its real or its imaginary form) took the place of the wicked other over against whom “we” might unite. During the period of flailing around, there was a brief attempt in the early 1990s to portray the Japanese as the stage villains, with a rash of Hollywood films highlighting both the deviousness of their conspiracies and their threatening wealth.

But it didn't last long, since Japan was too small and its economy too fragile for it to be a plausible "wicked other". Resentment-driven jihadis turned out to be a much better "wicked other", not least because they are such willing accomplices in the game: they know precisely how to get mileage out of victimary identity-building.

In any case, there are myriad examples of how this works in every culture and at every historical period—and also, in all probability, from your own personal experience of relationships. So when we talk about how sacrifice creates unity, we are not referring to a narrowly religious issue. We are discussing a cultural function that is universal. We are not aware of any human culture where identity is not achieved and maintained in this manner. And "this way" is not simply bad. Without it, we would not have achieved the measures of peace and stability that we have, however short-lived they may be. Humans without boundaries, without group identities, would probably have wiped themselves out. Unbridled imitation leads to unbridled vengeance, and without the apparent magic of a seemingly impartial finger directing and limiting the vengeance to one party and legitimising it, we would probably have ceased to exist as a race a long time ago.

My reason for stressing this here, in this context, is that Jesus did not found the Church merely as a particular religious institution. Instead, he inaugurated the possibility of undoing all existing forms of cultural togetherness without causing a total collapse of the human species. In other words, his project is an anthropological one, completely recasting the ways humans live together. This project is, of course, instantiated in a thoroughly particular and unsatisfying institution, populated by thoroughly unsatisfactory characters such as ourselves, which we call the Church. But don't let what looks like a crusty epiphenomenon fool you! An earthquake project has been initiated, and what we call the Church has been thrown up by it, even as it often tries to hide it.

This means that, in principle, Jesus' creative and founding activity—living out the role of the Forgiving Victim—is available wherever any group of people creates unity by ganging up against others. It is available regardless of the particular cultural forms or identities that are forged over against others. For it is this cultural fact, if you like, that is being undone by Jesus' foundation. It is not that Jesus came to attack

a particular “bad religious system” called “Judaism” and substitute for it a new religious system called “Christianity”. On the contrary, with the help of the tools and instruments made available to him through Ancient Hebrew and Jewish texts and institutions, Jesus came to reveal something about what humans do in such a way as to make it possible for a new way of being human to emerge.

This distinction is going to be very important to us in later chapters, since it is only by having a firm sense of the original project that we will be able to stand back from, relativize, and not be made too angry by the farcical contortions of identity-grabbing and hate-fired contrast which flourish amongst we who should know better in and as the Christian Church.

What Might a New Unity Look Like?

All this, of course, raises the issue of what on earth a new unity might look like? One that isn’t derived over against some other, and thus doesn’t hark back to a human culture dependent on expulsion and murder? And this is, for all of us, no purely theoretical question because the easiest thing for any of us is to be reactive. If you are in some doubt and don’t know who you are, get somebody to tell you who you should be against.

I don’t know if you’ve ever had the experience of joining a new group of people—migrating to a new country, or joining the Marines, converting to a new religion, or even joining a particular group within a religion. You find yourself in the new group, and you are not at all sure who you are supposed to be. As a result, you are incredibly open to any suggestion as to who you should become, eager to learn. Scarcely aware of what you are doing, you watch for markers from respected old-timers, as though you were a hugely thirsty sponge, saying: “Daddy, Daddy, tell me who I am to be”. And the results are acquired as if by an amazing osmosis: incredibly quickly, you become the poster child for all the values of the group. Not the real values, of course, for those are challenging to acquire, and can only be acquired over time, and the one thing you haven’t got while grasping for identity is time! No, instead of

the real values of the group, you acquire what I might call their frontier values: you become an expert at singing the tribal song. If you join the Marines, for instance, you'll very quickly learn to bond with your new fellows by rehearsing the ways in which the Marines are way different from other parts of the Armed Forces.

Upon becoming a Catholic, I myself was very tempted by a cheap identity over against the Protestantism of my upbringing. Then, upon joining a religious order called the Dominicans, I was tempted again by finding ways to score points against the Jesuits. Not because Jesuits are at all hateful, but because in some ways, the Jesuits are the group most like the Dominicans among male Catholic religious orders. Naturally enough, part of the tribal song I picked up was: "Here's how we are not like the Jesuits". The quickest way to some sort of belonging: ask, "What am I not supposed to be like?" You can imagine someone who has never had a hostile thought about Jewish people, but on becoming a Muslim quickly becomes a caricature of anti-Jewish diatribe, perhaps still without ever meeting an actual Jewish person. Or, you can imagine someone who discovers Christianity and becomes Amish, the sort whose observance demands the use of hooks, not buttons, in their clothing and for whom the very worst thing you could be is one of those "worldly" Amish who use buttons, not hooks.

Whatever your new group, there'll be older, wiser members who can see your identity-hunger for what it is, and will hope that you settle down soon enough. But it may be many years before you find whatever is central and creative in your new group and are able to be formed by that, moving beyond these boundary issues. And naturally enough, you will not be in a great place for creating unity with your apparent enemies if you really need to believe your caricatures about them in order to know who you are.

So, given that the standard mechanism for group formation includes a shortcut which asks, "Who am I supposed not to be like?" or says, "Give me difference", what is it going to look like to not be over against anyone at all? What is it going to look like to start finding similarities with the other, rather than grasping onto some pseudo-difference to make yourself feel good?

Well, we're given a picture of exactly this happening in Acts 10.

Acts 10

Acts 10 is Luke's account of an extraordinary anthropological earthquake—perhaps the most crucial day in history outside Judaism. This was the day when the Hebrew religion went universal, and what we now know as Catholicism—Universal Judaism—was birthed into reality. Let us look at the passage:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God.

So, we have a Roman soldier on duty far from home. He is described as “a devout man who feared God with all his family”. Here-in lies a technical term. Jews recognised a category of Gentiles called “God-fearers. These were non-Jewish people who had come to believe in the one God of Israel—who worshipped regularly in Synagogues, listened to the preaching of Moses and developed the sort of moral life that flowed from monotheism—but who were not prepared to go through with circumcision, actually convert to Judaism and take on the whole yoke of the Law and its 613 commandments.

This was a thoroughly respectable group of people who were, if you like, half-insiders and half-outsiders. Second-class citizens to be sure, but genuinely welcomed in the Synagogues, where there would be a special area set apart for them. It might be seriously complicated for a Roman centurion to actually convert to Judaism. However, to adhere to ethical monotheism would by no means be thought of as a bad thing, and many such “God-fearers” would have taken their religious duty very seriously. You may remember the incident in Luke's Gospel where Jesus cures the servant of another centurion (Luke 7:1-10). Just before he does so, some of the locals tell Jesus that the Centurion is worthy of his help since “he loves this nation and has built us our synagogue”. He is another example of a “God-fearer”: someone who is “basically on our side but is not prepared to go the whole way and become one of us”.

Back to Cornelius:

About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him: “Cornelius.” And he stared at him in terror, and said: “What is it, Lord?”

In the mid-afternoon, our Centurion has a clear vision, something very frightening to him. As a God-fearer, he understands his Judaism enough to know that an angel is not a Hallmark-card herald, but a local instantiation of God’s very self, something deeply awe-inspiring, and so he addresses the angel as “Lord”:

And he said to him: “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.” When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those that waited on him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. [That’s about midday.] And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the Heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the Earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat”. But Peter said: “No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”

Here we have some more technical words: common or profane, and unclean or impure. These refer to the sort of things that, according to the book of Leviticus, Jewish people are forbidden to eat.

In many cases, these things were not only called unclean, but were referred to as “toevah,” which is often translated as “abomination” but which we might paraphrase better as “absolutely taboo”. The text follows:

And the voice came to him again a second time: “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to Heaven. Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood before the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there.

What has Peter seen that so inwardly perplexes him? Well, he has seen, amongst the animals in the sheet, some of those which it was explicitly forbidden for Jews to eat: pigs, snakes, lobsters, and many others. It is not that they were considered evil beasts in themselves, merely that, according to the holiness code by which the people of Israel were set apart from other nations, these beasts were ritually unclean.

Keeping the purity code from Leviticus was part of maintaining the holiness of God’s people. Peter, as a good Jew, would never even have considered eating such things. Yet here he is, being told to kill and eat them, which might at first be regarded as a satanic temptation. Yet the voice assures him that God has cleansed these things, so he must not call them unclean. In other words, he is being told to overcome his repugnance at what is being shown to him. And this happens three times.

This is not the first time that Peter has experienced something in batches of three. The first time was in the High Priest’s courtyard where, under persistent questioning, he had denied Jesus three times. He had been unable to overcome his fear of sharing the place of shame with Jesus. After his third denial, as you may remember, the cock crows, or in Greek: “calls out”. Luke is certainly being deliberate when, after Peter’s third refusal to eat the repugnant food in his vision, Cornelius’ men stand outside his gate and “call out”. The verb is the same as the one used for the cock:

And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him: “Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down, and accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them.”

You can begin to imagine, perhaps, something of Peter's perplexity. Two apparently different things are coming together for him as the same: his shame—having run him such that he wanted nothing to do with a man he loved when that man was standing in the place of shame—and his ritual goodness, which ran him such that he would have nothing to do with the sort of people who kill and eat such repugnant beasts.

Nudged by the Spirit out of his place of shame, Peter doesn't hide and pretend to be someone else, as he had done earlier, when three other people tried to put him on the spot. Without knowing why these three have come, or indeed what their ritual status might be, he finds himself emboldened to openness:

And Peter went down to the men and said: "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" And they said: "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say." So he called them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went off with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends.

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying: "Stand up; I too am a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered; and he said to them: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; (...)"

Let us be clear here: Peter finds himself addressing outsiders, Gentiles. True, the sort of Gentiles who know what the Jewish law is about and respect it, who live in close proximity to observant Jews, but who have also accepted second-class status in this sphere, who would not have been deeply scandalised if Peter had asked them all to come

out so he could speak with them rather than risking his own impurity by entering a Gentile dwelling.

Nevertheless, Peter has already come into the house. And it is here, in a Gentile household, that he utters the following line, which I would strongly suggest you underline about three hundred times with all the highlighters and coloured markers that you can muster:

but God has shown me that I should not call any human common or unclean.

This simple sentence is the first hint of what is to come in the following few verses: this scene will be the only time in the New Testament that Peter uses what we now call the Petrine Authority, the power of the keys he was given by Jesus (Matt 16:19). He uses that authority to unbind the Gentiles, which is to say, to open Heaven for the non-Jewish portion of the human race. He does so as a result of his own experience, in which what appeared to be a vision about ritually unclean food had become inseparable from the shame he felt at his betrayal of Jesus. He has understood, from his own experience, the relationship between the expelled victim and the rituals and prohibitions by which people keep themselves at a distance from the victim in a state of fake goodness.

Peter now knows he can no longer, in good conscience, regard the purity laws as genuinely holy. But he's still not quite sure where all this is leading him, and it is delightful to watch him responding to events as they overtake him:

“So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.” And Cornelius said: “Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, saying, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside.’ So I sent to you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

Cornelius hasn't got anything particular to request of Peter, has no intention of trying to pry something out of him, or indeed of getting him to do anything. He merely has a narrative of being told to do something, doing it, and now waiting to see what comes next. And what comes next is the final portion of Peter's authoritative pronouncement:

And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Peter's understanding has clearly been developing on the road, catching up with what's going on. First, he has understood that he, personally, has been shown not to call any person impure or unclean. Now he sees that this is not merely something for him personally, but that God has set up events with Cornelius in order to drag out of him a recognition that something has happened which has much broader—indeed huge—implications: there is no over against in God. Therefore, being "on the inside" of the life of God cannot legitimize any form of group identity which includes self-definition over against another.

Peter now begins to tell a thoroughly Hebrew story, setting out an act of communication which began within the referential terms of Israel, of Judah and Jerusalem:

You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; (...)

It is interesting, in the context of what he himself has been undergoing, that Peter doesn't say "they crucified him". Instead, he uses the term which would have indicated clearly that Jesus died under a curse

from God, for that is how Deuteronomy regards one who is “hanged upon a tree” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23, see Galatians 3:13).

Peter could count on his God-fearing Gentile listeners knowing this reference. You can almost sense the shock of the anthropological earthquake as it becomes clear that the shamed one, the cursed one, is in fact the source of honour and forgiveness:

...but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

The logical consequences of this breakthrough travel faster than either Peter’s or his audience’s capacity to understand what is going on.

The transformation of the cursed one into the one who opens up belonging and new reputation has completely collapsed any notion of goodness through contrast with a shamed other:

While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

Notice what has happened. Before Peter has even reached for himself the logical conclusion he has already been nudged towards conceding, it suddenly turns out that the half-insiders/half-outsiders have already become insiders, just as he is:

And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Peter and his companions are significantly amazed. This is not what they expected. They could imagine, perhaps, in their generosity,

extending courtesy to these second-class citizens. But what was happening did not depend on their generosity, their superiority, or their initiative. In fact, they are discovering that they are now equal insiders with the formerly semi-shameful other, the initiative not belonging to either of them.

Then Peter declared: “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Peter magnificently catches up with what’s going on by authorizing the sign to match the reality. With this, the first Gentiles are baptized, insider status ceases to be over against anything at all, and Judaism goes universal.

Learning to Receive Identity in the Collapse of Identity

Now, I want to stress that what we have just read is actually much more difficult and produces much more of a shake-up than seems to be the case from St Luke’s account. We are all far more run by our systems of purity, the things which keep us “us” and the other “other”, than we realize. Peter, for instance, was not in principle a citizen of the world who just happened to hold to a purity code as a pleasing cultural option. He had been completely brought up within a system, had taken it for granted. The system had given him his identity. It didn’t even occur to Peter for quite a long time after hanging out with Jesus—after Jesus had risen from the dead and after he had been performing miracles in Jesus’ name—that all this was going to have unpredictably enormous cultural consequences. We witness him being taken to the very limit of his experience, asked to do something he finds repulsive.

Let’s remember that, if you are brought up in a purity code, it’s not merely that you have theoretical knowledge that certain things are impure for you while neutral for people outside your cultural group. You actually learn to feel repulsed by unclean things. You will learn to

regard the unclean other as disgusting—to feel a physical reaction, a frisson of horror, when faced, for instance, with pigs or pork products. Ritual uncleanness is often accompanied by a physical reaction; not merely “I know I shouldn’t touch that” but “Ugh! Get it out of here”. That’s the kind of reaction that a purity code will induce in you. You become a function of it.

So here is Peter, who has been living as a function of a purity code, imagining it to be good—indeed his imagination of the good utterly suffused by it. Suddenly, he finds himself taken to a place where he’s going to have to step across a huge boundary, go into the wrong sort of person’s house, eat the wrong kind of food with them, and start to recognise that “being good” is entirely unrelated to all the things that gave it shape, taste, and bearings before.

Furthermore, those whom he is visiting have to do the same. They are going to start seeing people whom they have regarded as “special but different” as on the same level as themselves. And that too is no minor disturbance. This dynamic is familiar to Catholics, since one of the ways we avoid taking our faith seriously is by putting priests on pedestals. We thereby create a safe space for us not to have to do something, because it’s the kind of thing that priests do. We are then genuinely quite shocked when we discover there is no real difference as regards humanity between priests and lay people. But priests being on pedestals for Catholics is not merely the result of priestly arrogance; it is very often the result of lay convenience. A ritual difference helps to give us an identity apart.

Here, though, we see two groups finding themselves face to face in an extraordinary situation where it has become clear that there is no barrier between them. And both groups are losing their identity. Any of us can cope with a situation in which the “other” crosses the line and becomes one of us—or, more painfully, betrays us and leaves us for the other side. But what is it like when what used to be an insider group discovers it doesn’t lay down the terms by which someone becomes “one of us”? Or when an outsider group loses the ability to grasp onto a certain resentment at second-class status, which at least lets it know who it was? The massive loss of identity occurs as a group finds itself

overcoming revulsion, repugnance—strong identity—and discovering the profane, threatening, other as its equal.

Even worse, this former other is inside the same thing as you, and on the same terms as you—terms which you do not control. It isn't that you can reach out to them from a position of firm identity, saying: "I'm such a kind, generous person that I can let you in, and you will become like me. In fact, that's all you need to do: become like me". That would be easy. But what has happened here—what Peter is discovering—is that, in fact, finding the other on the inside alongside you, on terms not dictated by you, means you are never going to be "you" ever again. You will find yourself becoming someone entirely different from who you thought you were. A new "we" is being created, and neither party yet knows what it is going to be like to be this new "we", what its goodness and security is going to look like. This is deeply disturbing to someone with firm boundaries. Rather than "Do this and become like us" it's "Yipes, we are finding ourselves on the inside of something new. We are both going to have to discover what this means". All over the world, this is the experience of host nations with growing immigrant populations: both cease to be what they thought they were and, after much painful tension, they come to rejoice in who they are becoming.

This is what I mean by the process of learning to receive identity in the collapse of identity. It is a process by which we find ourselves learning who we are to the degree that we discover a similarity with others, which can be very painful. It will feel like a loss of identity. It will feel profoundly destabilizing. Where is it going to go? It can be difficult to imagine, but what feels like a loss is in fact not a loss. It is the pain of being given a new identity, of discovering who I really am, of becoming "you are my people" rather than "not my people".

It is one thing, learning to see the other as not really a threat to me. But seeing the repulsive other as that which makes it possible for me to become who I really am? Yet this is the one foundation of the Church: a shamefully crucified victim. And from that one repulsive other begins the gathering-together of all people out of every nation, tribe, and language, all of whom are discovering who they are for the first time as they drop their boundaries over against each other.

The Universality and Contingency of this Process

We've seen how a single anthropological Earthquake—an act of communication which began turning all the normal markers of human culture around from within—also began a new “being together” which is, in principle, over against nothing at all. This means that the new “being together” is universal, or catholic, which is just a Greek word meaning: “according to the whole”, or “universal”. We are, of course, used to the word “Catholic” having acquired a tribal meaning—something like “loyal to the Pope” or “as opposed to Protestant” or meaning some kind of spiritual or liturgical flavour within Christianity. However, this is a debasement; the notion of catholicity is not an add-on to the Gospel, not an optional extra once you've got your basic Christianity sorted out. It is an essential dimension of what Jesus was about.

What Jesus inaugurated was the possibility of a being-together in which there is, in principle, no social “other”. There is no group or nation, ethnicity, gender, or any other identity that we typically create in a binary fashion (slave or free, Jew or Greek, male and female, black or white, straight or gay, and so on) that cannot be brought into the gathering, the *ekklesia*, the new people of God. For such people live in a reconciled way thanks to their living forgiving victim.

This means that the one thing the Catholicity of the Church can never be is a matter of identity politics. Identity politics stems from the most profound and primitive tribal notions of identity, built over against another. And there can be no greater betrayal of Catholicity than attempting to create an “in-group” called Catholics. But what sort of group definition could possibly persist in the face of there being no “in-group”, because there is no “out-group”? It is worth remembering how we are supposed to be living signs of this—and how frequently we betray it, short-changing the Kingdom we are being inducted into by grasping onto a cheap shot of identity politics.

So, *one* act of communication has inaugurated *one* new way of being together, one that implies no over against, no social other, and thus, the chance of universality. However, I would like to point out that this matter of universality is not something that happens by decree. It is not that someone says: “Oh, now we have a universal Saviour who has saved

us universally. Therefore, we must now treat everyone with universal benevolence". This would make what happened a moral or intellectual matter—rather like the French Revolution decreeing *Égalité*, as if the mere decreeing brought it about. No, the universality that is the essence of the Christian faith works in a much more contingent manner.

It comes about in every particular place where there is an "in" group and an "out" group. It comes about by overcoming the war between the "in" group and the "out" group, in a usually bloody process of someone bearing witness to the truth—in other words, getting it in the neck. Then, other people stand up for the person who bore witness to the truth by getting it in the neck. And then, still other people begin to realise that the game is over. In other words, catholicity is not a decree, it's a process—a process of reconciliation produced by witnesses to the truth. It can happen wherever a group of people defines itself over against another, which is to say, absolutely everywhere, and amidst every group. We know of no ethnic group anywhere on the face of the planet, no gang in the periphery of any major city, which is not inclined to build its unity at the expense of a social other. And this means that catholicity is everywhere latent. The possibility of it is just there, wherever people are doing that. Wherever people sacrifice, it is possible for the one being sacrificed to become the Christ.

So, in any group setting, anywhere at all, it is possible to become a witness—a *martus*—to what Jesus achieved by being prepared to stand in the place of shame, and so turn a particular conflict into a sign of the universal overcoming of conflict. The walls begin to come down. But this is a bloody process, not an automatic one. We are not talking of some grand sweep of history in which a peaceful dialectic simply advances. We are talking of a process that, once unleashed, is inevitable—but its inevitability is not despite us. Its inevitability includes us as actors who choose to stand and bear witness over a painful time. It is worth remembering that our addiction to violently achieved identity is so strong that we do not necessarily take kindly to the plug being pulled on our security. It would be nice to think that, once the plug had been pulled—once someone has occupied a space of shame and managed to de-toxify that shame—then we no longer need to fight each other. And some do get that. Others, however, will constantly try to re-establish the apparent security and togetherness that came with having such a convenient other in the place of shame. And they are

going to react with real wrath and rage at the loss of their defining other. Even though the attempt to re-establish unity over against is always going to be losing its power, that doesn't make its flailing around any less dangerous.

Imagining Heaven and Being Saved With the “Other”

I want to conclude this chapter by reflecting on a different dimension of this process of induction into a new people—a dimension that is sometimes called “holiness”. We say, in the Apostles’ Creed, that we believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and we’ve seen something of what this Oneness of the Church might mean: there was a single foundational act which brought into being (that is to say, genuinely instantiated and inaugurated) the first signs of the “being together” of all people. By definition, there cannot be more than one of these; someone who thought there was more than one Church in this strict sense would demonstrate that they don’t know what is meant by the word “Church”. We’ve seen that the word “Catholic” means “universal” in the sense that the one-ness is over against nothing at all. And we’ve looked at part of what is meant by the “Apostolicity” of the Church in seeing how the development of that one-ness over against nothing at all requires the real instantiation—in recognizable, messy, bloody, history—of genuine, named, historical people, mucky and unsatisfactory as we are, bearing witness to what Jesus did by doing it ourselves in vastly different circumstances, linked back across history to those in whose midst Jesus enacted his inauguration in the first place.

In some sense, the most counterfactual of all these dimensions of being inducted into a new people is “holiness”. I say counterfactual for three reasons. The first is that it is not at all clear what, in ordinary parlance, “holiness” means, or if indeed it is a good thing; a good deal of what passes as “holy” is either cosmetic, freakish, or frankly terrifying. The second reason is that holiness tends to conjure up pictures of moral superiority, or at least superciliousness. This clashes with what we have been looking at in the inauguration of a people not over against anything at all. How could such a people be “holy” without there being someone “unholy” by contrast with whom they might appear good? Wouldn’t the

“holiness” of the new people actually be an obstacle to their being what they’re supposed to be?

The third counterfactual is, sadly, the evident absence of holiness in the lives of so many official representatives of, and public spokespersons for, the Church. Our lives are so obviously driven by the same pathologies, rivalries, and mendacities as those of everybody else that it is passing rare to find, in our midst, a visible witness to the interruption of the social other by another Other.

So, I’d like to bring back the discussion of “holiness” to its real starting place. There is only one source of holiness for any of us, and it comes from the Forgiving Victim. In the Christian understanding, there is no holiness except from forgiveness. You can’t be good, let alone holy, except insofar as you are forgiven. This is, if you like, the personal element of the dynamic we looked at before: learning to receive a new identity in the loss of an identity. That is just as true of every member of a group as it is of the group as a whole.

It really is worth mentioning this, since so many of us tend to think of belonging to the Church and being forgiven as two quite separate things. And, of course, this is very convenient in a number of ways. It allows us to play at a form of tribal identity—“being Catholic” or “being Christian”—in a way thoroughly over against any number of different groups or ways of being in the world, and then separately to have a list of more-or-less superficial sins for which we can be forgiven repeatedly, so as to remind us that “we are sinners” as a way of feeling good about ourselves, being “insiders” in this mysterious tribe.

However, in fact, there is no way into the Church except by being forgiven; or, as one might say, no new identity without undergoing the original Earthquake. There is no way of “being good” which doesn’t have a direct relationship to this anthropological happening: learning to see that the way “we” held ourselves together was, in fact, something terrible, and stepping away from it relieved of our burden of being righteous persecutors. The holiness of the Church just describes this process: a new people being brought into being as a process of forgiveness, hoiked (though painfully) out of a reactive “goodness” and then set free from all that painful, hard, self-defeating baggage—and from there, discovering equality of heart with your repugnant “other”.

Thus, real holiness is the very reverse of frightening. It is, on the contrary, warm, gentle, tentative, alive, and empowering, with things that seemed hard tending to be made supple. Because the person who shows hints of holiness is learning to receive themselves in being let go, and knows it is in the measure that they let go that they will receive more. It should on no account be confused with the frightening simulacrum of holiness which is the “sacred”. This latter thing is full of fixity, superiority, strong identity, double-binds and self-destruction, all masked as immutability.

It is also worth remembering that no office in the Church can be exercised well by someone who is not in the process of being forgiven. The teaching of Christ is passed from those who are being forgiven to those who are being forgiven. If a liturgy is of Christ, then it has at its heart a reviled other reaching out to us in forgiveness. And that forgiveness, which breaks our heart, has as its purpose our being brought to life and made part of a much larger-hearted sign—not given a patina of respectability so that we can be superior to others.

You might try this as an imaginative exercise: how do you imagine Heaven? When I’ve asked people how they imagine Heaven—apart from the usual stuff about harps and clouds—they tend to talk about it being a place full of the sorts of people they loved when they were alive. Lots of people “like us”. I wonder! I wonder whether that wouldn’t be just too boring. I wonder whether part of the sheer excitement and dynamism of Heaven—a dynamism which starts here—doesn’t consist in finding that even the deep, contented delight in a beloved spouse or child is enriched by the zest of discovering equality of heart with all those repugnant others over against whom I might have remained stuck in my smallness, all those of whom I was frightened, or disapproved. Might not Heaven be a universe of others that becomes vastly more fun and varied as I’m able to let go of the terrifying narrowness of what I thought was “goodness”, but which turns out merely to have been a well-disguised amalgam of defensive snobbery?

The phrase “This day you will be with me in Paradise” was first spoken to, and first heard by, a thief on a gibbet thrown up on a city dump. How many of us have even begun to imagine what it is like to find the company of such a person forever delightful?

CHAPTER 8:

Inhabiting Texts and Being Discovered

I hope that, by the end of the last chapter, you may have felt yourself being caught up in a strange dynamic, finding yourself taken to a new place. Becoming part of a new people, through the work of an agency not your own, was quite disturbing. Yet it was ultimately extremely friendly to you. In this chapter, and the two that follow, we are going to spend more time exploring the strange dislocation and relocation which comes with finding yourself on the inside of this project. We will see how this process works, respectively, through text, desire, and sign—or, in more traditional language, how Scripture, prayer, and life in the Church can all be part of undergoing the act of communication we've been sinking into ever since the first chapter.

In fact, all of this has been an attempt to flesh out the picture we got from the road to Emmaus in our second chapter—to fill out the dynamic of the Crucified and Risen one coming alongside the confused disciples, interpreting and revealing himself to them, and their undergoing something as a result of his presence and its particular style. We've been adding layer upon layer, as it were, so that we get a richer and denser impression of what the Forgiving Victim in our midst is like, what he's about: the overall shape of our being shifted by him.

One of the dimensions of Jesus' presence to his disciples on the road to Emmaus was mediated to them through texts. You remember how Luke describes it: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27). You may also remember the sense I gave to Luke's use of the word “interpret”: that the crucified and living victim had become the living interpretative principle in their midst. I emphasised that the forgiving victim had not merely added to their store of infor-

mation by producing a list of proof texts. Instead, he took the whole story which was familiar to them and which had given them being—through the texts of Moses and all the prophets. He gave this back to them in such a way that they found themselves occupying a new place through those texts, one they could never have reached off their own bats but which, once received, made unified sense to them. It told them the truth about who they were, where they were coming from, and where they were going.

In this chapter, I aim to offer you glimpses, through various New Testament texts, of this dynamic at work. The dynamic of people undergoing the dislocation—and potential relocation—of being inducted into a new people, by having a familiar story given back to them from an entirely unfamiliar starting point. And this is part of the process of their enlivening: being taken out of roles within the stories they were used to, and finding themselves given quite new roles and challenges within stories that empowered their imaginations towards new ways of acting. In short, people who discover that the living hermeneutical principle, which I identified with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, can become a constantly loving, self-critical presence in their lives. These are signs in our life of the Holy Spirit's presence: a sometimes tough, sometimes gently received, but always loving capacity for self-criticism, opening out into a new way of being human together.

Before we start looking at some New Testament texts, I want to remind you of an element of how we've come to understand being human since the first chapter. And that is how important stories are to our being human. Humans are story-receiving, story-sharing, and story-telling animals. This is a vital part of our physicality, of the relationship between bodies, space, time, growth and change. Often enough, we sense that, if we are to be real truth-tellers, we must flee bodiliness and the muck of human remembering. We must aspire to some immutable, perhaps mathematical or ideal, form of truthfulness. But it is as bodies and through bodiliness—which means, through the processes of working through memories, feelings, habits and so on—that we have access to what is true. Remembering really does mean re-membering, putting together in new ways things that had become narrative-free, or narrative-toxic—things strewn about without healthy connections making them part of a bearable story.

So undergoing any induction into a new people will work through the same mechanisms. The status of stories as constitutive of our humanity is not suddenly going to be suppressed; rather, it will be opened up and given new dimensions. And one of the ways this works is that the double status of stories will be constantly before our eyes. Events can be described in a way which closes down reality—which is comfortable, repetitive, reinforces tribal belonging, and ultimately depends on the right “bad guy” getting it in the neck. But the same events can also be recast in a way that challenges, discomfits, pulls us out of our comfort zone, and enables us to see ourselves as less than the completely admirable people whom we like to flatter ourselves that we are—but people who can nevertheless aspire to more.

Someone engaged in self-deception or self-flattery (which is almost all of us, much of the time) is not someone who has gotten a piece of information about themselves wrong. It is someone who is telling a story which may well be true, but from the wrong position within the story—taking our own part as too important, or as not important enough, persistently regarding as “light matter” things which have devastating effects on others, but remain invisible to us. Being unable to lose ourselves in the discovery of what is really going on in a story, instead creating a narrow survival zone with limited communication. Or, trying to re-tell the story in a way that flatters our current self-interest, turning it into a story “over against” others, whose story it might also be, and whose hopes for flourishing may depend on us losing our fake “goodness”.

Throughout these chapters I’ve sought to bring out that all these positions within the telling of stories can relate to the central axis of the same story, either as told by those who find their togetherness at the expense of a victim, or as told by the forgiving victim at whose expense that togetherness was, and need no longer be, built. The discombobulation, the alteration, the enlivening power of the new story, is precisely that it shakes you out of your position in the story which was hardening into myth and lie, and drags you—in a way that is both painful and comforting—into having a story which we might call “new Creation”: discovering what really is, and what your minor but real, dependent but collaborative role in it is. How it really is far more fun and enlivening than anything the old story could imagine.

Now let us turn to some New Testament glimpses of the Master at work: Jesus doing among his listeners what he would later do more fully on the road to Emmaus, and continues to do to us, through the same texts, by means of his liturgical presence in the Eucharist. And please note something about how I handle these texts: not as solemnly finished works of prose to be read out loud and assented to, but rather as carefully prepared manuals for preachers or expositors. In short, for storytellers, whose job it is to help the listener recover not only the events that happened, but also the dynamic sense of what was really going on in the interactions being re-membered, so that they can find themselves inside the stories. I think this is a more accurate take on what those texts are about.

Approaching the Gospel stories in this way also helps us understand why different Gospel writers tell the same story in different ways, and why the texts themselves are peppered with allusions and references to other texts and stories. This is not because the Gospel writers were trying to be clever, introducing subtle and complicated word games into their plots for later scholars to get their teeth into—as if they were saying: “Well, here’s a simple story for the plebs, and hidden within it, a complicated set of word games for the Times Crossword addicts”. Quite the reverse: the authors, following well-known techniques of their time, introduced cues, guidelines, and reminders into their texts so as to make it easier for the storytellers to tell the story well. Far from being some exercise in erudition, it is better to see the Gospel writers’ technique as more like compiling “Cliffs Notes” or “Norton’s Notes”—“The Dummy’s guide to what Jesus Messiah was really about”.

Mark 3:1-6

To get us going, let’s look at a miracle story from early in Mark’s Gospel (3:1-6):

Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he

said to the man who had the withered hand: “Come here.” And he said to them: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man: “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

On first hearing this, you might think: “Well, it sounds perfectly straightforward: Jesus works a miracle on the Sabbath, which was against the Law, and the Pharisees get annoyed”. In fact, read this way, the story is rather odd, since it makes the reaction of the Pharisees altogether over the top. It says they went out and immediately held a meeting with some other important people in order to destroy Jesus. But why did they get so worked up? Looked at this way, it makes it sound as though they were really Very Evil People, whose job it was to stand around like stage baddies watching on the Sabbath until Jesus did a miracle, then gnash their teeth and go off in a huff in order to plan some new trap—an ancient, bearded version of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner. Their reaction is completely excessive if we consider the story to be simply an account of a miracle. Even if you do have strictures about things happening on certain days, if something obviously good—like someone getting cured from a visible affliction—happens on such a day, you shrug and find wiggle-room to accommodate it and be pleased.

I once showed this passage to a Rabbi who wasn’t familiar with the New Testament, and he immediately picked up the references at which we’ll be looking. His training had prepared him well for just this sort of storytelling technique. So, let’s see what’s really going on here, and why it is a much more interesting story than Wile E. Coyote, and where the real rage of the Pharisees came from.

Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

So here we have them preparing for a liturgical gathering, watching him. Also present is a man with a withered hand. The man with the withered hand is not asking to be healed; he's just there, maybe hoping for a healing, maybe not. The Pharisees are keen to see how Jesus copes with the situation. It's interesting that our word "accuse" translates a Greek word which gives us our word "category": they want to categorise him, put him in a box, fit him into the categories of their story. It is precisely this that will explode in their faces:

And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here."

Jesus accepts the implicit challenge that he can read from the situation and calls out the man with the withered hand. It is as if he is saying "How awful that these people are using you as a prop in their testing of me. But bear with me if you can. I want to do something for you. If you allow yourself to be my overhead projector, my PowerPoint Presentation, then you will find yourself becoming very much more than a prop in an argument. I accept that there are category problems here for your brethren, boxes into which things apparently don't fit, and for breaking which I may be accused. But with your help, I'm going to turn this into a teaching opportunity—which is, after all, what is meant to happen in Synagogue on the Sabbath".

Next comes Jesus' comeback:

And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

He now turns to the gathering and does to them what they thought they had done to him. He puts them on the spot by means of a difficult question. If they were to answer it, it would put them in contradictory boxes, rendering them liable to accusation.

Let's see what they would have understood from his tricky question. In the book of Deuteronomy, a text central to the Jewish project where Moses explains and teaches the Law to the people, there are several key moments of punctuation where Moses draws breath, as it were, and gets everybody present to assent to what he's teaching them.

Two of these very well-known passages, with which any adult male at least would have been familiar, are found roughly in the middle and at the end of the great liturgical gathering, which is how Deuteronomy represents Moses' sermon. So, in Deuteronomy 11:26-28, we read:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods which you have not known.

Then, close to the very end of his speech, Moses says:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

So Jesus is doing what should be done in a Sabbath liturgy: he is re-enacting Moses for them. It's as though he's saying: "OK guys, so Moses' Law prohibits certain things on the Sabbath? But here we are, celebrating the Sabbath by re-enacting Moses, and here we have someone with a withered hand. Well, I'm putting before you a choice, in exactly the same words as Moses did, because any attempt to re-enact Moses is always going to put before you this choice: the blessing if you obey, and the curse if you disobey. And obeying means pursuing life and good, and disobeying means pursuing death and evil. So here you are: are you really celebrating the Sabbath according to Moses? If you are,

you will certainly want me to choose life and good, and if you are not, then who are you to accuse me of disobeying the Law of Moses?"

Well, as you can imagine, this is an annoying question. Those gathered were not really expecting to have Moses re-enacted by this radical reinterpretation—one that went back to the roots—in their midst. It is an uncomfortable reminder that Moses, too, requires interpretation, and that he himself offers this interpretative principle, which Jesus has just brought out. If the choice is to follow the commandments, or not to follow them—to do good and choose life, or not to do good, and not to choose life—which is it to be? You can't, when faced with this choice, say: "I will obey the commandments, which means not choosing life". He's got them in a quandary: the whole point of what Moses was about, versus a particular passage from within that intention.

Well, they get it at once. They know exactly what he's saying, and they are paralysed by it. For them, Moses was someone they might use against him. But now, rather than retaliate, he's offered them real Moses as a question, insinuating that real Moses is against their Moses in a way that is perfectly clear to them. He's given them a self-evidently authoritative interpretation. When stuck, silence is the best answer:

And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart (...)

Here we have a splendid example of a "Dummy's Guide" giveaway: the little phrase "hardness of heart". To anyone even slightly acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures, there's one person above all others who suffers from hardness of heart, and that's the Pharaoh of Egypt. God tells Pharaoh, through Moses: "Let my people go", and every time that the Pharaoh is about to do just that, he hardens his heart (or God hardens his heart, or in some way arterio-sclerosis creeps upon him), he desists from generosity, and he keeps the people in slavery.

So please notice what the Gospel writer is telling us that Jesus is doing when he observes the hardness of heart in those gathered. He's saying that Jesus, who had just interpreted Moses to them definitely, has gone a step further back than the giving of the Law. Now he is Moses, looking at the assembled Pharaoh, wondering with sadness why

the gathered Pharaoh, in its stuckness, will not “let my people go”. And the man with the withered arm has become a stand-in for the people of Israel:

(...) and [Jesus] said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

This crowns his teaching, rubs it in, if you like. First, they try to trap Jesus with a Moses trap. He says: “OK, you want Moses? I’ll give you real Moses. But remember, if that is real Moses, then you are not the real Israel. No, this guy with the withered hand is Israel, and you are a kind of collective Pharaoh, but without the classy headgear”.

And then, in order to make his point, he does something rather terrible to them: he enacts YHWH. On several occasions during the buildup to the Exodus, YHWH says to Moses “Stretch out your hand” or “Stretch forth your hand”, which Moses then does, bringing confusion upon the gathered Egyptians (see, for instance Exodus 9:22; 10:12,21; 14:26—and also, suggestively, Numbers 11:23). YHWH’s enactment through Moses’ hand and arm had become central to the Exodus account as all of Jesus’ listeners remembered. Let’s look at Deuteronomy 4:32-35:

For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the Earth, and ask from one end of Heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides Him.

Again, please remember that this was not an obscure passage for Jews. This is a central passage, of the sort that every bar-mitzvah kid would have recognised. It was as familiar to Jesus' listeners as the Sermon on the Mount is to kids brought up in Christian homes today. So when Jesus gets the man with the withered hand to stretch out his hand, he is in fact doing something totally recognisable to his audience: he has made the man a symbol of Israel rescued by YHWH. YHWH's mighty hand and outstretched arm suddenly has a symbol of its presence in the congregation. This means that Jesus has not only enacted Moses in their midst, but, much more bafflingly, he has enacted YHWH. For what else could possibly be the power behind, and the meaning in, this newly stretched-out hand and arm?

So Jesus has not only interpreted the Law of Moses from within, as it were, bringing out its deepest intention; he has not only shown how, in the light of that deepest intention, those who thought of themselves as Israel were behaving much more like Pharaoh. He has also confirmed his teaching, his interpretation, and their new place in a story his audience knew well, with an indisputable sign that it is YHWH who is at work in him.

Do you begin to see now why they might have gone out and held counsel with the Herodians on how to destroy him? What he has done is much worse than the peccadillo of curing someone on the Sabbath. He's told them a story, one they know perfectly well. But bizarrely, he's told them this story with their trap, the man with the withered hand, turned into a sign, such that they are hearing the story of their hero Moses as if for the first time, and from an uncomfortable angle. Not the familiar story of "We are the good guys, we are the spiritual heirs of Moses" but the contrary: "You are acting like the Pharaoh of Egypt, using Moses' law for exactly the reverse purpose of what Moses wanted. Moses, after all, was the person who led the people out of Egypt. And just in case you're wondering whether my interpretation is true or not, what was it that YHWH did? Oh yes, something about a mighty hand and an outstretched arm—you mean, like this guy here? Oh, and on the Sabbath? Oh, so sorry, YHWH's bad!"

Do you see what's just gone on here? It's not just a miraculous healing: it's a sign. Jesus' miracles are always signs, always within a con-

text. They're always pushing an interpretation, if you like. Something comes to be seen that was not seen before, and those who were convinced that they occupied a certain place in the story (usually a rather complacent and self-satisfied place) suddenly find themselves having to say "Whoa! Do you mean that, all along, we've been making Moses our prisoner, rather than allowing God to use Moses to set us free?" What Jesus has done is not merely the friendly act of making someone better on Saturday: he's thrown into the midst of his listeners a sign which, as they work out what it means, challenges—and threatens to up-end—their whole understanding of goodness and togetherness. We might insinuate ourselves into this scene: what story of ourselves as the good guys are we wedded to? How might that story be so turned around that its challenge produces in us the depth of anger we see here? How might we allow ourselves to be moved on from that anger, finding ourselves occupying a less flattering part of a new story—but one where we are actually liked as ourselves?

Luke 11:14-20

As we move on to our next glimpse of the Master, please remember the distinction I made between a miracle and a sign: the difference between something happening, and the meaning which people give to the happening. This is important, since in principle, happenings are undecidable. If you produce a cure, it might be a work of God—or it might be a work of the devil, depending on how the group in whose midst it occurs perceives it as affecting them. Signs are always part of an act of communication, and in the passage we're going to look at now, interpreting signs is very much in the foreground. So, to Luke 11:

Now he was casting out a demon that was dumb; when the demon had gone out, the dumb man spoke, and the people marvelled. But some of them said: "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons."

Everyone present agreed that the demon had been cast out and that the person was now speaking. About the facts, there was no discussion.

The question was: “Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Does it come from a holy source, or is it someone’s black arts?” The same facts could be read both ways. And, indeed:

others, to test him, sought from him a sign from Heaven.

Others of those present say: “OK, we recognise what you’ve done, but what we need now is some sort of guarantee, to sort out the problem of interpretation. We need the divine “Made in Heaven” stamp to come down and brand this happening and assure interpretation. Miracles, as you know, are undecidable, so please produce the requisite sign from Heaven to back up your authenticity”. Jesus, Luke tells us, knows quite well that this is what is going on—a discussion about the undecidability of signs, and what this means about his listeners—:

But knowing their thoughts, (...)

So it is precisely to this discussion that he replies, by taking them straight into the middle of a very familiar story where the difference between silly, superficial signs and the real sign that is from God couldn’t be clearer:

...He said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

Luke gives us his “Dummy’s Guide” hint towards the end of this passage, in the rather strange remark: “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons...” The phrase “finger of God” doesn’t appear very

often in the Scriptures. In a couple of instances, God uses his finger for writing. But there's a rather special place in Exodus where the finger of God appears, in an episode which every bar-mitzvah kid would know, because it's during the account of the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 8:19). This is a highly memorable story—and, actually, one of the great comic passages of the Bible.

Moses and Aaron go in to see the Pharaoh, to tell him to “Let my people go”. Pharaoh tells them to prove their authenticity by working a sign (the same Greek word in Exodus as in our passage in Luke). So Aaron casts down his rod, and it turns into a serpent. Pharaoh calls his wizards, and they, too, use their magic arts to turn rods into serpents. Now, Aaron ups the stakes by turning the Nile into blood, something which would have devastated the lives, harvests, and economies of the Kingdoms of Egypt. A sensible Pharaoh with minimal public service instincts would have had his wizards turn the Nile back into sweet water. But no: caught in rivalry, Pharaoh's wizards manage the same trick as Aaron, except that it's entirely against their own interests—purely self-destructive.

For his next trick, Aaron produces a plague of frogs which covers the land of Egypt, causing chaos and discomfort everywhere. And once again, Pharaoh's genius wizards demonstrate their fecklessness by rivaling Aaron and producing yet more frogs. After these have been killed, gathered, and left to stink (thus causing yet more public distress) and the Pharaoh has yet again done what he does best (which is to harden his heart), Aaron produces a plague of gnats—an even sillier and more annoying magic trick. And, of course, Pharaoh's sorcerers go into a huddle to do the same.

But they can't. Something is wrong. The volume on spontaneous gnat production is missing from Hogwarts' library. Of all stupid things, it is the production of gnats that has them beat. So they go to Pharaoh and say “This is the finger of God”—their act of surrender.

That's the cue Luke gives us, which enables us to glimpse Jesus at work. It even provides us with a glimpse of Jesus' humour, adding a quirky touch to what is already a near-comic passage of Scripture. Effectively, Jesus is saying to them “OK, you're on! I've cast out the dumb demon. Some of you are saying this is the work of Beelzebub, and others

are asking for a sign to authenticate what I've done. Well, doesn't this take us back! Didn't Pharaoh ask Moses and Aaron for a sign? Don't you remember the silly fight between Aaron and the magicians of Egypt? In principle, no one could tell the difference between those tricks, each more idiotic than the other. There was only one difference, which is that, in Aaron's case, the plagues were produced to bully the Pharaoh into letting the people go. However, blinded by their rivalry, Pharaoh's court magicians produced identical tricks, but to purely self-destructive effect: every one an own-goal. What could be more stupid than evil men casting out evil spirits? That merely hastens the collapse of their power, just as Pharaoh's sages hastened the collapse of the Kingdom of Egypt by doing tricks against themselves.

"So, that's the playing field we're on: who's playing tit-for-tat with whom here? You have your own exorcists who cast out spirits just as I do. Which of us is Aaron, and which of us is acting out the blind rivalry of Pharaoh's magicians? Of course there is a real answer now, as there was then. Because the real sign from God wasn't any of the magic tricks, but what was at work underneath them all: the bringing of the people out of Egypt, making them into a new people with God. The real sign is on a completely different level from the tricks. So you tell me: this man, who had a dumb demon, now speaks. Which of us is Aaron and Moses, leading people out of slavery? And which of us is caught in self-destructive rivalries, which means we're part of Egypt and not part of the real Israel? (And for the record, doesn't the name "Beelzebub" often get corrupted to "Lord of the Flies", a derogatory term suggesting a turd, around which gather hosts of worshipping insects, devouring its incense? And wasn't the very next plague after the gnats a plague of flies? So, my delightful fellow countrymen, who are the real turd-sniffers here?)"

Do you begin to get a sense of what's going on? A story they would all of them have known, yet they find themselves suddenly occupying unexpected positions within that story—positions they would never have imagined themselves occupying without this shift. And yet the shift makes complete sense with relation to something they could see straightforwardly before their eyes, challenging them to consider their position within Israel or Egypt in their reaction to what is unfolding before them.

I also hope you get a sense of how much fun is going on in these teaching moments, as in so much rabbinical story telling: how many references to incidents which children will have known and understood well. The texts to which the Gospel writers point may be esoteric to us, but they were by no means esoteric to Jesus' audience.

Luke 13:10-17

Let us take another teaching moment, one which also contains both something very serious and a rich vein of fun:

Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, He called her and said to her: "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." And He laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." Then the Lord answered him: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" As He said this, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by Him.

Well, once again we have a cure in a synagogue on a Sabbath—quite our regular backdrop. And again, we have an apparently over-the-top reaction: why would his adversaries have been that put out by what he did? After all, it was well-known in rabbinic literature that, in matters of injury and illness, the priority should be to save life on the Sabbath. And what was it that got all the people rejoicing at "all the glorious things" Jesus did? Luke, as always, is generous with his clues. He

takes us straight into the realm of ancient Israelite history, an episode with which you are probably not familiar but which the kids would have adored, for reasons which will soon become clear.

Luke's starting hint is a woman in the synagogue, who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years. Numbers are always good clues. So, you ask yourself, what else happened for eighteen years in the Hebrew Scriptures? The answer can be found in Judges 3:12-30, and you can imagine how well this would have gone down in bar-mitzvah class:

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. The LORD gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

So we have our eighteen years. In fact, the king of Moab had become a kind of symbol of evil oppressing the people of Israel.

Israel had been bent down by oppression for eighteen years, just like the woman in the synagogue...

But when the people of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.

Eventually, the people cry out, and God gives them a deliverer. Interestingly, this is almost the only time in Scripture we get a reference to a left-handed person. You will see why it's going to be important:

The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he girded it on his right thigh under his clothes.

Security checks at the time would have assumed right-handedness. Any visitor would have been patted down on his left thigh, which

is where a right-handed man would have strapped his sword. Not so Ehud; he could be patted down on his left thigh while keeping his sword hidden on his right.

And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.

Why, it gets better and better! We have a fat baddy king, Eglon. We can imagine him rather like Jabba the Hutt from *Star Wars*.

And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people that carried the tribute. But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said: “I have a secret message for you, O king.” And he commanded: “Silence”. And all his attendants went out from his presence. And Ehud came to him, as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said: “I have a message from God for you.” And he arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly; and the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out.

You can imagine how the kids would have loved this—it is gross in a suitably kid-titillating way!

Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber upon him, and locked them. When he had gone, the servants came; and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought: “He is only relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber.”

As any storyteller can imagine, it’s not only the locked doors that will have given the servants the impression their boss was on the loo. The emanating smell must have given them a hint that he was having a bad attack of flatulence.

And they waited till they were utterly at a loss; but when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, [Or, when they realised not even Jabba the Hutt could have flatulence that bad...] they took the key and opened them; and there lay their lord dead on the floor.

Ehud, of course, escapes and leads the people of Israel in an uprising, delivering them from the power of Moab and giving them eighty years of peace. You can imagine the bits of this story at which the kids would have laughed—what's not to love? We have the people of Israel bound down, crying out to the Lord, and the Lord sending them a deliverer. We get a wonderful hero of old, a famous lefty, a very fat baddy king, smelly details, and an incredible rescue.

What a contrast from the synagogue where Jesus finds himself on this Sabbath! Here is a woman who has been bound for eighteen years. But is she crying out? Is she asking for a deliverer? Not a squeak from her or anybody else. She's just there. Jesus sees her and calls her out. She hasn't asked for it. But her unexpected—and unrequested—cure is going to be another rich sign not only of her being loved, but of what being Israel is all about. He lays his hands on her, and she is immediately made straight.

The man in charge of the synagogue, however, is not amused. In fact, he behaves like Eglon, saying to the people the equivalent of “Silence!” and sending them away. Effectively, he's saying “Get your delivery elsewhere. Here, you should be ordered and well-behaved, and just stay bowed down”. In other words, a re-enactment of Eglon rather than Ehud. Not only are the contemporary people of Israel not crying out for a deliverer, unlike their glorious forebears, but when one turns up, the leader of the synagogue turns all Moab on him! (As you can imagine, the synagogue leader would not have been amused at the insinuation that he is impersonating old toad-features).

Then we get a fascinating exchange. After the Synagogue leader has done his Eglon impression, sending the servants away and being an old fart (to use Scripture's implicit imagery) while trying to prevent people from being delivered, Jesus answers him in rather strange language. He says

You hypocrites.

And, oddly, he explicitly addresses the synagogue leader with the plural word, before turning to all those present: this suggests that, once again, we have a clue to help us interpret what is going on. And so we do: for while the word “hypocrites” is quite familiar to us, it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures hardly at all—in fact, only in one place, in the plural form, in the Greek of the book of Job, Chapter 36. We will have a look at it, so as to see Jesus doing something which he does not only here, but in a number of different places. He puts together entirely unrelated texts, which seem to have nothing to do with each other, and from out of them he produces a quite specific point.

So here is the passage from the book of Job:

Behold, God is mighty, and does not despise any; He is mighty in strength of understanding. God does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right. God does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings upon the throne he sets them for ever, and they are exalted. And if they are bound in fetters and caught in the cords of affliction, then God declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. God opens their ears to instruction, and commands that they return from iniquity. If they hearken and serve Him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. But if they do not hearken, they perish by the sword, and die without knowledge. **The godless in heart cherish anger;** they do not cry for help when he binds them. They die in youth, and their life ends in shame. God delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity. God also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no cramping, and what was set on your table was full of fatness. (Job 36:5-16)

The phrase, which is here translated as “godless in heart” is the phrase which in Greek is translated “Hypocrites”. We can see exactly why Jesus used this word. It beautifully describes what he has found in

the Synagogue on this Sabbath: people who cherish their own resentment, and do not cry out for help when bound.

In fact, we can begin to get a glimpse of Jesus' teaching by the way he brings together the Ehud story and the Job passage around his healing of the woman who had been bound for eighteen years. He comes into the synagogue, which is supposed to be the gathering of Israel, and what does he find? Israel bound down in affliction, symbolized by this woman here with her eighteen years of suffering. But unlike the Israel of old, is anybody crying out to the Lord for delivery? Not a bit! In fact, the Synagogue leader is behaving much more like Eglon than like Ehud. Both he and those present have become godless in heart—hypocrites—since, rather than cry out and actually long for help, they would rather sit complacently, gnawing over their own affliction.

But this is not what the Real Israel is about at all! The real Israel cried out to YHWH for deliverance and, in the absence of that, YHWH comes into their midst to give the afflicted their right. If they are bound in fetters, and caught in the cords of affliction: “he declares to them their work... that they are behaving arrogantly.” So please notice that Jesus is even now enacting in their midst what YHWH does: rebuking them from their arrogance and their weddedness to resentment, which leads them to fail to cry out. But he is also delivering the afflicted by her affliction, and opening the ears of all of them through her adversity. You can even imagine Jesus pointing out that the whole point of the Synagogue meeting is for Israel to be taken out of distress, led to a broad place, and given a table full of fatness—not the sort of fatness symbolized by Eglon and his silence-commanding contemporary stand in!

The overall dynamic is of YHWH visiting His people in the midst of a synagogue meeting, so as to bring out what Real Israel is genuinely all about, full of power and excitement as in the sagas of old, showing them in three dimensions what it truly is to be a child of Abraham. You can begin to get a sense of how a synagogue full of people suddenly found itself hoiked out of its ordinary routine. All its participants find themselves occupying different places within the stories; brought, if they could accept being urged to cry out more, to a real sense of what all the glories of Israel were really all about. These people were undergoing a visitation from YHWH; no wonder they rejoiced “at all the glo-

rious things that were done by him.” As for those for whom synagogue has become a Moabite cult—in which, as it says in the book of Job, resentful people go down to their graves in shame because they don’t cry out—well:

His adversaries were put to shame.

Luke 19:1-6

The shifts in understanding that Jesus provokes are not only accomplished by means of texts, along with the aid of three-dimensional props. The teaching is conveyed through physical actions, such as gestures and the undoing of potentially dangerous crowd mechanisms, as we will see in our final example: the story of Zacchaeus. It is a wonderful example of how highly compact details can yield a rich psychological account of an interaction.

In this passage, we find ourselves towards the end of Jesus’ public ministry. Owing to the spreading accounts of his various signs in both Galilee and Judaea, He is a well-known public figure with a reputation—the sort of person on whom the gaze of the crowd is easily fixed, what we would call a celebrity.

He entered Jericho and was passing through.

So, as far as everybody in Jericho is concerned, Jesus is just walking through the city. He’s not coming to stay. He doesn’t have a gig planned for them, so those who want to catch a glimpse of the celebrity will have to watch him as he passes through:

And there was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature.

We get a number of interesting hints concerning Zacchaeus. The first is that he was a chief tax collector. Now this doesn’t mean, as it would probably mean for us moderns, that he was a high-ranking em-

ployee of the Inland Revenue Service. Even if we all dislike taxes, we don't automatically think that government bureaucrats are wicked individuals. But that wouldn't have been the case then. Zacchaeus would have been something much closer to a quisling, a traitor, than a modern public servant. The Romans, as the colonial power, naturally wanted to tax their subjects. But they couldn't be bothered to set up a complicated bureaucracy of their own to do that. So they did something much simpler: estimated the revenue they could squeeze out of a particular location in a year, then sold the right to farm those revenues in that locality to the highest bidder. Thus, they got a good proportion of the revenue they would have gotten had they done so themselves, but without the cost of enforcing collection. The Revenue farmer effectively became the local enforcer of foreign taxation and someone who would expect to profit from it.

As you can imagine, such persons were not popular with their fellow citizens! Even if any rational compatriot of Zacchaeus knew perfectly well that taxes would be levied and collected, whoever was in charge, verbal darts like "Profiteer" and "Quisling" would doubtless have come zinging towards Zacchaeus' ears on a regular basis.

In addition to being a tax collector, Zacchaeus is rich. Whether it is because he was rich that he was able to afford to buy the right to farm the taxes, or he had become rich owing to his zeal in the collection of the same, we are not told. But the combination of these two factors—his position and his riches—already speaks to the complicated nature of his relationship with his fellow citizens. He is, in fact, in a dangerous situation: on the one hand he is a half-insider, half-outsider: one of us, but also one of them. On the other hand, he is also rich, so the object of a certain fascination and envy, as well as perhaps of interested friendships in order to get occasional loans. Apparently, however, he is enough of an insider to be tugged by the same allure as the crowd. They are drawn by fascination with a celebrity figure, and he is drawn with them. Normally, someone like him would be very wary of the moments when his fellow citizens might coalesce into a crowd. If you were as ambiguous a friend to them as he was, their crowd moments would be good times to make yourself scarce, but here he is aware of being drawn by the same fascination as they.

However, Zacchaeus has a further reason to be careful in crowds: he is small. Small people get trampled in crowds. They get trampled by mistake because sometimes people in crowds don't see what they're doing. But if, in addition to being small, you are a person of ambivalence to the crowd members, then accidental trampling can acquire inverted commas—becoming “accidental”, as when that which is deliberate, that which is deniable, and that for which no one need take responsibility conveniently come together.

Alongside this, there come to mind some reasons why those small in stature are sometimes driven, ambitious, Napoleon-like: you're constantly having to look up to people, to prove yourself, to be noticed. You're often looked down upon by people, accustomed to being made to feel inferior.

You can begin to see the many different insights into the relationship between Zacchaeus and his fellow citizens that Luke gives us with a very few brushstrokes:

So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way.

Zacchaeus—driven by the same desire as the crowd but taking appropriate, prudent steps to achieve that desire without the inconveniences of the *mélée*—climbs a tree on the route that Jesus is likely to take. Please notice what he has done: he has shown himself run by the same desire as the crowd, but with a capacity to stand back from that desire somewhat, not to be so run by it that he is put in danger. Like them, he seeks to see who Jesus is, but he is wise enough to know that—in order to see who Jesus is—he needs to be at one remove from a crowd.

Luke's key words in this passage are directional and interactional, seeking and seeing within the context of crowd dynamics:

And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

Here we have this rather wonderful, physical moment. Jesus has been moving along through Jericho like the eye of a hurricane, with the outlying crowd milling all around him to see him. The centre of attention has been calm and peaceful. Suddenly, the centre of attention looks up to where Zacchaeus is, carefully hidden in a place from which he could see but where he wouldn't easily be seen.

Please consider how odd this is for Zacchaeus: small of stature, he was entirely unaccustomed to being looked at from beneath by anyone at all. On the contrary, part of his complex relationship with everyone was that they looked down on him, and he had to look up at them. Yet here, without any warning at all, for the first time in ages, he is looked at from underneath. He has no armour underneath. He has no habit of protecting himself from being looked at from beneath. He is well accustomed to deflecting less than friendly looks from above, but the only people who could conceivably look at him from beneath were infants and children, people not dangerous to him.

And it is not any old glance that he now receives from beneath. Zacchaeus has been following the crowd's fascination with Jesus, has been watching them watching Jesus, and has been drawn in by their fascination with Jesus. Jesus occupies the centre of what is, for Zacchaeus, a potentially dangerous whirlwind. That is where he does not want to be. All that chargedness is now standing directly beneath him. But the one who stands there, looking up, is not in any way mediating all the dangerousness, the stress, the ambivalence of the crowd. It turns out that the one looking at him doesn't sear his soul with a terrifying regard. Quite the reverse. This regard has nothing at all to do with the spirit of the crowd. Zacchaeus is suddenly seen, called by name, and summoned down with haste. The centre of group fascination—playing host to whom would have been the dream of not a few in the crowd—has pushed right through all their potential for jealousy, fear and violence. He has simultaneously commanded hospitality and also made himself vulnerable to put himself beneath the regard of this complex little fellow:

So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully.

Personally, I find it difficult to imagine the depth of joy, the shake-up to his entire being, which this regard from beneath would have produced in Zacchaeus with its demand to be hospitable by making itself vulnerable. At one blow, the fear has been taken out of all of the complexities of his relationship with his fellow citizens. All its strange double binds have been loosed. He is suddenly set free to relate in an entirely new way.

And when they saw it they all murmured, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.”

The fellow citizens themselves don’t get it at all. They still behave very much like a crowd. And crowds have very fickle relationships with celebrities. Crowds want celebrities to be the standard bearers of their values and passions. Their fascination can turn from curiosity to adulation, to murmurs, to rage in very short order. Here, they are not at all amused that the celebrity hasn’t backed up their sense of good and bad, right and wrong. The murmuring of a crowd is always an ominous sign:

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.”

But Zacchaeus is no longer cowed, no longer hiding, no longer small, no longer run by the way he was tied into the crowd before. Luke emphasises the physical gesture: Zacchaeus stands tall, and immediately sets about reconstructing a whole new way of “being together” with his fellow citizens. He is not concerned with his goodness or badness, only happy to work through the details and accusations of impropriety, about which the murmuring crowd will have had more than a thing or two to say. But more than that, he is completely concerned with his new way of belonging to Israel.

And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.”

This is what Jesus emphasizes, as in our previous passage from Luke, where the straightened woman is also a daughter of Abraham: YHWH delights in including people, in bringing the most improbable and indeed unsuitable people back in; YHWH has no delight in resentful righteousness:

For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

Luke ends by pointing up something which was, I hope, also clear in the Emmaus passage which we looked at in Chapter 2. There, the two travellers thought they were the hosts and Jesus their guest, only to find that he was hosting them and had all along been the protagonist in the story of which they had thought themselves knowledgeable. Part of what Jesus' presence feels like in the midst of people is just this curious inversion of perspective and protagonism. At the beginning of our story here, it is Zacchaeus who seeks to see who Jesus is, working around all the complexities of his relationship with the crowd so as to get a glimpse. But from the moment that Jesus looks up at him, calls him by name and tells him he must spend the night in his house, it is clear that the whole protagonism has been inverted. Not only is it, once again, the apparent guest who is the real host: all along, it was the regard of another Other that was deliberately seeking this particular person, Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus' seeking of Jesus had been real, if still embryonic; it was the seeking of someone who was tied up in a very complex pattern of desire. Perhaps the beginning of Zacchaeus' being found lay in the fact that, as part of his lostness, he had to begin uncoupling himself from the immediacy of crowd desire, just to get a look at Jesus. Even that uncoupling, leading to his moment of unexpected vulnerability, is part of the process, part of receiving the regard which recreated him. It is part of what being sought and found by another Other looks like.

The Hosea Instruction and Putting Our Own Examples to Work

As you can imagine, there is no shortage of other passages from the New Testament which we could read in the same way, bringing out what I

have called “glimpses of the Master” as well as hints at the sorts of shifts we might find ourselves undergoing in his presence. I’d just like to end by pointing out that this business of inhabiting texts and being turned around by them is not simply something which clever people after Jesus have come up with as a way of reminding us what Jesus was about. Nor is it something Jesus did merely because he was a great teacher. It is something he very solemnly instructs people to do for ourselves.

There are a couple of occasions in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus quotes the same passage of Scripture to the same effect. The passage in question is Hosea 6:6:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

Some of our translations read “mercy” rather than “steadfast love”, but the sentiment is the same. On the first occasion that Jesus uses this passage (Matthew 9:13), He says to the Pharisees who have just been grumbling about the people He is hanging out with:

Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Jesus is not saying to them “I think you should go and look up the text of Hosea”. He’s saying “You all know what God says in the Prophets: ‘I want mercy and not sacrifice.’ But this is not just a particular commandment. It is a reading instruction, a hermeneutical key. Whenever you interpret anything, you can read it two ways: in such a way that your interpretation creates mercy, and in such a way that it demands sacrifice. It is perfectly possible to read the law such that it creates a group of the good and casts someone out. It is also perfectly possible to read the law as something always to be made flexible for the benefit of those who need reaching and bringing into richer life, for leaving the good to look after themselves and going after the lost sheep. But only one of these two is acting in obedience to the word in Hosea”.

So when Jesus tells the Pharisees “Go and learn what this means” he is saying: “Go and sit under this word, and allow it to become the in-

terpretable key in your approach to your fellow human beings”. “Mercy” and “sacrifice” are not here discrete religious gestures; each is an entire anthropology of God’s desire, and they are incompatible with each other. This is even clearer in Jesus’ second use of the word from Hosea (Matthew 12:7):

And if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless.

What is meant by “sacrifice” is not only whatever goes on in the Temple. It is the act of creating goodness over against others who are then judged, condemned as guilty and treated as sinners. In other words, there is a whole anthropology behind the word “sacrifice”, and Jesus is telling his listeners: “Hosea is giving you a reading instruction. Allow whatever you do—your teaching, your whole moral enterprise—to be rocked to the core by this question: am I discovering my equality of heart with potentially inconvenient others, and thus welcoming them in—or am I acting out in such a way that I’m making myself good at someone’s expense? However, please note that it’s always one or the other, and it’s always a matter of taking responsibility for your interpretation. Don’t think that, by getting the rules right, you will always obey the commandment. It is only by sitting under this word over time, sinking for yourselves into a sense of where the two anthropologies clash, that you will learn how to live it out”.

I want to stress that Jesus is not being rude to the Pharisees. He is offering a lesson in reading technique, something with which they would have been familiar. He is supplying them, if you like, with the hard grammar of a criterion from outside themselves, something that is constantly available to them to challenge what they’re doing. This criterion is the shape by which the other Other is available to us, in our midst. In each case that we’ve looked at, this is what we have seen Jesus reveal, and here—in his quotations of Hosea—He is explaining what we’ve seen him do.

I hope you can begin to imagine how many ways we can find of putting this to work for ourselves, just by taking famous passages of Scripture which we know perfectly well. Think, for instance, of John’s passion narrative, which is sung or recited each year in our Churches on

Good Friday. If we take part in this, we typically think of ourselves as doing something good and imagine that, if we had been there, we would have been on Jesus' side, not swept up into the hostile crowd. In fact, the liturgy asks us to do precisely the reverse: it requires us to come together to shout out "Crucify him! Crucify him!" at different points, reminding us that we would most likely have been full of enraged righteousness, blind to what was going on. And there is the other Other, puncturing us from the place of the victim and taking us into a different perception of who we are and what we do, so that we may be caught, here and now, in whatever analogous situation we find ourselves in, and taken into a new way of being.

You remember the story we heard in Chapter 6, of the Gerasenes and Crazy Joe? At what moments might we find ourselves rocked as they were by our apparently less-than-human other becoming human? In the last Chapter, we will look in detail at the story of the Good Samaritan. Still, it won't spoil the story if even at this early stage you can imagine how that might work: someone who thought of themselves as on the right side has their sense of goodness challenged as they are forced to recognise that it was a repugnant other—a despised foreigner—who showed real goodness. And real goodness looked like attention to a real victim, and not making sure that sacrifice was properly carried out in the Temple.

Similarly, the story of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8:2-11), the different accounts of Jesus' interacting with prostitutes—all of these can leave their pages as stories about a more-or-less caricatural "them" in some distant past, and become moments in which we perceive that another Other has uncovered us. They haven't uncovered us so as to humiliate us, but to give us more. They want to share with us their joy, their enthusiasm, at their discovery of us.

CHAPTER 9:

Prayer: Getting Inside the Shift of Desire

In our last chapter, as part of finding ourselves inducted into a new people and exploring what that feels like, we looked at how another Other shifts us and discovers us through texts. In this chapter, we will continue exploring what it is like to find ourselves on the inside of this project of being inducted. However, this time we will attend to how it is through learning desire that we are brought into a new being. We will be looking at what is usually referred to by the term “prayer”.

I’d like to start by noting something rather strange: how little there is in the New Testament on prayer. In fact, given that almsgiving, prayer and fasting are traditionally the visible pillars of what we call “religion”, it is odd how little the New Testament attends to any of them. The only place where all three are treated with something like rigour is in the first eighteen verses of the sixth chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel. And there they undergo, as I hope to show you, what appears to be a gross relativisation. They are entirely subordinated to, and reinterpreted by, a penetrating understanding of the workings of desire.

It would be tempting to see this as something proper to Matthew, and so to talk about “Matthew’s understanding of desire”. Nevertheless, the same understanding—the same intelligence of desire—can be detected at work in Luke and John as well as in St Paul. Ockham’s Razor would suggest that this intelligence goes back to Our Lord Himself. When it comes to laying out that intelligence and how it works, the best guide I know is René Girard’s thought. He has been my teacher throughout this book. So here I would like to show how Girard’s thought—sometimes called “mimetic theory”—helps us to read these texts on prayer.

You should by now be quite familiar with his approach, since I have been using it since our very first chapter. However, in order to remind you quite what a difference his way of thinking makes, I'll begin by giving you a comparison between his approach and a reading which depends on a folk-psychology approach to desire.

I sometimes characterise the folk-psychology approach as the “blob-and-arrow” understanding of desire. In this approach, there is a blob located somewhere within each of us, normally referred to as a “self”. This more or less bloated entity is pretty stable, and from it come forth arrows which aim at objects. So: “I” desire a car, a mate, a house, a holiday, some particular clothes, and so on, and so forth. The desire for the object comes from the “I” which originates it, and thus the desire is authentically and truly “mine”. Let us suppose that I desire the same thing as someone else: this is either accidental—and we must be rational about resolving any conflict which may arise; or it is a result of the other person imitating my desire (which is, of course, stronger and more authentic than their secondary and less worthy desire). Since I take my desiring self—my “I”—to be basically rational, it follows that my desires are basically rational. Thus, I am unlike those people whom I observe to have clearly pathological patterns of desire: they are constantly falling for unsuitable mates and banging their heads against the consequences, or else hooked on substances or patterns of behaviour that do them no good. Those people are in some way sick, and their desires escape the possibilities of rational discourse, unlike me, and my desires.

If this is an accurate understanding of how we desire, then of course the New Testament is weirdly quaint and inaccurate—for all it would be doing when talking about prayer is urging us to whip ourselves (and how can “we” whip our “selves”?) into wanting more. Furthermore, following this view, the New Testament would contain within itself the seeds of destruction of its own teaching about prayer, for in the text from St Matthew's Gospel, at which we will look in more detail, there appears the phrase:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7-8)

The logical conclusion to this, given the premise of the blob-and-arrow understanding of desire, is to stop praying. There is literally no point in expressing your desire, since your desire is known independently of its expression, and its expression makes no difference at all. The New Testament text seems a pointer on the road towards the self-contained and religiously indifferent modern “self”.

Please notice, also, that since desires are arrived at by the self without need of instruction or intervention from outside, and those desires don’t need to be expressed in order to be real, the self-contained and self-starting “blob” with its arrows is also radically private. Part of the self-understanding of the “blob” is that it has a defensive role, protecting and hiding the “real me” and my “real desire”, which is always under a certain amount of threat from the fundamentally “flaky” public world—the world of commerce, of business, of politics and of war, in which no forms of discourse are really truth-bearing. So, what I say in public, how I act in public, and what I say I want in public are always a certain form of dissimulation; it is only the private “self” which is real. Notice how miraculously the New Testament text, once again doing itself out of a job, seems to flatter this picture of the self: for if there is one verse from this section of Matthew that almost everyone seems to remember, it is where Jesus, having disparaged the attention-seeking public prayers of the Pharisees, says this: “But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6) Behold, the apparent Scriptural canonisation of the modern individual self! (Who is, of course: “spiritual”, but not “religious”!)

Now, let’s see whether we can rescue this text from its imprisonment by the blob-and-arrow understanding of the self, and learn how, rather than flattering our prejudices, it challenges them.

Desire According to the Other

The understanding of desire which René Girard put forward for over half a century, often referred to as “mimetic”, is about as far removed from this blob-and-arrow picture as you can get. The key phrase (which

I never tire of repeating) is “We desire according to the desire of the other”. This “other” is the social other—the social world which surrounds us, which moves us to desire, to want, and to act. This doesn’t sound particularly challenging when it is illustrated in the way the entertainment industry creates celebrities, or how the advertising profession manages to make particular objects or brands desirable. Few of us are so grandiose as to deny that some of our desires show us to be easily led and susceptible to suggestion. It becomes much more challenging when it is claimed that, in fact, it is not only some of our desires that are in question, but the entire way in which we humans are structured by desire.

Girard is pointing out that humans are those animals for whom even basic biological instincts (which are not the same thing as desires) are run by the social other, within which the instinct-bearing body is born. In fact, our capacity to receive and deal with our instincts is given to us through our being drawn towards the social other, which inducts us into living as this sort of animal by reproducing itself within us. What makes this draw possible is the hugely developed capacity for imitation, which sets our species apart from our nearest simian relatives.

Thus, to cut a long story short by recapping what we saw in our first chapter: gesture, language, and memory are not only things which “we” learn, as though there were an “I” that was doing the learning. Instead—through this body being imitatively drawn into the life of the social other—gesture, language and memory form an “I” that is one of the symptoms, one of the epiphenomena, of that social other. This “I” is much more malleable than it is comfortable admitting. And even more difficult: it is not the “I” that has desires; it is desire that forms and sustains the “I”. The “I” is something like a snapshot in time of the relationships which pre-exists it, and of which it is a symptom.

This picture is severely unflattering. It seems to un-anchor the “I” from a cosily sacred certainty of being “something basically good in the midst of a somewhat ‘iffy’ world”. Instead, it points out that we are not so much afloat on a dangerous sea as that we are the perilous sea we are afloat on. Our economic systems, our military conflicts, our erotic life, our ways of keeping law and order—all are part of each other, run by the same patterns of desire. In other words, we humans are not only

slightly affected by a culture of war and violence; we are actually run by it. We find ourselves to be the species which acts in groups to grab identity over against some conveniently designated other, and that relies on a violent contrast in order to survive, define value, and forge culture. As you can imagine, prayer is going to look somewhat different if this is the sort of animal who is doing the praying. In this picture, prayer is going to start from the presupposition that we all desire according to the desire of the other. It is going to raise the question: yes, but which other? We know there is a social other which gives us desire and which moves us this way and that. But is there another Other, who is not part of the social other, and who has an entirely different pattern of desire into which it is seeking to induct us? That, as we have seen, is the great Hebrew question: the discovery of God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods, and our texts on prayer, are part of our way into the great Hebrew answer.

Which Other?

So thoroughly do we assume the blob-and-arrow model of self and desire that we find it difficult to imagine the New Testament authors might be closer to the world of what we would consider primitive animist cults than to our own. For, in the world of animist cults, it is perfectly obvious to everybody that people are moved by what is other than themselves. Indeed, in the various trances or dances into which the participants are inducted by mixtures of music and chanting: “spirits” will “come down” and “possess” or “ride” the participants, whose normal demeanour will be temporarily displaced by the quite recognisable public persona of the spirit in question.

Given this, it is interesting to see how much closer to that world is St Paul than we sometimes imagine:

We know that the whole Creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the Creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were

saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:22-27)

To paraphrase: “We are part of a new social other that is being brought painfully into being amidst the collapse of a dead-end way of being human. This new social other is being brought into being through our learning to desire it—something we want, but are very poor at articulating. The tension of being pulled between two different kinds of social other is absolutely vital for us—and what enables us to live it is hope. Given that we don’t know how to desire and express our desire, the Spirit is another Other desiring within us, without displacing us, so that it will actually be we who are brought into the New Creation”.

Please see what Paul and the animists have in common: the understanding that we are more desired-in than desirers. This is, in itself, neither a good nor a bad thing. It is just what we are. The difference between the animist question and the Hebrew question is not whether we are moved by another, but by which other are we moved?

For “spirits”, idols and so forth are merely violent disguises by which the social other moves us. Those spirits temporarily displace us, make us act “out of character” and trap us into being functions of themselves, usually while demanding sacrifice. Whereas the Spirit of God is the Spirit of the Creator, and thus is in no way at all a function of anything that is. Quite the reverse: everything that is is a function of the Creator. The Creator is not in any sort of rivalry with us, and is thus able to move us from within, bringing us into being without displacing us.

Let us not be fooled by a difference of language here: traditionally, we refer to spirits possessing people, and there is—in the word “possess”—a note of violence concerning the relationship between the spirit and the person possessed. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, we refer to the Spirit indwelling, or inhabiting, the person—words without any connotation of violence. However, please note that the human

mechanism of being moved is the same in both cases. What is different is the quality of the “other” doing the moving.

I hope that we are now in a better position to look at some Gospel texts on prayer.

The Public Nature of Desire

The first thing I want to point out about the Gospel texts is that they take for granted the public nature of human life and relationships—including prayer. As one would expect, given the understanding of desire which I’ve been trying to flesh out with you, it is not the case that there are two equal and opposed realities: who I am in public and who I am in private. Rather, there is one reality: who I am in public. Privacy is a temporary abstraction from an essentially public way of being. Jesus, and the New Testament as a whole, simply takes for granted the public nature of religious, cultural and political life.

Given that, it becomes more plausible to see why Jesus is described in various places as withdrawing to pray. Typically, these moments of withdrawal come in the immediate aftermath of a major interaction with a crowd, following a miracle. It is not hard to see why: any leader, especially one who is enjoying a certain success, risks becoming infected by the desires of their followers, allowing themselves to believe what their followers believe about them, and to be flattered into acting out those followers’ projections. Thus, they become the puppets of their crowd’s desires.

Jesus’ moving off to pray shows that he understood his need to detox from the pattern of desire which threatened to run him: people wanting to make Him King, or proclaim him as Messiah in a way that was far from what he was trying to teach them. He was acquainted with what we call temptation—the risk of being lured by the social other into a pattern of desire which is presented under the guise of being good, but which is not good. Jesus needed to spend time having his “I” strengthened by receiving his pattern of desire from another Other.

(One classic recognition of Jesus’ being tempted, and his refusal to be beguiled by it, comes when he tells Peter “Get thou behind me,

Satan!" (Mark 8:33). He rejects Peter's attempt to dissuade him from entering into the pathway of suffering that will lead to his death. Peter is linked to the Tempter, the stumbling block, and is told that his mind is disposed according to the culture of men, not according to the culture of God).

Given this, let us turn to Jesus' explicit teaching about prayer—especially as we find it in Matthew 6, with some reference to Luke as well. The first thing we notice is that Jesus' comments on prayer are embedded in a teaching about patterns of desire:

Beware of practising your piety before others *in order to be seen by them*; for then you have no reward from your Father in Heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, *so that they may be praised by others*. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:1-4, italics mine)

Before he gets to talking about prayer, Jesus is already demonstrating an understanding of desire. He presupposes that we are all immensely needy people who long for approval and rewards. He doesn't say: "Really, this is too infantile. You shouldn't be wanting approval or rewards. Grow up and be self-starting, self-contained heroic individuals who act on entirely rational grounds". On the contrary, he takes it for granted that we desperately need approval. The question is: whose approval is going to run us? The danger of seeking approval from the social other is that you will get it, and thereafter, you will be hooked on that approval. It will literally give you to be who you are and what you will become. You will act out of the pattern of desire which the social other gives you.

I used to think that the phrase "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward"—especially when pronounced in booming tones by a Scots-accented Calvinist preacher—was a euphemism for sending someone to Hell. But it makes much more sense if you see it as an an-

thropological observation: the trouble with seeking the social other's approval is that you will get it! You will act in such a way as to get that approval, and then become its puppet. And because of that, you will be selling yourself short. You won't be wanting enough—you will have too little desire. Your "self" will be a shadow of what you could be if you allowed the Creator to call you into being.

(As an aside: isn't it interesting that Jesus' example of how one should give alms is physiologically almost impossible? What on earth does it mean, in practice, for the left hand not to know what the right hand is doing? It suggests a lack of personal coordination that can only be managed by a person who isn't a stable self. I'm not quite sure what is being recommended here, but I got a hint some time ago. After going along with the seemingly endless requests for money from a friend I had been supporting, I was tempted to do some accounting and work out how much I had given him over time, to put some parameters around what my giving and our relationship might look like in the future. Mercifully, I'm not a very good accountant, but halfway through my record-checking exercise, I realised I was, as it were, grasping onto my own generosity—attempting to make of it something that defined me over against him, such that it became a bargaining chip in a relationship. I also realised that, in that very moment of grasping, what I had been doing had ceased to be an act of generosity, and I had ceased to be someone through whom another Other's generosity might flow).

When Jesus turns to prayer, the understanding of desire is identical. What people really want is approval, a particular reputation in the eyes of others, and this leads them to act out in such a way that they will get that approval. And that is the problem: they get the approval, and with it, they are given a "self" that is a function of the group's desire. Belonging and approval go together. This means, incidentally, that someone is thereafter exceedingly unlikely to be self-critical about their group belonging. They will agree to cover up whatever in themselves and in other group members needs covering up, in order for the group to maintain its unanimity and to keep their own reputation—their "self".

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners,

so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)

Jesus urges his disciples to receive their “self” from “another Other” (and the Matthean code for “another Other” is “your Father who sees in secret” or “your Father who is in Heaven”—the Creator who is absolutely not part of the give and take, the tit-for-tat reciprocity of the social other).

The image Jesus uses here is curious, since our translations mostly refer to a “room” into which we are supposed to go, which we, in turn, tend to associate with our bedroom, assuming that to be a private place. Yet the word is more accurately rendered as “storeroom”: “larder”, or “pantry”. In an ancient Middle Eastern house, this room was totally enclosed inside a building, with no windows. The purpose of such a space, in a culture which had neither central heating nor refrigeration, was to ensure that perishable food stored in it would be less susceptible to extremes of either cold or heat. It also meant that, once you had shut the door from inside, you could neither see out nor be seen.

In short, Jesus is recommending the psychological equivalent of the physiological dislocation we saw in the previous example. He is saying: “You are addicted to being who you are in the eyes of your adoring public (or your execrating public, it doesn’t matter which, since crowd love and crowd hate give identity in just the same dangerous ways). So, go into a place of detox from the regard of those who give you identity, so that your Father—who alone is not part of that give and take—can have a chance to call your identity into being”.

The Interface of Desire and Voices

Now, here’s the trouble with spending time in the larder, removed from the eyes of your public, unable to act out: you gradually start to lose “who you are”. You begin to dwell in the strange place which I call the interface between your “own” desire—very small, and only tentative—

ly coming into being, timidly and somewhat shamefacedly—and the voices which run you, which you have so perfectly ventriloquised. I presume I'm not unique in having, after spending some time alone, occasionally detected the person who was speaking through me—the voice of my father or mother, or a headmaster, or some admired teacher, or a political or religious leader. In other words, I had been giving voice to a pattern of desire taken on board from someone else, with all the conviction of it being really me who was talking and desiring.

That can be quite a shocking moment: I realise how easily I have allowed myself to put aside—indeed trample on—whatever delicate hints were pulling me in other, less strident directions. I have instead rushed headlong into the first “persona” that seemed to give me a chance at being someone who counts. It is only with time spent in the larder that I may find the One who sees me in secret is actually calling forth a quite different and richer set of desires, without such an easy and narrow straitjacket as my current persona. Furthermore, the One who sees in secret seems to be in much less of a hurry for me to avoid shame and “measure up” than I am.

Imagine, if you will, a childhood scene. Little Johnny is about to go to bed. A parent comes to tuck him in, and the following dialogue takes place:

—Little Johnny, did you say your prayers?

—Yes, I did.

—Good, little Johnny. And what did you ask for in your prayers?

—I asked for... chocolate pudding tomorrow, and for Arsenal to win on Saturday.

—Oh no, little Johnny, you shouldn't ask for chocolate pudding tomorrow and for Arsenal to win on Saturday! You should be praying for an end to the war in Ukraine, relief for the famine in Gaza and the Holy Father's Mission intentions for the month of May!

Well, of course, little Johnny will take this on board. His smelly little desires have been treated with contempt. He has been taught to despise them and to want much more “noble” things instead, things that

will make him stand tall in the world of his parents. In fact, he has been taught St Matthew's Gospel in reverse: desire according to the social other, so as to get approval.

Here's the thing: little Johnny is fast on the road to becoming a perfect puritan, a dweller in a world of things that are nice but naughty: things you want but shouldn't say so. But also a world of things which are good but boring: things which you don't really want, but should at least say you do.

The curious thing is that, if we are to believe the Gospel, this is the reverse pattern of what God wants. It would appear that "Your Father who sees in secret" doesn't despise our smelly little desires. In fact, God suggests that, if only we can hold on to them and insist on articulating them, we will actually find over time that we want more than those desires—that we really do want something with a passion. In other words, he takes us seriously in our weakness and unimportance, even when we don't. Suppose we learn to give some voice to those desires: then there's a chance that we may move through them organically, over time, until we find ourselves the sort of humungous desirers who throw ourselves into peace work in dangerous war-zones, or into famine-relief in some newly devastated region, or even into being the sort of missionary for whom the Holy Father wants people to pray in May. But we'll be doing so because we—who start from not really knowing what we want, by not despising our little desires, and learning to articulate them—have discovered from within that this is what we really want and, in our wanting will be who we come to be.

The Importunate Widow

Before returning to our Matthew text, let me give a couple of further examples of the pattern of desire the Gospel texts on prayer point to, for they fit well into this larder (or pantry) where we find ourselves dwelling: the interface between our desires and our internal "voices"—the voices of the social other which we have internalised.

Here is the model for prayer Jesus puts before us in Luke's Gospel: an importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8).

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

OK, hold that thought. At first blush, this sounds as though Jesus is giving advice about not becoming discouraged. I suggest that it is rather more than that. It is about how, through becoming insistent desirers, we will actually be given a heart—be given to be. If we do not desire, we will not have a heart.

He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.”

Please notice that this judge is a perfectly non-mimetic person.

In fact, he is more like a concrete block than like a person, since neither the social other, nor the other Other can move him.

In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.”

Now we have an inconvenient person, the sort of person who has no one to stand up for her. She is not held in high regard, and her satisfaction is of no importance to those living in the city. In her extreme vulnerability, she is the equivalent of little Johnny’s smelly desire. However, she is persistent, and just keeps on with her demand:

For a while he refused; but later he said to himself: “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

The judge has an enviable degree of self-knowledge, for he understands perfectly well that he is a concrete block, hermetically sealed from mimetic influence.

Even so, he eventually concedes, anxious to avoid a drubbing at the hands of this redoubtable widow. (I say “drubbing”, for the word

which we translate as “wear out” was apparently the language of the wrestling arena or the boxing ring).

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?”

Does Jesus really think that God is like an unjust judge? Indeed not. But he knows how all of us are inclined to have an unjust judge well-installed in our consciousness. In fact, as part of our socialisation, we acquire a voice or set of voices which seem completely impervious to anything. Should we be so bold as to want something, this voice (or voices) will quickly send down little messages to us: “Shouldn’t want that if I were you—better not to want much, so as not to be disappointed!” or “Getting above our station are we?” Or, as in the famous Oliver Twist scene: “More?!!” The point of these messages is to shut down our desire—to get us to mask our discontent with remaining mere puppets of our group. Our unjust judge is internal to each of us, a glowering “no” in the face of our potential happiness.

Yet what Jesus recommends is a long-running, persistent refusal to have our smelly little desires put down—to instead engage in a constant guerrilla warfare of desiring, so that, eventually, even the block in our head starts to yield, and what is right for us starts becoming imaginable and obtainable. God is not like a judge, a hermetic block; God is like an irritating desire that gets stronger and stronger. It is only through our wanting something that God is able to give it to us:

Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on Earth?

Curiously, at the end of this teaching, Our Lord shows a certain ambivalence about us. Imagination and desire feed each other positively, and this is a vital element of faith: becoming able to imagine something good, and thus able to want it. Then, as one wants it more, finding it possible to imagine it more fully.

Here, however, God seems aware that, despite what he is attempting to implode in our midst, we are frighteningly likely to be content with far too little, to go along with our internalised unjust judges and so not dare to imagine a goodness which could be ours—and thus not dare to want it, let alone become crazed single-minded athletes of system-shattering desire. God wonders whether we will really allow ourselves to be given heart.

Before moving on from this image, I'd like to point out an important part of the way the new "self" of desire is brought into being. That is by saying: "I want". Please notice that this simple act of saying something—and in fact, saying it frequently—is much more psychologically crucial than it seems. For it is not that there is an "I" which has such-and-such a desire, which it is now expressing. Rather, among the patterns of desire which are running this body, this body is finding the humility to recognise that it needs to be brought into being in a certain way. By making, as it were, an act of commitment to being directed. "I want such and such" is an act of commitment, found in a certain becoming—an act of alignment. "I" am agreeing that, in my malleability, the desire according to the other (which precedes me, and which I'm agreeing to take on board) will bring me into being. Language makes this public, which is why it can be such a relief finally to be able to say "I want such and such", even "privately", because saying it has involved me in getting over the shame of being found out as the sort of person who wants such a thing.

A couple of final examples from the Gospel, teaching the same pattern of desire as regards prayer: in Luke 6:28, we read:

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

I hope it now makes much more sense why this is emphatically not a way of saying: "Jesus wants me as a doormat". On the contrary, Jesus knows very well how we become intimately involved with that subsection of the social other which are our enemies, in just the same ways that we become intimately involved with those whose approval we seek. God knows how susceptible we are to taking our enemies on board, becoming just like them by reciprocally acting out towards them. So God

offers us this recipe for freedom: do not allow yourselves to be run by those who do you evil. This involves a refusal of negative reciprocity, a learning to move from the heart, towards them, in a way which has nothing to do with what they have done to you. In fact, He is saying: “Step out of the pattern of desire in which you are enthralled by—and which entrals you to—your enemies. Step arduously instead into a pattern of desire where you are not over against them at all, but are able to be—as God is—for them, towards them, without being their rival”.

In case you think I’m making this up, Matthew’s version of the same saying is perfectly instructive:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.* (Matthew 5:44-45, italics mine)

The rationale for praying for those who persecute you is set out clearly: it is so that you will become part of the other Other’s pattern of desire. One which is not part of the reciprocity, the tit-for-tat, the good and evil of the social other, but is entirely outside it—not in rivalry with it, and perfectly generous towards it.

Seeing Myself Through the Eye of Another

Let us step back now, into our larder or pantry, to consider further the oddity of this interface between our desire and the voices which run us. So far, I’ve emphasised the negative, the rupture, what we are being dislocated from—the way we have been run by the regard of the social other.

Now, please note that there is no alternative to being run by the regard of another. It is not the case that we can strip off the false-selves given us by the social other—that there, underneath it all, radiantly, will be our true self, untrammelled by the social other. No, we always receive ourselves through the eye of another. The truly challenging aspect of prayer is learning to receive ourselves through the eyes of an-

other Other. For what on earth is it like to be looked at by another Other? What does that “regard” tell us of who we are, and who we are becoming?

My sense is that the collapse of the “self-of-desire”, which begins when we step temporarily outside the regard of the social other, is much easier to notice than the much quieter and more imperceptible calling into being of a new self-of-desire—one without any flashy “over againsts”, or bits of grasped self, sodden with the wrong sorts of meaning. But it is here that the work of imagination, to which Jesus was appealing in his example of the importunate widow, has its proper place, for it is as we stretch the boundaries of our imagination, formed by the social other, that we may catch glimpses of being looked at by One who is not part of that imagination at all.

What, for instance, is meant by the “deathlessness” of God? Here, I don’t mean the usual associations which come with “immortality” or “eternity”—something like invulnerability or going on for an awfully long time. Rather, part of what we mean when we talk about being looked at by God is that we are held in the regard of someone who is... deathless. Someone for whom, unlike for anyone we know or have ever known, death is not a parameter, a reality, a limit, a circumscription. Someone, therefore, for whom mortality—existence in limited time, our reality—looks entirely different. Someone who can wish us into acting as if death were not. This is the sort of regard that can suggest into us the possibility of believing it is worthwhile to undertake projects whose fruition we may not see. The sort of regard that is unhurried enough not to be bothered by my failure, that empowers me to share the space of those who are despised, because I am secure about my long-term prospects. It is the sort of regard for whom Keynes’ famous phrase: “in the long term, we’re all dead”, is simply meaningless, for the only long term that exists is one in which death has no incidence.

Or again, what does it mean to be looked at through eyes that only know abundance, for whom scarcity is simply not a reality, for whom there is always more? Please think of the rupture this produces in my patterns of desire! They say “If you want more, there won’t be enough to go round”, or “There’s no free meal at the end of the universe”, or “Grab what you can before it all runs out”, or just the gloomy, depressed

drawn out “Meh” of disappointment with things, with life and so on not matching up to my expectations. The ancient Hebrews referred to this way of perceiving and of being in the world as Vanity, or futility. What does it look like to spend time in the regard of One for whom it is not (as the whole of our capitalist system presupposes) scarcity that leads to abundance by promoting rivalry, which we then bless and call competition? Rather, a hugely leisured creative abundance underlies reality, and an endless *magis*—“more”—is always on the way.

What does it look like to spend time in the regard of One for whom daring and adventure, not fear and caution, underlie the whole project of Creation? For whom everything that is, is open-ended, and pointing to more than itself, and for whom we are invited to share in the Other’s excitement and thrill, to want and to achieve crazy and unimaginable things?

What is it like to sit in a regard which is bellowing at us “Something out of nothing, something out of nothing”? Our pattern of desire says “Unhhh, nothing comes from nothing”, and feels sorry for itself. Yet the heart of the difference between atheism and belief in God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods is not an ideology; it is a pattern of desire which thrills to hear “Something out of nothing”. The wonderful verses of Second Isaiah, fresh from the great breakthrough into monotheism in the sixth century BCE, shout this out:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. (Isaiah 55:1-3)

This is a definition of God as quite outside the pattern of desire into which the social other inculcates us: “something out of nothing”.

These terms—deathlessness, abundance, daring, something out of nothing—are just a few of the sorts of phrases by which the Scrip-

tures attempt to nudge our imaginations into undergoing a regard that is not the regard of the social other. A regard which has a wish, a longing, a heart that is much more for us than we are for ourselves and which we can trust with our long-term interests. In each case, spending time in the regard of the other Other will work to produce in us a way of being public which seems directly counter to the expectations arising from the patterns of desire which the social other produces in us. Our temporary abstraction from public life will not have made us private; it will have empowered us to be public in a new way, a way whose precariousness and vulnerability rests on an unimaginable security.

Not Leaving Las Vegas

Let us get back, finally, to Matthew, and to Jesus' concluding remarks about prayer. I hope that they will read somewhat differently now:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6: 7-8)

I remember standing on a hill overlooking Lake Titicaca and watching the local Yatiris—shamans or priests—plying their wares. You could go to them and, for an appropriate offering, they would then light candles around little portable shrines, burn incense, and recite the requisite prayers or incantations, which were in an amazing mixture of Latin, Quechua, Aymara and Spanish. The prayers or incantations were for a fairly repetitive list of things: protection from a neighbour's evil eye, quick riches, the death of a troublesome mother-in-law, to get an unwilling prospective love-match to fall for me, or various forms of vengeance.

The pattern seemed to be simple: God, or the gods, are a sort of celestial Las Vegas slot machine, full of amazing bounty, but inclined to be retentive. So prayer is the art of conjuring this capricious divinity, by precisely the correct phrases repeated exactly the right number of

times, into parting with some of its treasure. As if the priest were a particularly expert puller of the slot machine handle—one who could ensure that three lemons or five bars line up and so manipulate the divinity into disgorging its riches.

What this presupposes is a pattern of desire where we are subjects in control, and God is an object who must be manipulated. We are back to the blob-and-arrow picture of desire. What Jesus is teaching is exactly the reverse of this. In Jesus' picture, it is God who is the subject—who has a desire, an intention, a longing, who knows who we are and what is good for us. And we, who are capricious and somewhat inert slot machines, are always getting our handles pulled by the wrong players. In this picture, it is precisely because our Father knows what we need before we ask God that we must learn to pray: our Father's only access to us, the only way God can work our slot-machine handle, is by our asking him into our pattern of desire.

You remember that, with the blob-and-arrow understanding of desire, Jesus' phrase: “your Father knows what you need before you ask him”, renders prayer pointless. But with the mimetic understanding of desire—which I hope to have shown at work throughout this passage—the same phrase works in precisely the opposite way. It becomes the urgent reason why we need to pray: to allow the One who knows what is good for us (unlike we ourselves), whose desire is for us and for our fruition (unlike the social other and its violent traps), to gain access to us, re-creating us from within, and giving us a “self”, an “I of desire” that is in fact a constant flow of treasure. We are asking to become a symptom of his pattern of desire, rather than that of the social other, which ties us up into becoming so much less.

The Our Father

It is with this, then, that Jesus leads up to teaching the “Our Father”:

Pray then in this way: Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:9-15)

Before we go into a line-by-line reading, I ask you to imagine yourself not as standing stably on a firm surface, being instructed about words to say; rather, imagine yourself as highly malleable, as being stretched between two force-fields, two patterns of desire. What the “Our Father” is doing is inducting you into a pattern of desire within which you may be found, one which will enable you to inhabit the “being stretched”. The “being stretched” is how the desire of the other Other brings into being the daughter or son who is learning to pray.

So, line by line:

Our Father in Heaven, (...)

Here—entirely without rivalry with anything that is, in no way part of the push and pull, the tit for tat of human togetherness—is the other Other. But not merely Other in a distant and removed way: Father. One who is for us, below us, young and excited about who we might come to be.

The very ground of possible familiarity, the guarantor that—prior to any of our fear, resentment and shame at ourselves and each other—there is a way for us to be sisters and brothers that will be a delight to us.

...hallowed be your name; (...)

Most special invocation of the stretched-between world! You remember how God gave Himself a non-name Name for Moses, and how Jesus’ acting-out in going to the Cross was so that he would be given the Name that is above every other name (Philippians 2:9)? So here, we are being urged to desire “cause your reputation, your personality, who you are really like, to become visible, detectable, reverenceable in our midst”. Anything more solid than the Name of the Holy One—a con-

stantly flickering hologram of revelation—would quickly become an idol we could grasp. Anything less visible, less capable of being sensed and revered, would leave us without hints that this world is marked, loved, projected, and owned; we would be left adrift in the vast impersonality of an unowned universe.

Part of how we find ourselves is in longing to see the visible signs in our midst of the personal, named, directed ownership of everything that is.

...your Kingdom come; (...)

The project of the other Other is already on the way. All that realisation, that fruition, that effective and purposeful building-up of something that is to be and which doesn't know shading down into futility, disappointment and abandonment: all that is the sign of a Kingship quite unlike anything we can imagine while borrowing the terminology derived from "glorious rulers" here on Earth. It presupposes a pattern of desire quite unlike anything we are used to, one which is way prior to any pattern of desire we know and yet which can move us to want and to create hints of that kingdom now.

So we need to be inducted into wanting it: being on the inside of it means having our pattern of desire re-created so that we become the project's conscious agents:

...your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

So, may Your pattern of desire be achieved, here in our midst, amongst all these things that we are so quick to reject, to despise, to tire of, be bored of, that make us despair. Your pattern of desire—which already has and is a tremendous rejoicing and delight, an immense benevolence and peaceful longing, a real reality upon which our small reality rests and from which it so often seeks to cut itself off, incapable of perceiving itself as the symptom of so much glory. May we be taken into the inside of this pattern.

Remind us that we are the slot machine, and you the delighted player, so happy and lucky to have found us, fine-tuning us into disgorging far more treasure than we ever knew we had.

Give us this day our daily bread; (...)

I think there are two references here: the people of Israel were told to gather Manna in the desert, but only what was sufficient for the day; they were instructed not to collect more to store or save, except on the eve of the Sabbath when they could collect for two days. This too is a teaching about desire: those who know they are loved don't need to be anxious for more, but can relax into knowing they can ask for and will be given what they need by someone who knows their needs more than they do themselves. To learn to trust the goodness of the giver, day by day, is a constant shift in our pattern of desire.

However, just as longing for God to cause his Name to pulsate in our midst, even in the circumstances of this Earth, is part of opening up our pattern of desire, so too is longing for the bread of Heaven, the food which deepens hunger even as it satisfies. I think the reference here is to the Blessed Bread in the Temple, understood to be the sign, coming down into our midst, of the one who longs for us to want more, to eat more, in a way which pulls us out of our smaller wantings and cravings. For we who are living the Temple as the Body of Christ, it is the Eucharist—suspended, like the Name, midway between this world and the one which is breaking in—which symbolizes and makes present a simultaneous deepening and satisfying of desire which draws us onward.

...and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors;
(...)

Surprise, surprise: Our Lord takes for granted that we are entirely mimetic animals. It is only in our letting go of the “social other” that we can find ourselves let go. It is as we find ourselves able to unbind others—to let them go, rather than be tied into them with ever-tighter violent reciprocity—that we find ourselves being let go. And, in finding ourselves being let go, we actually find ourselves.

Who we are is formed relationally, and it is strictly in our relation with what is other than us that we will be found to be.

...and do not bring us to the time of trial, (...)

Once again, think yourself inside the pattern of desire we are being asked to inhabit. One of the ways we avoid trusting someone who likes us is by holding them at a distance, by considering that they may be capricious, may have hidden intentions, and may lead us in a particular way just to test us—not because it is good for us, but because we are playthings, and it is good for them. In fact, as humans, we are surrounded by a social other that treats us in just such ways. Part of learning that the other Other is not part of the social other is learning that there are no hidden intentions in God: the other Other is totally for us. We can allow the other Other to take over our whole heart without fear. We don't need to hold back a tiny bit, so as to take an "adult" distance and second-guess his project for us.

Linked to this is our tendency to grasp identity through the excitement of a challenge: it seems so exciting to grasp at identity by comparison with some convenient other over against whom I can become a hero—or a victim, it doesn't really matter which. In either case, at least I get to be, to have an identity, however much of a junk identity it turns out to be. So much more exciting than agreeing to the slow business of being given an identity as a daughter or son of God, without any "over against"! Yet this need for identity by grabbing for a quick fix masks a despair about there being any real "me" that is being called into existence over time. Here, we are inducted into a pattern of desire whereby we agree to lose the quick-fix identities we might grab through "tests", so as to be given something much richer and deeper which will hold us up, but which we cannot grab.

...but rescue us from the evil one.

Continuing with the same pattern of desire, Our Lord situates us with relation to what is evil. There is nothing evil in God, and any attribution of evil to God works to prevent us from trusting God whole-

heartedly. If God is two-faced, Janus, we will always be shadowboxing, never allowing ourselves to be indwelt. Evil is real, but we are not to seek it out, face it down. The thing about evil is that the more we try to define it and face it, the more real it gets—and the more we become it. Think how easily people fixate on their enemies, becoming, without realising it, more and more like them, until they are mirror-images of each other. The pattern of desire into which the Lord's prayer is inducting us recognises evil, but only as that from which people can be delivered. Rather than being a thing in itself, it is only known in being left behind to curve down on itself, never to be dignified with a concentrated gaze. The real force in the universe is not evil but love, and love really does want to rescue us, to bring us out of our tendency to enclose ourselves in smaller and smaller spaces—to bring us into being.

And then finally:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Our Lord here repeats and emphasises the central anthropological point around which the whole of his teaching has been built: it is in our letting go of the social other that we find ourselves let go by the other Other. This is the pattern of desire, the shape of our being stretched into being.

I hope you will agree then that “desire according to the desire of the other” and the absolute, mechanical, mimetic working of our desire do not seem to be foreign imports into these texts on prayer, but offer a rich reading of them that goes with their flow. May they help us to be found on the inside of the adventure of prayer, as part of the shift by which we are inducted into a new people.

CHAPTER 10:

The Portal and the Halfway House: Spacious Imagination and Aristocratic Belonging

If you're anything like me, you have been wondering how what we've been looking at bears any relation at all to "life in the Church" as we know it. The forms of institutional life called "Church", with which we are familiar either from personal experience or by hearsay, seem far removed from what I have been trying to open up for you: how the crucified and risen Jesus interacts with his disciples in such a way as to induct us into a new people no longer run by fear of death. I know it's a tall order, but here I'm going to try and see if we can navigate our way into glimpsing these apparently removed realities as having something to do with each other after all.

A little note of disclosure: when I talk about Church, my first point of reference is the Church of which I am a member: the Catholic Church, that grouping of baptised Christians whose communion with each other includes, and is in some sense guaranteed by, the successor of Peter. However, by no means does the word "Church" have the same resonances for you. For those of you for whom the word has different associations, please see whether you can find useful analogies between what I say here and your own experience of being able, or unable, to participate in some form of Christian group belonging.

You will probably have heard many different ways of talking about what "the Church" is, many of them quite frightening (in just the same way that many ways of talking about the Bible are frightening). You get the impression that you are hearing a discourse about power, or a discourse emerging from ownership of a "position", or a justification and

defence of traditional and historical prerogatives. It is not necessarily the clerical caste in the Church who talk in these ways, though we are particularly susceptible to it. Often enough, lay people, politicians, and others will also wield “The Church” as a weapon in cultural wars, in much the same way as others wield “The Bible”. Indeed, while the default Protestant error is “Bibliolatry”—making an idol of the Bible—the default Catholic error is “Ecclesiolatry”: making an idol of Church. The idol worship to which each of our groups is prone is slightly culturally different, even if the underlying pattern is the same.

When we worship an idol, our love—which is in principle a good thing—is trapped into grasping onto something made in our own image. This “something”, which we of course do not perceive as an idol, then becomes the repository for all the security and certainty which we idolaters need in order to survive in the world. We are unaware that, the tighter we grasp it, the more insecure and uncertain we in fact become, and the more we empty the object which we idolise of any potential for truth and meaning. Of course, because love is a good thing, it is excruciating for us to get untangled from its distorted form. Nevertheless, against any tendency we might have to blame the idol for being an idol, it is really the pattern of desire in us, the grasping, that is the problem—not the object. For just as the Bible is not an act of communication we can lay hold of, but the written monuments to an act of communication that takes hold of us, so Church is not an object we can grasp, but a sign of our being-grasped and held. It is not something any of us owns, but the first hint, difficult to perceive, of Another’s ownership of us.

In this chapter, rather than attempting to paint a picture of Church as an object, I will try something more challenging: I will speak tentatively from within a process of letting go of idolatry. I’ll begin not with some fantasy Church that exists only in textbooks, but by assuming that you stand as I do: within range of the ordinary, humdrum reality of local parishes, sacraments, catechists, liturgies, families, prayers, youth groups, school finance discussions, Bishops, Papal trips, hospitals, architecture, discussions about the admission and formation of clergy, or about the presence or absence of clergy in your local community.

In addition to these realities, which can vary from the banal to the occasionally heroic, we experience a far more dire set of resonances of

“Church”. Recent ones include the very long shadows cast by the great clerical sexual abuse cover-up. But each generation in each part of the world may have some comparable memories: of Vichy Bishops giving Hitler salutes; of Argentine Bishops backing up torturers; of a Venezuelan hierarch claiming that a series of devastating floods was God’s punishment on the people for voting in a way of which he disapproved; of a Romanian Patriarch blessing Communist guns; of silver-tongued pastors demonising opponents and rolling in cash while living double lives; of closeted gay clergy—many, mitred—emotionally blackmailing each other into supporting mendacious attacks on the civil rights of their openly gay brothers and sisters; of rank institutional misogyny and the cheap political use of threatened excommunication.

This is, sadly, by no means an exhaustive list. Nevertheless, I take it that these are the kinds of things which colour our experience of Church. However, I’m not going to be dealing with them directly. Instead, I will seek to further the shifts in relationship, imagination, wanting, and belonging that I’ve been introducing to you so far. I’m very keen not to try and tell you to which institutions you must belong to be “good”. Nor even to tell you how I think the visible institutions which we already have should be run or structured, nor to offer a critique of them. I take their presence and their need to be seriously reformed for granted. But I also think that what is really important is not what they do or say, but how we learn to get unhooked, in their midst—and even occasionally with their help—from being run by the “social other”, and are empowered instead to be run by the “other Other”. In other words, I want to offer you, by means of some images, a way into a non-idolatrous living of Church—one characterised by a spacious imagination and a complete lack of rivalry in the belonging.

The Restaurant

No image is entirely reliable as a guide to reality. Still, I hope you will allow yourself to inhabit each of the images I’m going to propose for long enough to see where it might be useful. The first image I’m going to ask you to dwell on—or in—is that of a Really Classy Restaurant.

You are a Really Aristocratic Guest at this restaurant. You've been invited for a magnificent meal, one for which the taste buds even of a Real Aristo like yourself aren't fully prepared, so that the evening will be a learning experience as well as a tasting one.

You have heard of the chef, although no one has seen him since shortly after the restaurant's inauguration. It may even be the case, as suggested by the brilliant detectives from Pixar in their 2007 exposé, *Ratatouille*, that the master chef is, in fact, a rat. Certainly, the creativity that comes from occupying a place of shame with generosity was beautifully captured in their account of a "repugnant other" as the driving force behind the banquet. In any case, the chef is busy in the kitchen, behind those swinging doors—the sort that waiters can push through while balancing improbable numbers of trays.

You have been invited for two reasons, which are really one: because the chef likes you, and because he wants to feed you. In fact, this is the chef's way of showing that he delights in you: by feeding you his very best, in a way that makes you even more aware of how aristocratic, privileged, and fortunate you are. The food is a sign of his delighting in you, and at the same time is a nourishment that will put you into a rollicking good humour. Thus, it will both enable you to think more imaginatively and give you the energy to realise whatever your growing good humour suggests you would really like to accomplish.

Here, as in every classy restaurant, there are waiters and sommeliers whose job it is to scurry back and forth between the kitchen, the cellar and the tables, bringing you menus, suggestions, cutlery, napkins, and eventually food and drink to suit you. Except that, in this restaurant, something is out of sync. The waiters are suffering from a serious problem of perspective. They seem to think that the restaurant is all about them, and this, of course, introduces an element of farce into the proceedings. I mean, how many of us go to a restaurant because of the waiters?

Nevertheless, in this restaurant—at the same time as the chef is hard at work preparing the food, and the aristocratic guests are beginning to relax into knowing how aristocratic they are at the tables—the waiters, whose task it is to serve the chef by serving those whom the chef wants to nourish, are engaged in a constant series of drama-queen hissy fits. Sometimes it is about which one is the maître d', or whether

there ought to be a maître d' at all. Then there are rows about the gender, the marital status, and (Dear Lord!) even the sexual orientation of the waiters. Then there are endless snits about who has a nicer uniform, who is promoting whose friends, who has been insufficiently attentive to whose dignity and so forth. Furthermore, the waiters seem to have picked up, through their forays into the kitchen, that they are somehow emanations of the chef—but they know better than the chef who the guests are, and what is good for them. The result is that they are inclined to offer the guests very eccentric accounts of the menu, ones strongly biased towards what is less effort for themselves. They have a tendency to filter the extensive list of “specials” into something much narrower, which boosts their own understanding of what the restaurant is about and of their place in it. They also come up with strange translations of the menu that make the food sound rather unpalatable.

Sometimes, amidst much rolling of the eyeballs, they make it quite clear that they dislike some of the guests and don't think they should be in the restaurant. They refuse to serve them, or serve them tiny portions, or portions in which they have spat *en route* to the table. Miraculously, they can't actually poison the food. Nevertheless, they can so poison the atmosphere as to make even the hardiest guest wonder whether the food isn't poisoned also. Sometimes they withhold bits of cutlery out of spite, while convincing themselves that it's for the guests' own good. All in all, they seem entirely run by their own concerns, driven by what's going on within their own group dynamic. From the waiters' point of view, the chef's guests are incidental extras, a backdrop to their own addictive soap opera.

Well, what a show! Just as well that the guests are Really Very Aristocratic. If the guests weren't very aristocratic, they might be inclined to get into rivalry with the waiters, to start protesting, to be dragged into the waiters' internal rows. They might completely lose perspective and start being sucked into the waiters' delusions that the point of guests being at the restaurant is for the benefit of the waiters. Luckily, as I say, the guests are Really Very Aristocratic, and they know a Very Aristocratic Chef has invited them, the very source of Aristocracy. So, being aristocratic, they are able to chortle with amusement at the goings-on among the hired help: “Ah, well, it's awfully difficult to get good service nowa-

days!” “Downstairs are playing up again”. Rather than being dismayed at the servants’ inability to get their act together, the Aristocratic guests are relaxed about how the Aristocratic Chef is going about the whole thing in an unflummoxed way, continuously smuggling delicious food out to the guests in clever disguises, so the waiters don’t notice, by means of non-uniformed employees whose existence the waiters might well refuse to acknowledge if they could even perceive them.

Isn’t it lucky, as I say, that the guests are Very Aristocratic—so aristocratic, in fact, that they are not at all sucked into the waiters’ soap opera! They can be mildly amused by the goings on when they notice them, but not at all obsessive, let alone contemptuous. A real Aristo would never be contemptuous of servants, not being in rivalry with them. They might even be very fond of them, grateful for their being there at all, tolerant of their foibles, able to see the hilarity of the farce without losing the ability to be pained by its pathos. Having no horse in the race of her servants’ rows, a real Aristo might even be able to offer occasional, clear-sighted advice to this or that waiter. However, she wouldn’t at all let Downstairs’ dramas occupy too much of Upstairs’ time or attention, which are very properly dedicated to much more enjoyable, creative and leisurely purposes.

I hope the main purpose of the image is clear: it facilitates a shift in perspective. Most discussions of what is meant by Church emanate from a waiterly perspective, and assume that the restaurant has much more to do with the waiters than it does. In fact, Church is really all about the chef making something available for increasingly aristocratic guests, and what the guests then make of the energy they are thereby given. So I’m going to concentrate on these two poles of the image: what’s in the kitchen, and what it’s like to be at the Table. We will, eventually, take a brief look at the role of the waiters in all this, but initially, I want to get you accustomed to the idea that the waiters (of which I am one) have a proper and genuine role, whose perfection in acting out coincides with our near invisibility. Every restaurant has waiters, but a good restaurant is really about more than just the waiters. The very best waiter is the one whose advice, elegance, speed and availability for service enhance your experience of the banquet which the chef has prepared for you, without ever drawing attention to himself.

The Halfway House

The next image I'm going to ask you to inhabit, as we imagine our way through some more shifts of perspective, is that of the halfway house. In some countries, when people are released from prison after serving long terms, they are not sent straight back to the communities from which they came. Rather, our governments have so disposed it that they spend a period in a halfway house. There, they become accustomed to the freedom that is coming upon them, and begin reacquiring habits of socialisation, self-reliance and employability: habits which they may have had before being sent to prison, but which are likely to have been severely atrophied by their period of institutionalisation.

Many convicts become so accustomed to prison life that, as their sentences come to an end, they experience considerable fear as to whether they will be able to survive on the outside. A number of ex-convicts re-offend very shortly after release in order to be returned to a security which they are unable to provide for themselves. Hence, the value of the halfway house: a period of adjustment to freedom with some supervision, some conditions, some enforced moments of presence, but also some networks, some guidance as to how to cope with a "world out there" which may have altered almost beyond recognition in the fifteen or twenty years since the ex-con was last a regular citizen.

Of course, the very fact that halfway houses exist is a sign that those "on the outside"—the authorities and the ordinary citizens of civil society—consider there to be certain normal, decent values, ways of behaving, habits, abilities to care for oneself and one's family, most of which are beyond the range of those in prison. There are patterns of courtship, mating, procreating and educating, ways to conduct commerce and leisure—all of which are good things in themselves and part of what being a viable, free adult is about. It is because these habits and practices exist so massively "on the outside", however flawed and fragile their living out, that those who are used to them recognise that enforced incarceration in total institutions defined by gender has deleterious consequences for personal viability over time. Long-term imprisonment, more than an extended temporary deprivation of liberty, is an enforced re-socialisation into a total, but seriously diminished, form of human culture.

It is because those on the outside share among themselves significant elements of an understanding of what is sane and healthy that they know convicts, who may have had a somewhat weak hold on normal and healthy social habits and practices in the first place, need help shifting from the diminished and vitiated forms of living together which are cultivated in prison, towards the richer and more open forms which go along with freedom, family, regular employment, creativity and so on.

In other words, however little an ex-con coming out of a total institution after twenty years may understand of what it's going to take for him to be re-socialised into the practices and forms of life "on the outside"—however little he may genuinely comprehend quite what a distance he will have to travel before being viable—it is people from those "outside" forms of life who "reach down", as it were, and set up a halfway house with accompanying social workers, probation officers, and employment counsellors to facilitate the draw of the ex-con back into less frightened, healthier and more productive patterns of life.

I'd like to explore some ways in which the image of the halfway house can help us re-imagine what it is and isn't like living within the Church. First, some similarities. A central one, perhaps, is that Church, like the halfway house, is not an end in itself. No one thinks that the chief joy of coming out of prison is that you get to go to a halfway house. The halfway house only exists as a staging post, something which has enough elements in common with the life the prisoner is leaving behind that she need not completely drown in her own inability to cope with returning to freedom. Nevertheless, its whole purpose is to prepare people for freedom, a way of life which has very little in common with what they are used to. In this new way of life, they will be relied upon to be creative, responsible, imaginative, full of initiative, and persevering, among other qualities. The halfway house exists only in service of something much greater than itself: forms of social flourishing and togetherness which are, initially, out of reach of the ex-con. For those who have "come through the system", the idea is that, after a time, they will become viable in entirely new fields. Then they will, in the best of cases, have only a loose and entirely voluntary affiliation with the halfway house, gratitude for the help derived from their association with it, and a longing to help other ex-cons who are coming through.

Another point of similarity with Church is that the very existence of the halfway house is a firm sign of a benevolent intention implanted by the “outside”. The “outside” knows what it is like to live well, and knows that those who currently don’t know how to do so, owing to their time in prison, are in principle capable of living well and can be nudged beyond their current patterns of desire. The bricks and mortar of the halfway house, and even the competence of the social workers and probation officers, are secondary to their being genuine, if more or less effective, signs of what is a real project, more or less effectively instantiated: a project that is the fruit of a pattern of desire, a draw from an outside which knows that there is a way—an arduous way to be sure—of moving people from their prison socialisation into free socialisation. The halfway house, like the Church, is an effective sign of a draw from beyond itself that is empowering its residents into becoming active creators of society.

A third similarity between Church and the halfway house might be that neither is concerned with producing predetermined results. A halfway house is not designed to train ex-cons specifically to be computer programmers, or beauticians, landscape-gardeners or air-traffic controllers—though any halfway house would be delighted if its former residents achieved stable careers in any of those fields. Its purpose is relational, enabling an arduous change in the ex-con’s pattern of desire, imagination, capacity for socialisation and self-esteem, such that they are no longer constantly liable to trip themselves, and others, up. They are able to imagine some good, one matched to the talents and idiosyncrasies they are coming to discover as their own—a good they are increasingly equipped to realise as their talents are allowed to develop. The hope is that, eventually, they will be empowered and connected in such ways as to turn renewed imagination into recognisable flourishing. The halfway house is a structured space in which people move beyond being merely freed *from* something (enforced confinement) to being free *for* something: constructive and creative involvement with society. Likewise, Church is a structured space in which people move beyond being free from something (being run by death and its fear) to being free for something: constructive and creative involvement in new forms of togetherness and enjoyment.

So: not an end in itself, but an effective sign of a draw from beyond itself, whose hoped-for outcome is free lives run by changed patterns of desire. So far, so good. But in fact, all of these similarities depend on something which is in evidence when it comes to halfway houses—the way in which a more or less healthy “outside” society is what people are used to—but not at all in evidence when it comes to Church—the existence of Heaven as a well-populated and healthy reality. In our normal countries: “outside” is vastly bigger than “inside”; those who are in prison are, it is to be hoped, a tiny minority of the populace. They are there because of failures to respect the norms of healthy outside life, and their presence there is, in principle, a temporary but more or less long-term abstraction from where they normally belong. Thus, from the point of view of those in prison, the existence of a halfway house is a comparatively banal statement of wider society’s values, an indication of continuity between life on the Outside and life on the Inside, and a helping hand to face the challenges of adapting to a less-structured normalcy. None of those inside a prison denies the existence of an “outside”, even those who will never see it again. So the existence of a halfway house is not, in itself, very revolutionary or radical.

The Portal

When it comes to seeing Church as a halfway house, however, something much weirder is going on—something requiring a much greater rupture in our imagination. Because the image starts from recognising that everyone is in prison, and no one has ever had a previous, regular, or normal life on the outside. In fact, of ourselves, we would not even know there was such a thing as life on the outside, let alone that it might be available for us and that we can be, as it were, retro-fitted for it.

Here, of course, is what is odd: when everyone is in prison, and always has been, and it is the only reality that everyone knows, then it doesn’t appear to anyone that they are in jail. They are normal, and life just is what it is. Remember how long it took Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show* to learn that there was an “outside” to his “normal” world? It is only when such people receive a communication from someone who is not

in prison that they learn they are in jail. A communication from someone entirely outside their social and cultural world—someone who offers signs of being from somewhere else, and of there actually being a somewhere else, which is in fact more truly where all those who are in prison are from and for which they are capable of being re-fitted.

Now, please notice the shocking quality of the communication: the Good News that you needn't be in prison, and weren't made for jail, inevitably also communicates the beginnings of an awareness that what you regard as normal may, more properly, be characterised as “being in prison”. This awareness, and the new characterisation of your situation which comes with it—an awareness which depends entirely on your taking on board a regard from outside—may be perceived as quite intolerable!

Well, this of course is central to imagining Church. As humans, we were quite literally unable to begin to imagine that there might be such a thing as life not run by death. All our presuppositions are death-laden, in ways we couldn't even recognise until something that wasn't part of our culture structured by death unfurled itself in our midst. It was unimaginable that what seemed so normal to us might, in fact, have been a symptom of our having become trapped in something less than ourselves. Yet that is what the entire burden of our Forgiving Victim course has been: we are being inducted into, becoming able to imagine, the deathless one unfurling deathlessness as a human life story in our midst, in such a way that we can share it and begin to participate in a deathless sociality as that for which we were really made.

Given this, I hope you can see that, whereas an ordinary halfway house is a comparatively banal conduit between two social realities, the unfurling of the beginnings of a deathless sociality—and the possibility of our being inducted into it, in the midst of our death-run culture—implies much more of a rupture. A shuttle docking at the International Space Station to take the astronauts who've spent a few months there back to Earth is experienced by the astronauts as part of a certain continuity. However, a portal from another universe opening up over the White House lawn and beginning to communicate with us about taking us into that other universe, asking us to trust that the other universe is more fully our home than the one we know, is much more of a shake-up.

Yet this latter picture is the more accurate analogy to Church: a completely unknown social reality has started instantiating itself in our midst, entirely altering our understanding of the social reality we once took for normal. It is one thing to know where you are, and to know that there is an elsewhere, and that there is a way to get adapted to life elsewhere. It is quite another when a previously unknown “elsewhere” turns up, and is just there making elsewhere available to you, starting now. Where you are, what you are used to, is now wholly and shockingly relativised. So in this way, Church is quite unlike most halfway houses. The very fact of its existence—which is the same as the beginnings of the new form of living together it contains—is already an irruption of elsewhere. It is a reality-altering statement, or sign, of an unimaginably powerful “just there” alongside, and breaking into what we had taken for granted as normal.

Shifts in Perspective

I hope it is by now clear quite how different the same reality can look, depending on where you find yourself as it arrives. Those who share our culture are perfectly at liberty to see it as not a halfway house at all. Meanwhile, the portal that has opened over the lawn looks remarkably like a dead criminal, executed under shameful circumstances. A failure like that scarcely seems like an act of communication, much less an opening into a richer universe that is palpitating alongside our own.

For many in our culture, the visible elements of the halfway house are merely signs of the strange obsession—or escapism—of some within our culture, pointing to nothing beyond that. The “portal over the lawn” is simply a hologram set up by clever projectors behind the bushes. Such people have no sense of a regard from “outside” which knows us and knows of a healthier form of human flourishing. It is logical, therefore, that they should have no sense of being trapped on the “inside” of something that is an atrophied or distorted form of being.

Nevertheless, even those of us who are beginning to undergo the draw of the act of communication—to sense it for what it is—we too are almost entirely run by the same patterns of desire and imagination

as all the rest of our fellow humans. Hence, it takes some time for our perception to shift. Indeed, the first impression that someone would get, if they perceived a previously unknown “elsewhere” opening up a portal inside their reality, is not “Oh, someone’s setting up a halfway house”. The first impression would be “We’re being invaded!” Then, as what has happened sinks in, the second impression would be: “What looked like an invasion is beginning to look more like a prison break-in, of all absurd things”. And it’s worth remembering that this is the sort of imagery which Jesus uses in the New Testament—a thief in the night, breaking unexpectedly through a wall into a house (Matthew 24:43, Luke 12:39, Revelation 16:15). I use the image of “prison break-in” because, as what’s really going on in the “invasion” becomes clear, it also becomes clear that the “invasion” (an unfriendly term) is in fact an “irruption” (a friendly term) into a reality which seemed normal, but in the light of the irruption is being seen for what it is: a hostile form of existence, a form of prison, an unnecessary confinement.

As time goes on, the perspective shifts again: what initially appeared to be a prison break-in has had the effect of creating a gaping hole in the prison fabric, the portal through which “elsewhere” has been unfurled in our midst. Some people, seeing the hole in the fabric of their reality, imagine that “elsewhere” is to be found by going somewhere else. What has been opened up is a form of escape from prison—not a halfway house, but a hole through which they can climb in order to get somewhere else. For these people, there is really no such thing as a halfway house, a process by which they can be drawn into a new socialisation. There is simply what they have discovered to be a bad socialisation, from which they have been given an exit hatch, without any particular notion of what any good socialisation might look like. For such people (and many modern Christians are of this sort), the Church may point to a reality “outside”, but it doesn’t contain within itself the beginnings of the reality to which it is pointing. It is not a portal by which another reality begins to instantiate itself in our midst, but a hole through which we climb into a better place. There is rupture, but no real continuity.

However (and this is where I love the Catholic “thing”), if we stick with the perception of the prison break-in and the portal for long

enough, we begin to notice something rather odd: a prison with a hole in it—which is just there, and stays open—isn’t really a prison. A jail with a temporary hole in it—a tunnel made by some escaping prisoners, or by friends of theirs from the outside—becomes an effective prison again the moment its authorities seal the escape route. However, any prison in which an unclosable hole emerges ceases to be a prison and becomes a quite different sort of collective. While some in it may prefer the stability and order of life before the hole, and act as though there were no hole in the system, the fact is that the hole has now altered the entire system. It has become not only possible, but normal, to reconceptualise the “inside”. What used to be a closed system, which didn’t even know it was closed, turns out instead to be a satellite reality dependent on a huge and massively healthy “outside” whose existence had not previously been suspected.

It is as this perception develops and stabilises that the image of the “halfway house” comes into its own. The shock of the rupture yields to the realisation of the continuing “just there” of the “elsewhere” instantiating itself via the portal in our midst. And with it comes the realisation of what a small satellite our reality is to the “elsewhere” that is beginning to draw us into its orbit. Eventually, there develops the realisation that the portal is habitable, that it is training us to start being what we were always meant to be, and didn’t know it. So we can begin to understand “Church” as a quite normal function of the portal, a stable sign of a healthy sociality from beyond, reaching into our midst in quite regular ways, to draw us out of our diminished culture of togetherness marked by death and start making us viable creators of new, deathless forms of togetherness.

It is here, alas, that Catholics (of whom I am one) become presumptuous. So sure are we, and rightly so, of the “just there” which is unfurling itself in our midst—so clear to us is it that humans are not really prisoners, yet have all been accidentally born in and formed by prison, and are now being empowered to be citizens of elsewhere—that we forget we are, all of us, still largely formed from within by the pattern of desire which seemed normal in prison. The result is that we downplay the rupture the portal has introduced into our manner of being together, and assume too easily that the stable, regular objectivity of

“just there” is like the stable, regular objectivity we knew from prison. We are far too often inattentive to how we are treating, as part of the stability and order of “Elsewhere”, things which are in fact part of the oppressive, death-ridden order and fake stability enjoined on us by the prison officers and administrators of the system that is passing away.

The challenge is to be sensitive to both the rupture and the continuity simultaneously—and that is a great challenge. Becoming sensitive to this is part of becoming alive to the sheer vivacity and variety—the sense of fun, the desire for our delight, the essential lack of seriousness—by which the other Other is inclined to scandalise our narrow little hearts.

The Embassy

There is a further shift in perception tied to my inadequate, ever-shifting “halfway house” model of Church. After a bit, what seems like a halfway house, morphs into an embassy. The image is easy to understand: an embassy is a portal of another country within our own. We recognise that, once a person is through the gates of a country’s embassy, then they are on the sovereign soil of that country, even though the embassy building is physically located in one of our cities. Our own armed forces cannot haul that person out, as they could if they were, for instance, a bank robber who had “gone to ground” in a warehouse. Furthermore, the employees of the embassy are typically citizens of the country whose embassy it is, and they come among the citizens of our country bearing the values and the interests of their own country. They sign to us by their presence that “elsewhere” is not only geographically removed, but also in our midst; when they look at us, we are being gazed at, from close up, with a regard formed by “elsewhere”. And their gaze, if we are drawn to it, can teach us to look at our own country and values in a quite different light from the ones to which we are accustomed. Their boss is the ambassador, but they are all ambassadors in the sense that each one, by being who they are, instantiates the embassy.

We also use the word “ambassador” in a looser sense. People who have gone through a particular course of training and become particu-

larly fine examples of what this school, or that apprenticeship, hopes to turn out. They are then recognised as “ambassadors”—public bearers of the values for which the institution in question would like to be known. You can imagine, then, that some—indeed hopefully all—of the residents of a halfway house will eventually be regarded as its “ambassadors”, as its success stories: not ex-cons who were merely, grudgingly re-inserted into “outside” values, but people who have become shining examples of what those outside values are about and are unashamed of it being known that it was the help they received through the halfway house that equipped them, say, to set up and run a small business, itself employing other ex-cons.

Well, the oddity of Church is that it is not only the sign of a prison break-in that creates a rupture in the fabric of the system, opening us up to an outside that is “just there”; it is not only an escape tunnel to get outside the system; it is not even only a halfway house, by which ex-cons can be stably and regularly drawn into the forms of socialization which are proper to life on the outside. It is a portal of “just there” solidly implanted in the territory of “here”, which turns ex-cons around completely. They come to find their real citizenship in the country that is “just there”, and take on board its values in such a way that they are transformed into ambassadors of another kingdom and what it’s about. In other words, the whole point of the portal is not to extract people from prison and send them somewhere else, but to “turn” apparent citizens of one reality into active agents of another. This happens when these people discover their real citizenship in another reality, and take that citizenship on board so completely that they can become part of the irruption—the breaking in, the effective instantiation in our midst—of the deathless life that the portal has opened up.

In Chapter 6, when we looked at the Fernando story, we saw how Paul talks about the role of being “ambassador for Christ”. I suggested that this meant someone who has allowed themselves to be forgiven by the class fairy, by the one not run by the space of shame, and so has themselves become an imitator of the class fairy, being prepared to occupy the space of shame, fear, and death without being run by it. I hope you can see now how this embassy might work: part of what the portal does, its halfway house function, is it gets us used to not being run by

death, shame, fear and rivalry until such a time as we find ourselves “turned”, so that we can actually become part of its Embassy function.

But please notice what this “turning” does to my inadequate “half-way house” image: it deprives it of an “elsewhere”, a healthy outside society for which ex-cons are being prepared, so that they can leave behind prison life forever. It turns out that the portal never had any intention of taking any of us “elsewhere”, which would suggest a certain despair about, or contempt for, the reality into which the portal has inserted itself. On the contrary, it turns out that the only “elsewhere” is here, beginning to be instantiated in our midst by signs that contain and produce the reality they are pointing to. The result is that the embassy-creating portal is turning reality, which we only perceived as a prison on our way out of it, into the adventure playground it was always meant to be. It is not so much taking our reality by *storm*—a military image suggesting one reality which takes over another and shuts it down—as taking it by *surprise*, so that it begins to yield delighted glimpses and gasps of what is coming into it, and what it is becoming.

Rules and Officers

I hope it is more or less obvious that what I have been trying to convey is the notion of “sacramentality”: insinuations that the irruption of the other Other in our midst has a regular shape that we call Church. I want you to notice a couple of things derived from the shifting perspective that I’ve been trying to illustrate for you: how very different “Rules” and “Clerical leadership” look if we consider them according to my “morphing halfway house” model of Church. I mention these two, since they are both issues which can become unhealthy fixations (whether of love or of hatred), and my whole purpose in this chapter is to facilitate freedom from idolatry.

The only difference, initially, as regards patterns of desire between those who are in prison but don’t know it, and those who are being persuaded of the portal’s invitation and are just beginning to move into a halfway house, is that the latter—having received hints of a regard from outside—have some sense that their imagination and pattern of desire

is atrophied and distorted. But this scarcely makes them any more capable of imagining and desiring healthy forms of living.

For at least his first few days in a halfway house, and even though his heart be singing at what is opening up for him, the ex-con is hardly any less atrophied and distorted in his desire, expectations, and ways of relating than his former cell-mates who have remained in prison. It is also odd that, from his former cell-mates' point of view—those who are in jail but don't know it, since for them there is no outside—the halfway house does not at all look like what it claims to be: a staging post en route to a yet-to-be imagined freedom. Quite the reverse: It looks like a series of restrictions on such liberties as they already have, and pointless and arbitrary limits at that.

Let's explore this gap in perception by means of an example. You can imagine that it might be a normal part of life in a particular culture to tell lies for immediate gain. Those within that culture are aware of this, understand it, are accustomed to it, and participate in it. The result is that people don't really believe each other, consistently treat each other (and thus themselves) as means, not ends, and consequently are not prepared to entrust each other with much. Overall, the group is pretty stagnant: consider how weak and unstable commerce, for instance, would be in such a culture. Now imagine that there is another culture where truthfulness is the norm, and because truthfulness is the norm, people can entrust things, roles, projects and deals to each other, and all move ahead very well because of the cooperation this engenders. For these latter people, the instruction "Don't tell lies" is redundant, moot, since truthfulness is habitual to them and they already enjoy all the benefits that come from living in this way.

However, for a denizen of the "lying is normal" world, it is not at all clear that there is such a thing as a world of habitual truthfulness, nor can they imagine any benefits to be had from it. If the inhabitants of the habitually truthful world were to set up a halfway house enabling habitual liars to be drawn into their world, the halfway house would look, from the perspective of those outside it (and even from the standpoint of those recently inside it), like a pretty restrictive place. It would appear to them under the sign of a prohibition: "Thou shalt not tell lies". For dwellers in the "lying is normal" world, this would simply be

a silly, and purely negative, interference with their normal way of doing things. Even for many of those recently entering the halfway house, they would have to trust the good intentions of those who set it up, for initially there would be no profit to them in obeying the prohibition—merely the inconvenience. For the only way to taste the value of habitual truthfulness is by being habitually truthful.

Until such a time as you are habitually truthful, then, you may find yourself having—painfully, and on an incident-by-incident basis—to forego the immediate gains you are accustomed to getting from lies, without seeing any positive return. Only when it doesn't occur to you to reach for the immediate gains will you start to see that you have already been receiving a whole lot of non-immediate gains in terms of how other people treat you, how you are able to treat them, and what you are able to do together. These gains were entirely invisible to you before, and are so obvious to you now as not even to seem gains but normality: just part of what being human is all about. From your new, habitually truthful persona, it is perfectly clear that the culture of habitual lies is not even really human in its own right. It is simply a terribly atrophied and distorted version of what it might be, but can't imagine. Part of its distortion is that of being locked into rivalry with the absolute prohibition “Do not tell lies”. This has the effect that, from within the culture of habitual lies, the culture of habitual truthfulness cannot be seen for what it is, but appears as a restrictive culture absolutely centred on a prohibition.

I stress this, since one of the joys of life within the Church is discovering that, actually, prohibitions have no real place in it at all. They are merely the moot remnants of what things looked like before you found yourself sucked into a new way of life. Once you are living it, on the inside of it, you gradually lose your need for a description of what it looks like to trespass outside it, since you are becoming free even of being able to imagine trespassing. All your freedom is *for*, to such an extent that you don't really understand any more what freedom *from* is from: you are so entirely dedicated to what is constructively appropriate that all prohibitions are moot (see 1 Corinthians 6:12, where St Paul says: “All things are lawful for me—but not all things are beneficial—All things are lawful for me—but I will not be dominated by anything.”)

So life in this halfway house really does look completely different depending on the perspective of different patterns of desire and imagination. For some, it is simply a derangement; for others, it is a place of cruel and pointless restrictions. Even for those coming close to it, its initial narrowness and sobriety are quite frightening, for they are having to trust what is not evident: that there is a world of freedom beyond the restrictions, that the limits are only the entry-point into a process of re-habituation. For the moment, they will have to trust the probation officers, psychologists and employment counsellors to help them find their way into enjoying that re-habituation from within. Sometimes, what they now recognise to be the prison they have left behind will seem positively attractive by comparison.

Well, this raises the thorny issue of the officers. In most halfway houses, comparatively few of the probation officers, psychologists and employment counsellors are themselves ex-cons (though some may be, and it is difficult to think of a better training). They are people from the outside who are employed by others on the outside in order to facilitate the acclimatisation of the ex-cons into their new outside reality. They are, if you like, already visibly and imitably competent, fully habituated citizens of the healthy social reality. Their job is to be part of the draw which makes the halfway house a sign of something beyond itself.

However, in the halfway house that is the Church, there is not a single officer who is not just as much an ex-con as all the other residents. Every one of us started in prison, like everybody else; our imaginations and patterns of desire, despite—and sometimes because of—our intensive training and style of life, are just as subject to lapsing back into the habitual cultural patterns of prison life.

Suppose a prisoner who doesn't realise she's in prison is confronted with someone who claims to be a probation officer mandated by a social reality of whose existence she (the prisoner) is ignorant. In that case, she doesn't see a probation officer from elsewhere: she sees just another representative of "law and order"—a prison guard with a gaudily coloured uniform. That's no surprise. However, it is also the case that all of us who are more or less newly arrived residents in the halfway house also find it difficult at first to distinguish between those whom we now understand to have been prison guards—whom we are used

to dealing with—and probation officers, who at first seem awfully like prison guards. Only with great difficulty do we come to perceive that there are social workers and psychologists whose joy it is to help us get adjusted to a new reality, and that they are not the same as the similarly uniformed people who brainwashed and sedated us in prison to make us more functional and manageable. It is even more difficult for us to reach the stage where we perceive, from any of the counsellors, hints of direction for future employment in the new society, rather than barks that we should stop dreaming and instead get useful in maintaining the prison economy.

Of course, the officers themselves—since they are also ex-cons in differing stages of re-socialisation—are at least as likely as everyone else to have difficulties of perception in this field, and maybe even more likely. Think of it like this: after a comparatively short time in a halfway house, you are told that you are to be a probation officer or an employment counsellor. But you have either no experience at all, or merely the tiniest hint at an intuition of what the healthy society you are supposed to be inducting people into is like, and your only experience of uniformed officials is prison guards. Well, it is scarcely surprising that you will, at least initially, be much more like a prison guard than like a probation officer, much more inclined to react to a changing situation by calling for lockdown than by helping the residents imagine creative new possibilities for the freedom that is coming upon them. And of course, there will be plenty of halfway house residents who will be glad that you are like a prison guard; it enables you to be part of a give-and-take with which they are familiar, and so helps them put off the arduous training of imagination and desire which will equip you and them to be socialised into the new society.

The Banquet

At this point, I would like to reintroduce—in a slightly different form—the image with which we started: that of the aristocratic guests in the restaurant. That image, morphing now into an image of a banquet, takes us into the full reality of the draw and power emanating

from the “healthy outside society”. For this healthy outside society is a party, which has gate-crashed what turned out to be our prison, set up a portal from elsewhere which is “just there”, opened up a halfway house enabling us to be re-socialised, and started staffing an embassy so that signs of “just there” might begin to transform, from within, our perception of “here”. Just beneath the surface of each of these images, and palpitating at the centre of all of them, is the image of a banquet—actually, a wedding banquet. This banquet has already begun, and the consummation it celebrates is already taking place. Yet it unfurls itself amongst us as something already now reaching into our midst from a future we cannot grasp, something which is beginning to turn us into signs of a becoming in which we are held securely. This is, of course, the central reality which is made available to us through the Mass.

One of the things which gets very little attention when people discuss the Heavenly banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb, is the nature of the joy involved. And when people talk about Heavenly joy, you sometimes get the impression that they are talking about something rather linear, pure and rarified. Is this really bearable? If a party is for us, then it is for us to enjoy, at least starting with our sense of humour, and because the host actually really likes us and wants our company—indeed, likes our company so much that, of all ludicrous things, he wants to marry us, take us into sharing his life on equal terms! So I would like to suggest that we allow the raucousness of the hilarity that is spilling over from the banquet to break through to us.

We are all aware that laughter and humour can be very cruel, and cruel laughter would scarcely be compatible with the joy emanating from the banquet. There is, however, a form of laughter and humour which is entirely without cruelty—which is in fact one of the firmest signs of cruelty’s absence, and of the presence of general health and sane enjoyment: people who are able to laugh at themselves. We’ve perhaps all been in a situation where someone has started to laugh at us, in a way which might have seemed ironic, for we were indeed doing something ridiculous. But as they laugh, we find ourselves noticing that their laughter is not out to get us; it is for us, it enjoys us, and it welcomes us in. Rather than becoming all defensive, grim and closed-down, we find that their laughter lightens us up, so that we are able to receive

ourselves again through their perception of us. Thus we can let go of our brittleness, our defensiveness. We are enabled to climb down from whatever postures of pretentiousness we were grasping at, and find that we are able to join in with all the mucky-seeming others who are going through the same thing in a growing cacophony of shared delight. It's as we go through this process of laughing at ourselves along with others that we discover how like them we are, what fun it is to be with them, and how much fun it is going to be to enjoy them more in the future.

Earlier, when we were looking at the image of the aristocratic guests at the meal, I asked you to consider the mixture of hilarity and pathos which enables these guests to put up with the more or less farcical behaviour of the waiters. Now, I would like to see if we can inhabit that tension a little more fully. For it is easy enough to see that the waiters, who have now morphed into scarcely-prepared probation officers in the halfway house, are run by patterns of behaviour so contrary to that of which we are supposed to be becoming signs, that we simply scandalise the guests into becoming indignant at us—and Lord alone knows we have given them grounds for this.

The tension which holds together the hilarity and the pathos, allowing each to be filled out by the other without collapsing, is, I think, one of the most difficult things to gesture towards successfully. How can you talk about a dynamic which enables you, simultaneously, to treat something extremely seriously, and yet not take it seriously at all? The tension hints at something of the power of the passion for us, the inside taste of the love for us that shapes our host's besottedness. A power which begins to be sensed in our midst as the ability to laugh at ourselves as we find ourselves being forgiven, becoming self-critical, brought into a new way of enjoying togetherness—and yet a power that has a longing for us, a concern for our well-being so strong that we are tempted to use words like “anger” to describe its pathos at our constant and persistent rejection of its invitations.

I wonder whether exactly the same longing, love and joy—experienced by us as an ability not to take ourselves seriously, to laugh at ourselves as we are “let off” our pretentiousness and become self-critical—is not also experienced as wrath by those whose sense of righteousness clings to an impossibility of being tickled by ridicule. And,

curiously, the richness and joy of finding ourselves able to laugh at ourselves is not diminished, but enhanced by the fact that it constantly stretches us out with pathos towards those who seem most averse to it, which means also the bits of ourselves that seem most averse to it. In other words, part of the joy of the hilarity coming upon us is precisely its gentle, stretched refusal to concede definite existence to a “they” off whom our laughter might cruelly rebound, condemned to a separate sphere of ever more fixated seriousness.

I bring this out here because I think that to be able to inhabit this tension between hilarity and pathos, tickled by the hidden bursts of mirth that are summoning us into the banquet, is an essential element of life in Church. It is this tension which empowers us not to be in rivalry with each other, not to be indignant with each other, to withstand the siren lure of being scandalised by each other. I suspect this tension is going to be vital if we are to give flesh to God’s project.

Think, for instance, of these words emanating from the banquet. Their speaker seems to know so well how we are inclined to collapse the tension into either cruel laughter or cruel righteousness. I suspect that these words, words which last forever, were not given to us as “critical snark” designed to make us look at each other in a jaundiced and cynical way. I suspect the Presence who opens up the portal gives us these words because he knows how difficult it is for us not to hurt each other. They are there to protect us from each other as we grow out of prison-thought. They remind us how big and spacious the project is that seeks to make us so much freer than our frightened, prison-run imaginations will allow.

Consider this:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your servant; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your slave: even as the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25b-28)

So the titles, the costumes, the weightiness of tone, the gravity of attitude are pure kitsch, fading remnants of prison life, unless they are brought to life by someone who is throwing themselves lightly into being your servant—which means finding out and ministering to your actual needs, not to what they tell you your needs should be. Only those who are prepared to sit lightly to being a nobody will be found, to their own surprise, to have become a somebody!

Or this:

How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (John 5:44)

Are we, or our officers, locked into dependence on each other's approval—which is part of prison life—rather than acting as sons and daughters whose approval comes from elsewhere, acting from beyond being frightened, blackmailed and ashamed?

Or this:

Beware the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. (Luke 12:1b-2)

We are therefore encouraged to learn to be systematically self-critical. It's not just this or that bad apple that "covers up"; fake goodness imposes itself as a system, a leaven which runs people, starting with ourselves, and we must always be on the watch for it.

Or this:

You...make void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on (Mark 7:13)

So there is a real difference, to which we are encouraged to be ever attentive, between the apparent incorrigibility of our ideological systems of goodness and the unchanging "just there" which is a living, delighting act of communication producing huge and constant changes in our ways of understanding each other and living together.

Or this:

They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not lift a finger to move them. (Matthew 23:4).

It is as if they said: "The system suits us, adjust yourself to it if you want to belong on our terms, which are the only real terms".

Or this:

You blind guides, you strain out gnats and swallow camels. (Matthew 23:24).

This might translate as "We strain out condoms and swallow wars" . . . Please be encouraged to continue self-critically in this vein!

Or this:

But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one Teacher, and you are all brethren . . . you have one master, the Christ. (Matthew 23:8,10b).

The one master, the dynamo of Presence in the portal, is always just there. His teaching and example remain alive, independent of any of us. So anyone who would teach in Christ's name is always on the same level as us, as one whose job it is to enliven among us the sign that the Master is producing. Someone who insists on their authority will always be an anti-sign, and we will be right to suspect them. Where true Authority has been given, it will always be sensed in the enlivening of the sign in those being taught, and in the transparency and loss of self-importance of the one teaching.

What I find curious—and what we officers or waiters find hard to take from these words of Jesus, and many others like them—is this: precisely because the portal which has opened up for us all is much more of a rupture than a continuity; and precisely because all of us, officers included, have a very slow, arduous path out of having our minds and hearts run by the patterns of prison; so the very same Presence—

who gifts us with signs of himself as Priest and Teacher, turning particular ex-cons into probation officers, counsellors and the like—this same Presence simultaneously gifts us with a strongly quizzical presumption concerning the officer being out of sync with what he's supposed to be about, and does so as part of the education of all of us in freedom.

All the phrases I have quoted above tend to encourage in us, as a normal part of healthy growth in the new Kingdom, an instinctive suspicion of religious leaders—a presumption of pretension until the contrary is demonstrated. They suggest that we are right, always, to ask of any religious teaching: “*Cui bono?*” Who does it benefit? If it is really from God, then it is for our benefit. Our benefit is the criterion of its Godliness. Maybe it will take time for us to understand why it is beneficial, because the freedom that is coming upon us is so difficult for us to imagine. Still, there is also the real possibility that such-and-such a teaching is just one of those things that may have seemed, and even been, helpful at one time, but is now being shown up as part of the prison structure of fake goodness, which we should learn to leave behind. The active and creative ability to discern in this area is an intrinsic part of the gift of life in the halfway house as it morphs into the banquet (see 1 Thessalonians 5:19: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic words; rather test everything, hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”)

I hope you can see how this ties in with the image of the restaurant with which we started. The really aristocratic guests do not despise their waiters, even as their relationship to them is undergirded with a giggle. The guests are aware of quite what a curious task the waiters have been given in appearing to face them from the same “side” as the chef. All of us undergo an arduous transformation of imagination and desire in our passage from the prison, through the halfway house, into ultimately becoming well-equipped ambassadors of the portal. But not all of us are commissioned to be signs of the portal’s draw to those alongside us within the halfway house, signs made alive as those commissioned, and those with whom they interact, blossom publicly into lives shaped as purification from fake goodness. Suppose the priestly vocation is to undertake the route from “magnificently decked-out offerer of sacrifice” to “visibly generous dweller in the victimary space of shame”. In that

case, it is fair to say that the life-story thrown up by a faithful traversing of that route will not lend itself to obvious charting. If the preacher's vocation is "Be a professional hypocrite, who will become an authentic sign of Christ in your publicly being set free from your own hypocrisy as a truthfulness not your own comes upon you", then it is fair to say that the calling does not come with a straightforward career path.

Conclusion

I apologise for this barrage of images. I have wanted to offer some ways into a less idolatrous living-out of the reality of Church. Every one of us is liable to be sifted by the shocking realisation at how easy it is to become enablers of a self-serving rhetoric which passes as "good" and "holy", and yet is entirely run by the pattern of desire that is proper to prison, tending towards lockdown. How easy it is, furthermore, to be fully committed to thinking we are acting as supervisors or educators from the halfway house, or even the embassy, while in fact we are the pigs of prison administration, gaudily decked out with lipstick borrowed from "Elsewhere". And every one of us is right, since part of our process of growing in life in the halfway house is learning to discern—gently, aristocratically—whether those who claim they are "serving" us or "teaching" us are in fact doing any such thing. It is part of our increasingly relaxed, non-rivalrous way of being in the halfway house: to be regularly quizzical as to whether it is, in fact, the One Master who is speaking himself into being through this or that official, this or that pronouncement. Maybe, even as the Master tries to nudge the officials (people like us and alongside us, whom he really rather likes) beyond cowardice tricked out as obedience—maybe, at the same time, his love, service and teaching (and his hilarity and the pathos which deepens it) are spilling past those officials to reach us through conduits whose freedom from self-importance are a better match for the message.

CHAPTER 11:

A Little Family Upheaval

You may remember how, in Chapter 1, we looked at this passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also God created the world. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

The passage started in a way which, whether we believed it or not, was a more or less recognisable form of discourse. However, pretty quickly, the author of the passage “jumped the shark” by telling us that the historical person to whom he was referring, Jesus, was somehow involved in the creation of the world—that everything had, in fact, been made through him. I compared this to a “Napoleon” moment: an apparently rational interlocutor suddenly slips into the conversation the matter-of-fact observation that he is, in fact, Napoleon, and then carries on unembarrassed, as though no normal listener would be phased by the revelation that l’empereur himself is addressing them.

Now, in this penultimate chapter, we are in a better position to make some sense of that apparent “Napoleon” moment. And, like all true crazies, rather than blushing and backing down from my little slip, I’m going to double down on it because it’s not just an incidental “extra” in the New Testament, which turns up in one or two fringe texts. It is explicitly mentioned in several places (John 1:1-2; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:15-20; Ephesians 1:3-14). At the end of this chapter, it might be interesting for you to look up some of these texts for yourself, to see if they make more sense after what you will be exposed to

in the following pages!) And implicitly—which means narratively—it turns up, as I will show you, right in the centre of everything. The vision that yields that “Napoleon” moment is central to the whole explosion of meaning which has thrown up the New Testament as its monument. I rather hope that, during our course, we’ve undergone enough shifts in our understanding that now we will be able to find ourselves on the inside of this vision without too much difficulty!

Let me just remind you briefly of one of those shifts, to prepare us for the delicacy of what I hope to introduce you to. You may remember that, when we looked at the Burning Bush passage in Chapter 4, I tried to bring out the difference between an I AM account and a “He, She or It is” account of God. A god who can be referred to as “He, She or It” very quickly becomes a function of our manipulation, an object about whom we can talk, or which we can describe. In doing so, we become the starting place, and the god in question fits in with our scheme of things, making us effectively the real “gods” in the story. With I AM, on the other hand, the starting place is not us, and cannot be grasped by us. We discover ourselves to be peripheral beings as I AM approaches us. In this latter account, the more time we spend in the presence of I AM, the more we are aware that, not only we ourselves, but everything that is, is shot through with what I might call “secondariness”: we catch a glimpse of ourselves as real, contingent, alive; we find ourselves reflecting back that we are held in being by something prior to us, something not at the same level as ourselves at all, not in rivalry with anything. This “secondariness” is not a form of diminishment or being put down, but an accurate and objective sense of createdness—something that can be relaxed into with gratitude.

Exploring “Secondariness”

In order to have a better sense of this “secondariness”, I’m going to ask you to spend a little more time inside the shift I’ve been setting out. I’m going to ask you to recall a couple of illustrations from our earlier chapters. In Chapter 6, I asked you to engage in the imaginative exercise of remembering a moment in your past in which you had been forgiven

for something. To help kick-start the exercise, I gave the example of little Johnny, who had stolen a Mars bar from Mrs O'Reilly's corner store. I asked what it was like for little Johnny to be brought back to the store and to be approached by Mrs O'Reilly. She was not so much forgiving of him as she was not offended by him in the first place: the loss of the Mars bar from her stock had scarcely registered as somehow an attack on her. So interested was she in little Johnny's well-being that she had interpreted his having stolen the Mars bar as a sign that there was something wrong. More than anything else, she wanted to ensure that he was okay.

For Johnny, the experience of being forgiven—and for him it was indeed being forgiven, since he knew perfectly well that he'd done something wrong and was expecting punishment—felt at first like a disorienting challenge. He found himself held in eyes that were looking at him from a completely unexpected perspective: eyes that were not part of any tit-for-tat, any system of control, or payback, or desert. And yet, as he allowed himself to be looked at by them, as he consented to their gaze, he found himself being let go from his own guilty weddedness to what he'd done, and taken into the space of a new friendship with Mrs O'Reilly—a new space in which he'd actually become someone he didn't yet know, part of a new "we" into which he was being invited.

The second illustration appeared in our last chapter, as part of my attempt to bring out the raucous, laughter-filled nature of the joy that is central to the heavenly banquet. I asked you to consider a form of laughter which is not cruel: the laughter which flows when someone is enabled to laugh at themselves. Like experiencing forgiveness, a healthy learning to laugh at yourself is a very delicate and rich experience. It involves learning to detect the laughing eyes of, say, a group of people you are with, as affectionate—not hostile, and not out to get you. So if you laugh along with them, you are not simply agreeing to be "put in your place", consenting to a cruel act of putting you down. Your laughing at yourself is not a subtle form of colluding with the gang of those who are against you, agreeing to your own lynching, as it were. On the contrary, you're able to intuit that the laughter in the eyes of the others is well-intentioned—that it likes you, rejoices in you, doesn't take you too seriously in some areas where maybe you've been tempted to take

yourself too seriously. Precisely because those merrily laughing eyes are looking at you with this affection, you find yourself able to accept their invitation to join in with their appreciation of you, to allow them to guide you in how you perceive yourself, to sit loose to whatever bits of self-importance were clouding your ability to join in with them. In fact, you are given the gift of being able to receive yourself back graciously and flexibly as part of a richer belonging with them. Far from being put down by this experience, you have been loosened up, opened to discovering how much more you are than you had thought, and how much more fun it is to be you with these other people than you had previously imagined.

I hope it is clear what these experiences have in common. Both little Johnny and the person learning to laugh at themselves started with some sense of self, which they more or less knew about and more or less held to. However, they found themselves undergoing a hugely healthy shift in perception, such that *who they are doesn't start with them*. Each of them starts to receive themselves from what is other—freely, and in a way which opens them out. Furthermore, each of them comes to perceive that this receiving of themselves through the eyes of others is something objective, real, and to be grateful for. Precisely because they are receiving themselves through the eyes of what is other than they, they glimpse that their own knowing, their own perceiving—formed as it is by that experience of receiving—is peripheral, is a symptom of something which doesn't start with them. In other words, there is a certain dependence—that “secondariness” I mentioned earlier, if you like—which corresponds to who they are, to their place in the world, to their way of learning about people and things. This secondariness does not go along with any sense of being “second rate” or “only second”. Instead, it is accompanied by a sense of relief and the possibility of opening out. The person undergoing this secondariness will find themselves becoming more than they had thought. Elements of their past, which seemed central and sources of fixity, if not fixation, are being relativised, and other elements of their past which had not seemed of importance or worth are gradually turning into having been, all along, unexplored, rich foundations for a direction, an achievement, and a shared flourishing that is only now opening up.

Let's hold these experiences of "secondariness" a moment longer, if we can, rather than rush through them and onto the next thing. Let's imagine that little Johnny spends time undergoing Mrs O'Reilly's generous move towards him, or that I spend time relishing the ways my friends are giving me back to myself by drawing me into their laughter at me in such a way that it enables me to laugh at myself. While I'm held in that experience, part of the aliveness of the moment in which I glimpse my "secondariness" is that it is a moment of someone else's presence towards me, which opens for me my own relationship to my past and to my future. The longer I'm held in their regard, the more easily I am able both to remember and to cope with my past, and to imagine a future to which I can aspire.

While I was just trudging along by myself, not catching myself in the regard of someone else, it was quite simple: my past was behind me, and there was nothing I could do about it. And my future was before me, and who knows what possible knocks or joys it would bring, other than the usual: death and taxes.

However, the experience of undergoing something in the present at the hands of someone much stronger than myself gives us something very curious: a sense, starting strictly in the present (which is the only moment at which I can be reached), that there is an outside to my past and to my future. On the one hand, my "becoming" is enlivened such that I experience being reached from a future that is not yet me but which is pulling me in; on the other hand, in ways I hadn't anticipated, my past is alive and flexible. Parts of it that seemed important were in fact heading nowhere, and surprising parts of it were already tending in a friendly way to whom I am now discovering myself to be. Who I thought I was, and who I think I am becoming, are both simultaneously altered by the quality of presence of the other who has moved alongside me—Mrs O'Reilly, or my group of raucous friends.

An Extra-planetary Interlude

To take this further, before exploring with you what's going on inside some New Testament narratives, I'm going to ask you to engage in a

further imaginative exercise. Please imagine that you are a large, complacent, bureaucratic ruler on a small, firm planet somewhere in space, rather like in one of those illustrations from *The Little Prince*. You are convinced that you are standing on stable ground, and appear to have good reason to think so. Things seem pretty regular. You govern all that you survey, dispensing order with what seems to you to be fairness, punishing the bad, and rewarding those who support you in keeping the good, good. You are able to deduce, from everything you can see, a considerable amount about how things work and how they should be. In line with that knowledge, you have made yourself, to your considerable satisfaction, the master of it all.

Now imagine that, in the far horizon of outer space, there appears a small dot. Not very important, really. However, this dot seems to grow, and grow, and grow. What was, in the first place, scarcely even an object of curiosity for you and your astronomers turns into something rather bigger. As it grows larger and larger, it also impinges upon and gradually fills out your field of vision. But in fact, the object is not growing: it is vastly bigger than your planet, an unimaginably large star that appears to be moving towards you at scarcely calculable speed. It seems to be moving out of nowhere, coming ever closer to your planet.

However, that is not what is going on at all. It is not *it* that has been moving towards *you*. On the contrary, *you* have been gradually pulled towards *it*. So big is it that its own movement is scarcely detectable, despite the fact that you are being drawn in by its gravitational pull. As you come closer to this star, its own gravitational forces adjust your planet to its orbit. This causes the axis of your planet to tip ever so slightly, completely throwing what had seemed like its stability and security. Now, all the dwellers on the planet begin to move in ways that—from your complacent, bureaucratic standpoint—are unexpected and unpredictable.

As your planet starts to undergo this new draw, finding itself in the train of a new direction, you—and of course your “grateful” subjects—begin to realise, as you look back at where you had been, that what had, up until now, seemed so stable and regular, so firm and predictable, was in fact no such thing. Up until the time when you started being drawn into the orbit of the colossal star—and way, way before you began to appreciate what was going on—the whole of your planet had already been

dangerously out of kilter: in a manner far beyond anything which your planet-bound, complacent, bureaucratic, powers might be able to control, your planet had been gradually tipping backwards into the maw of a black hole. This you can only begin to appreciate now, as you find yourself safely in the draw of the huge star, and can now look behind you to see what had really been going on. This is something which none of you, except for a few crazies whose opinions you had rubbed out and whom you had kept out of circulation, had even begun to perceive before.

As the draw of the gigantic star pulls the little planet further into its train, a new kind of regularity begins to emerge in your way of life: a regularity wholly dependent on a star of whose existence you had until recently been entirely ignorant. Imagine your shock, stable and complacent as you are, as you come to perceive how all the stability, all the order over which you thought you had been presiding, had in fact been so much fakery. Real stability and security looks like nothing less than a wild adventure of being drawn into the tail of this hugely powerful star. Neither you nor anybody who mattered on your planet had even come close to perceiving what had really been running your show before, when fixity seemed all, and movement seemed so threatening. The power of the black hole had been entirely invisible, even as it had been sucking you in.

So, there's something of a shock, yes—especially for you, since you were so invested in stability and order, in what had until just recently passed as goodness. But there is also the excitement—especially for those under you, many of whom had been burdened by your pretentious righteousness. You can imagine them, rather to your discomfort, beginning to rejoice as they discover parameters of existence and ways of being about which your rule had known nothing, and of which it would have heartily disapproved if it had. While you are in shock, they are adjusting remarkably quickly to the delight of finding themselves to be an unfinished project being drawn into the movement of the immensely powerful star, learning the ropes of who they are to become. You, on the other hand, are more or less paralysed, not sure whether to batten down the hatches, proclaim nothing has changed, and try to re-assert your control, or whether, in some way, and preferably without being too greatly humiliated, to get to grips with the new direction

of things. To lower your pretensions and allow yourself to join those whom you thought of as your subjects in being redefined by the unexpected star.

I've given you this image for two reasons. In the first place, it illustrates the change of perspective which occurs when what seemed like a not-particularly-significant object in your ken begins moving towards you, and turns out to be not so much an object as a vastly superior force moving you towards it. In other words, it illustrates the shift from an "it starts with me" perspective to a glimpse of that "secondariness" I've been trying to bring out.

But more specifically: in the illustration I've just given you, there is a particular moment of awareness which I've referred to as the "tipping of the axis". This is the moment when, as you are being shifted into the new perspective, you are able to look back at where you were coming from and see it in an entirely new light. "Oh my God, to think that I used to believe that was normal and stable! As I move out of that space, I can see what it was really like, something that was really grinding me down, sucking me out of being. And what enables me to glimpse this is the hugely more powerful draw which is pulling me into a much richer and more enlivened space". Simultaneously, there is, coming upon you, both a sense of delight at what you are becoming and a sense of shock at how wrong you were about what you now find yourself leaving behind. You are on the dynamic cusp of something where two different realities are peeling away from each other: one is spinning round on itself, turning down into futility and nothingness; the other, inside which you are beginning to discover yourself, is being spun open into a richer and more demanding participation in the life of something beyond itself.

A Non-moralistic Account of Sin and Original Sin

One of my reasons for giving you this planetary image (which, like all such images, is severely inadequate) is that it brings out something which can very easily get lost in presentations of Christianity. When we talk about what Jesus came to do, did, and is doing in our midst, *we are talking about what comes upon us as an alteration of the axis of Creation*,

rather than as the resolution of a moral problem. Our being brought close into the life of God by Jesus being a forgiving victim in our midst has this as its effect: that we perceive, simultaneously, where we used to be heading—into an ever-shrinking world run by revenge, envy and death—and where we are instead finding ourselves drawn: into being forgiven, forgiving, and thus being opened up into true, insider knowledge of Creation as it unfolds dynamically.

In the order of apparent logic, an “it” God created an “it” world in which we find ourselves. We do something wrong, and need forgiving by an “it” intervention which puts things right. In the order of discovery, we only discover the beginning through our experience in the middle: I AM is determined to make alive in us the wonder of being God, and so decides to involve us in the inside of Creation. Our access to being drawn into this insider status comes as we discover ourselves as “being forgiven”, having our basic paradigm for being human altogether undone from within by our forgiving victim hoiking us into a richer draw—or pattern of desire—than that which used to run us. From within this richer draw, we can see the futility of what we were holding onto before. We were, in fact, resisting being created, while holding instead to our futile security; we were locked into a way of being less than human, a way that depends on making victims.

Being forgiven is prior to being created. This is really what the very ancient Christian doctrine of “Original Sin” teaches. Far from it being a moralistic doctrine based on dodgy palaeontology and insufficient knowledge of genetics, it is the insistence on that very delicate “backward glance from the cusp of the new creation” as vital to any understanding of who we are finding ourselves to be and of how we should behave. To bring out what I mean by how non-moralistic this is, let’s go back to our complacent ruler on the planet.

In that image, two quite different understandings of sin are at work. Both are operative simultaneously. There is the sense of sin as worked out and held onto by the complacent ruler, the one by whom the people on the planet were controlled. This sense of sin, naturally enough, depends on the ruler starting from a stable sense of how things are, how they must be, and therefore what is right and what is wrong. Its starting point is obvious—provided you’re the ruler.

The second sense of sin comes from a very odd place. It comes from the feeling of shock which all those on the planet undergo as they find themselves summoned up into the new draw. They are enabled, from their new and entirely unexpected vantage point, to glance back at what they had thought of as stable and normal and see that, far from being stable and normal, it had gradually been tilting backwards into the maw of the black hole. So part of the sense of shock—which is also one of delight—is the realisation that they had in fact been completely self-deceived about what was really going on, what was really running them, what was really right and what was wrong.

Their reaction is something like this: “Wow! To think that we used to think living like *that* was normal! Only now are we beginning to sense how small and narrow were the confines we thought of as goodness, badness, righteousness, sin and who got to judge us, to give us our criteria. How impotent we were within that framework! It’s only now, from the seriously *unstable*-seeming but in fact massively *safe* place of finding ourselves hoiked into a completely new orbit, that we begin to get a sense of what’s really going on, who we really are, and what we are really becoming. Even our quite accurate sense that we often fall short of what we are really becoming looks quite unlike whatever it was that we thought of as sin in our previous orbit”.

I hope it is apparent to you that, of these two senses of sin, it is only the latter which has a real claim to being part of the Christian faith. And in case you think I’m making this up, rather than being the boringly predictable Catholic theologian that I think I am, then here is the huge star describing the effect of the draw, which will start to affect those on the planet as its axis tilts:

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Defence Counsellor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. And when He comes, He will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment; about sin, because they do not believe in me, about righteousness because I’m going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment because the ruler of this world has been judged. (John 16:7-11)

It could scarcely be clearer: there was a notion of sin and righteousness and judgment that was proper to our world. It was a notion in which the prosecuting counsel, the accuser, always tended to win. However, in the light of the draw from the huge star—a draw which goes as far as to call itself the Counsel for the Defence—our whole understanding of what sin is, what righteousness looks like and in what judgment consists will be completely reshaped.

The reason for this change-around is not arbitrary: it turns out that the victim of this world's judgment, sense of righteousness, and definition of sin was God himself. Those who perceive this—who find themselves able to recognise what was going on in the putting to death of Jesus, which means those who find themselves starting to look at themselves from the perspective of their own victim who is in fact forgiving them—those people are receiving a totally new perspective on what sin, righteousness and judgment look like, a perspective which flows towards them from the regard of the forgiving victim. In this perspective, *sin is known in its being forgiven*.

The Beginning in the Middle—Luke

Now that we have explored some of the dimensions of that “secondariness” which I mentioned, I think we are in a good position to look at some of the narrative ways in which the New Testament brings out how a particular human intervention in history was in fact the fulcrum which tips the axis—the fulcrum by which the Creator involves us as active participants in Creation. We'll look at Luke first, and then John.

You may remember that in the Book of Genesis, when Creation is still formless, and before there is any light, the Spirit moves over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1-2). Later, God creates Adam. But after a short time, Adam and Eve succumb to receiving their sense of “secondariness” through the eyes of the serpent, rather than through the eyes of God, and so start to imagine God as being in rivalry with them. This leads to the act of disobedience in which they try to become what they were always meant to be—gods—but do so in rivalry with God, rather than by allowing themselves to become gods held in gracious secondari-

ness by God. They need to grasp what is good and evil for themselves, and then to protect and hide themselves rather than trust the goodness of what they have been given and are. From this point, everything begins to wind down. Shortly before they are driven out of Eden, this prophecy is made: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

What we see in St Luke’s Passion narrative, en route to Jesus’ Crucifixion, is Genesis run backwards. After Jesus’ last eating of bread, he moves to the place by the Mount of Olives, which other Evangelists call Gethsemani. There, he prays: “Father, if you wish, take away this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) Rather than this being an insight into the psychology of the one praying—which is how modern readers are inclined to see it—I suggest that here, Jesus is standing in for Adam. He is putting right what Adam got wrong: the human pattern of desire, or will, is being drawn in once more to the Father’s pattern of desire. Shortly thereafter, we get this: “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like clots of blood falling down upon the ground.” (Luke 22:44) Hidden from us by our translations is a series of Hebrew puns concerning redness, blood, earth, and Adam, all of which are associated with the word “dam”. It is not that Jesus was sweating blood, but that the definitive “Adam’s sweat”, combined with reddish dust of the earth, looked like clots of blood, returning to the Earth whence it had come. In other words, Luke is indicating that here, the prophecy of Genesis 3, which we saw above, is being fulfilled: Adam’s being bound down into futility is being undone by the definitive Adam getting right what the first Adam got wrong.

Jesus then moves towards his Crucifixion. On the Cross, he indicates to the criminal who was being executed alongside him, and who we call the “good thief”: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43) This should be taken rather literally, as referring to the Garden before the Fall. The sense that the Book of Genesis is running backwards is brought out even more clearly in the next verses: “It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed.” (Luke 23:44) In

other words, the order of creation is running backwards, until we are prior to the moment when God made light. At that moment—and it could not be more appropriate—the symbol of the distinction between God creating everything out of nothing, and of the beginning of materiality, of everything that is, is torn: “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” (Luke 23:45) Now we are back at Genesis 1, before anything was created, and at this point: “Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said ‘Father into thy hands I commit my Spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.” (Luke 23:46) So finally, we are back to the Spirit hovering over the formless void of Genesis 1.

However, please note what has happened: in the Genesis story, the Spirit is portrayed as impersonal. By the time that Jesus breathes out his Spirit, the Spirit has a fully anthropological content. The Spirit of the Creator actually has shape: what the Creator looks like while creating is not what it appears to be from Genesis—an outside force arranging and ordering things out of some formlessness. What the Creator Spirit looks like, and is, is the pattern of desire of one who, in order to make it possible for us to live, occupies the space of being a dead person for us; one who has given themselves into the space of being a dead person before us out of love. This is not a space of “control” or “ordering” in any obvious sense; on the contrary, the power of the Creator has shown itself as personal in offering us the possibility of becoming persons from a position of complete powerlessness.

When Pentecost comes, a few weeks later, it comes as the full panoply of the New Creation, starting from a new, veil-less temple. This temple is henceforth to be made up of people from every language, tribe and nation who are being empowered to become humans through the presence in their midst of the open heavens—and, constantly available to them, the presence of the utterly alive forgiving victim.

Please notice what has happened: the real beginning has made itself present in what, for us, is the middle. This appearance of the real beginning in the middle resembles, and is, a painful upheaval—especially since it is the ability to occupy the space of shame and death that has tipped the axis of creation. But those who are able to occupy that space are, in fact, undergoing the shift of the planetary axis such that the real beginning, which is also the real purpose or end of everything,

is being made real in them now. Here is St Paul, making the same point in his own language:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole Creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the Creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:18-23)

I hope you can see the sense of living on the cusp of two realities: Creation is referred to as something which has been opened up, and which is drawing us into it with great zest. And at the same time, it turns out to have been spinning round and turning in on itself in futility, unaware of what it was destined to become. The axis-turning moment—the present moment, in which we are living—feels like an upheaval full of suffering, which is in fact an act of childbirth. Through it, the Creator, I AM, is bringing into being secondary I AMs—sons and daughters, the “gods” we were promised we would be—as our very bodies are drawn into being insider sharers of the life of God.

The Beginning in the Middle—John

Now, let us look at how St John narrates this same sense of a futile creation winding down, and of the real creation happening now. In Chapter 20, after the Crucifixion and burial of Jesus, it is now the first day of the week. Here, too, we are being tipped off that what is about to be described is somehow linked to the early verses of Genesis. This impression is deepened by the fact that there is, as yet, no light: “it was still dark”. After Peter and the Beloved Disciple have visited the tomb

and seen that it is empty, they go home. Mary, however, stands weeping outside the tomb, and then stoops to look inside. What she sees there are two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

So, in John, it is not the veil of the temple that is torn, thus transporting us outside the realm of creation. Rather, the open tomb turns out to be the now-vacated Holy of Holies. In the Holy of Holies, the seraphim were on either side of the Mercy Seat, where the Presence of God rested. This is precisely where the angels are in John, except they are now resting beside a vacated Mercy Seat. The Presence is elsewhere. The angels, reasonably enough, wonder why Mary is weeping. After all, from their point of view, Eve is now inside the garden again, for the Holy of Holies and the Garden of Eden are the same thing. Eve had been excluded from the garden, and cherubim armed with swords had turned “this way and that” and been posted over the entrance (Genesis 3:24). That would be a motive for weeping. But that exclusion from the Garden has now been undone.

Nevertheless, here in this scene of staggered vision, where nothing is quite as it seems, Mary Magdalene doesn’t exactly know where she is, confusing this place with a place in which there might actually be a dead person to find. She turns and sees an unrecognisable Jesus, who addresses her as “Woman”—or Eve. She wonders whether it is the gardener or Adam. It might also be YHWH wandering in the garden in the cool of the day. And it is indeed both of these, but not as she could imagine them. But then, Jesus addresses her by her name: Mary. And she recognises who He is by what she hears. She turns again. In fact, in this narrative, she is like the sword of the cherubim from Genesis, turning “this way and that”. Nevertheless, what she hears is still part of what was before his death; she hears and responds to “My teacher”.

We are still not quite yet in the New Creation. This is brought out when Jesus tells her: “Do not touch me”. You may remember that, in Genesis, God told the earthling, before he was divided into Adam and Eve, that he could eat of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God didn’t mention anything at all about not touching it. However, when the serpent enquires of Eve about what God had said, Eve embellished the instruction somewhat:

We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.” (Genesis 3:2-3).

In her enthusiasm, she has added the bit about not touching the tree. So, in John’s Garden, Jesus is taking her back to before that time, undoing Eve’s confused excitement. In this staggered vision of Genesis running down, he is still something of a corpse which, according to Numbers 19, should not be touched—still something of an object, rather than pure protagonist. He is not yet the Forgiving Victim who can show his hands and side. It is only when he has gone to his Father that he will open up the space of the New Creation completely. Genesis will cease to run backwards, and everything can move forward.

And so it is, towards the end of the first day, that we come to the room behind closed doors where the disciples are meeting. This first day now stretches backwards from an evening in Jerusalem until the beginning of the second chapter of Genesis, for that is the day that is at last being brought to fruition. And in the midst of the room—in the midst not of myth nor of narratives from the past, but of history and fear and tension—the Lord God appears. First, He announces peace. Then, He reveals his hands and his side: this is the forgiving victim, the Lamb slaughtered before the foundation of the world. Then He announces peace again and says: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21) The beginning has become contemporary; creation is now.

To prove this, Jesus then breathes into the disciples. The word is exactly the same word by which, in Genesis 2:7, the Lord God breathes into the nostrils of the earthling, who thus becomes a living being (see John 20:22: *ένεφύσησεν*). Here, however, the breath which is breathed into them is described not as “breath of life” but as “Holy Spirit”, and with it comes the ability to forgive or to hold. In other words, exactly as with Luke, it turns out that the Spirit from creation is in fact the Spirit of the Forgiving Victim, and that it is in the degree to which we allow ourselves to be enlivened by the Spirit of the Forgiving Victim that we participate as insiders in the opening-out of creation.

This sense of the cusp between the “not yet” and the “now” is shown by the parallelism between Mary Magdalene—who can’t rec-

ognise Jesus clearly, who hears his voice, calls Him “My Master”, and is urged not to touch him yet—and Thomas, who, a full week into the New Creation, sees Him, recognises Him clearly thanks to the wounds of the forgiving victim, is then invited to touch Him, and calls Him “My Lord and My God.” (John 20:28) Furthermore, the touching takes the form of Thomas placing his hand in Jesus’ side. In Genesis, just in case we had forgotten, it is from Adam’s side that a portion is taken and filled out with flesh. Those who receive the breath, and live according to the Spirit of the Forgiving Victim, are in fact becoming the flesh of the New Adam—Creation is strictly contemporary.

What I’ve wanted to bring out from these central Christian texts is how removed they are from seeing “Creation” as having been “a long time ago”, and God as only intervening moralistically among us by Jesus’ death, some time later, to sort out the problem of sin. The early Christian texts show something much richer than that: the true narrative of Creation is to be found in the account of Jesus’ death and Resurrection, where the definitive Adam emerges as a forgiving victim, thus opening up the possibility of our sharing in something utterly non-futile: Creation. At the same time, we can see everything which came before as folding back on itself in futility: the off-kilter planet being sucked into the maw of a black hole, while all along it was being reached towards in hope by a future of which it had no idea. The forgiveness of our sins, rather than being in the first instance a moralistic matter, is what it looks like for us that the Deathless One has opened up the battened-down culture which eventually makes outsiders of us all; the Forgiving Victim dares us to aspire to be valued insiders in the adventure of Creation, starting from our place on the cusp of the shifting axis. From Mrs O’Reilly’s perspective, forgiving Johnny was scarcely on her mind at all in the depth of her concern for him, her longing that he be able to share something much bigger with her. For little Johnny, locked in fear and resentment at what he’d done, allowing himself to be forgiven was the *sine qua non* of his being on the inside of the new “we” at all.

There is something peace-inspiring about the sheer hugeness of something coming into our ken. Like the sense of peace and majesty which comes upon those wrestling with the rigging of a small sailing vessel as a vast ocean liner comes alongside. However, where the planetary image I have been using is weak is that this peace is given off by the imperturbable hugeness of an impersonal “it”, rather than being part of what we receive from the imperturbable hugeness of I AM coming toward us.

Cast your mind back to the defining moment of Creation in St John’s Gospel: it comes when the Presence appears in—irrupts into—the locked room where the frightened disciples had gathered. The Presence announces “Peace” before and after showing Himself. Completely swathed in the peace out of which He has emerged, He shows his hands and side. By showing Himself in this way, non-verbally, I AM identifies Himself as the Risen Victim, dwelling in the midst of—coming from and giving off—all the peace that comes from before the foundation of the world. I AM then breathes life into the disciples: the Holy Spirit, which turns out to be the contagion of forgiveness flowing from the Risen Victim who is forgiveness.

What I would like to bring out here is the strange confluence of hugeness and banality in what is going on: the culminating theophany in which the very Presence of YHWH, the Creator, allows itself to be glimpsed in its most finely tuned form as “I AM, the Forgiving Victim from before the foundation of the world”; the fullest vision of all the power, splendour, weight, gravity, hugeness and majesty of the heavenly Presence creating humans. This takes place not on some suitably majestic mountain, nor even in a gloriously arrayed temple sanctuary, but instead in a hideaway, whose locked status “for fear of the Jews” is almost a parody of the veiled Holy Place of the Temple, for who did not fear to enter there?

This strange confluence of hugeness and the apparent banality of the everyday seems to me central to our understanding of what is meant by Incarnation. You may remember that, in Chapter 6, I pointed out to you some ways in which Luke depicts Mary, Jesus’ mother. This ordinary girl with marriage plans finds herself invited to be the portal

through which Creation out of Nothing takes place, to be in historical fact what had been symbolised by the Tabernacle overshadowed by the Presence of the Most High: the verb here translated as “overshadowed” in Luke 1:35 is the same as in Exodus 40:35, in the description of the Tabernacle. When pregnant Mary goes to visit her more heavily pregnant cousin Elizabeth—and what could be more domestic?—, the unborn John the Baptist dances in her womb, as David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, and Elizabeth cries out in the voice of the Levites recognising the Ark. Soon, the family goes to the Temple in Jerusalem for the most simple of rites, and only two aged weirdos, Ana and Simeon, see what has really happened: God has come suddenly to his Temple, fulfilling what the prophet Malachi foretold. At the same time (of course), the priests and temple authorities are far too busy keeping the show on the road to perceive the de-centred theophany.

The fascinating thing about the New Testament account is that it does not puff up the Virgin Mary by projecting her backwards, making her as glorious as the Temple artefacts of yesteryear—using her to reinstate them, as it were. On the contrary, it is as though we need to be led out of our fascination with the sacred kitsch of yesteryear if we are to perceive—irrupting in our midst, in and as history—all the real weight and glory to which, as we suppose, those artefacts once pointed. In an ordinary theatre production, initial rehearsals are done in street clothes, with more costumes and props introduced as the rehearsals progress, leading up to all being made ready for the dress rehearsal, where full makeup is worn. Finally, the first and subsequent performances are enacted with the full panoply of kitsch passing as what is real. The incarnation of YHWH into history follows the exact reverse route: the kitsch and the makeup were all in the rehearsals, and are gradually stripped down the closer we get to the real enactment. The real thing happens in street clothes, in a way the set designers and prop managers could scarcely recognise. The true grandeur is more visible in the apparent banality of this off-centre acting-out than it ever was among the theatre props of old.

And here it really is worth our while to spend a little time with Mary, for if there is any way at all that we can understand the things I’ve been trying to point towards in this chapter, it is in her company. Her

personal history is one of being stretched out of myth and into history. There is a continuity between the old Creation and the new—between the Old Israel and its institutions, and the new—that is lived out by Mary being stretched by what is done in her as she provides the flesh for the Lord God to come among his people; and then in what is done to her as the Lord God works among his people. She is the first and most complete example of that “secondariness” I’ve been trying to bring out in this chapter, receiving who she is through the regard of the Presence that has come into history through her.

In Luke’s Gospel, where she enters the story as the moment when all the artefacts and prophecies become history, she quickly becomes the one who is told that a sword will pierce her heart, and as things develop “she stores all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Later, she undergoes a further stretching in her own apparent relativisation at the hands of her son:

Then his mother and his brothers came to Him, but they could not reach Him because of the crowd. And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:19-21)

Only someone who was very secure in being held in their secondariness could undergo such an experience without wanting to grasp onto being special. But Mary is not in rivalry with the huge elective family her son is bringing into being, not humiliated by the evident collapse of generations into one single contemporary generation which Jesus is producing.

At the beginning of Acts, we glimpse her again. At first, she is named as one of the group who gather for prayer after Jesus’ Ascension, before Pentecost. But by the day of Pentecost, she, like all the others, is included but no longer named: “They were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). For those who are born again on Pentecost are all of the same generation. Mary’s motherhood of Jesus has been stretched into her being the sister to her son’s new sisters and brothers. The one who provided the raw material for the New Creation has become an insider within that new creation.

Or, as Dante says it:

Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio,
umile e alta più che creatura,
termine fisso d'eterno consiglio,

tu se' colei che l'umana natura
nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo fattore
non disdegno di farsi sua fattura.

(*Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 1-6)

(Maiden yet a Mother, daughter of your son; at once the most humble of creatures yet higher than them all; for in you the plan from before all time rests as in its final end; So much did you enoble human nature, that its creator had no second thoughts about becoming its creature.)

John tells us the same thing in a slightly different way. In the immediate run-up to Jesus' death, several things happen as the ancient Atonement rite is fulfilled by being stretched out of theatre and into history: Jesus' garments are divided among the soldiers—except for his tunic, which is explicitly described as without seam, and woven from top to bottom. This is a description of the high priestly vestment, which is woven in the same manner as the Temple Veil. Over this garment, the soldiers cast lots, reminding us that the High Priest would have cast lots to decide which of the unblemished lambs would get to stand in for YHWH and which for Azazel.

Shortly after this moment, Jesus is going to announce that he thirsts, and will be given vinegar to drink, thus bringing together the way in which the priests consumed the “portion of the Lord”—the entrails of the lamb they had slaughtered—with the help of vinegar (John 19:28-29). And he will then announce, “it is completed”, “finished”, “consummated”, or “settled by sacrifice”—all of these translations bring out elements which underlie Jesus' last word in John's Gospel (John 19:30).

In between these two moments in which Jesus fulfilled elements of the rite, there is an apparent interlude in which Jesus' mother, his mother's sister (Mary the wife of Clopas), Mary Magdalene, and the beloved disciple are found standing close to the cross: a mixture of people from both Jesus' family of birth and his elective family.

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:26-27)

This exchange is often read as though Jesus were addressing his mother, pointing her, perhaps with a slight nod of the head, towards the beloved disciple, whom he thus indicates should now be treated by her as her son. He then addresses the beloved disciple and, again with a nod of his head, indicates to the disciple that Mary should now be treated as his mother. I wonder, however, whether that is really what is going on here. It would be very much part of John's style to indicate something rather richer than a little last moment "family arrangements for when I'm gone" scene.

To me, it makes much more sense that, within this scene by the cross, John is exploring the image of "travail"—or birth-giving—which he used before when Jesus was preparing his disciples for his forthcoming execution:

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:20-22)

If that is the case, then I wonder whether it isn't better to read both uses of "behold" in the scene by the cross as drawing the eyes of the person being addressed *to Jesus*. He is urging his mother—whom

he here greets as “Woman”, as though she were Eve—to behold Him, her son. In doing so, He is both indicating the old creation going out of being, which is killing her son, and indicating to her that she is in travail with Him for a birthing that is taking place now. Then, he draws the eyes of the beloved disciple towards Himself *as mother*, indicating that in His going to death, He is bringing to birth a new family. From that hour, a new family is being born, and it makes perfect sense for the relationship of Mary and the beloved disciple to be recast as one in which they are of the same generation. The elective family which has been brought into being by Jesus’ birthing stretches towards and welcomes into it the woman whose motherhood was both honoured and yet emptied of any cultural meaning as it was stretched into a sisterhood in the new creation.

Isaiah had already foreseen something along these lines in a passage to which the image of “travail” seems to refer:

Before she was in labour she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she was delivered of a son. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labour she brought forth her sons. (Isaiah 66:7-8)

This sense of Jesus Himself being involved in giving birth, producing the new generation of those who are on a complete level of equality with Himself, is further brought out when, after his death, a soldier pierces his side with a spear: “And at once there came out blood and water.” (John 19:34b) This is remarkably like the appearance of afterbirth. If this were not enough, we can still be sure that John is trying to show us that a new kind of family has been brought into existence by these events, since when Jesus speaks to Mary Magdalene in the Garden, He tells her: “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (John 20:17) This is the first time in the Gospel that Jesus refers to his brethren as “my brethren”. More significantly, while He has frequently referred to God as his Father, never before in John’s Gospel was there any indication that God was, properly speaking, the father of anyone else. In going to his death, having become the mother of the new

generation of brethren, Jesus has opened out the possibility for them to be sons and daughters of God, for God to be their Father in exactly the same way that he was Jesus' Father.

However, please notice once again what has happened: all the grandeur of Creation has erupted quietly into some very subtle changes of relationship among very ordinary people. This is a constant throughout the Gospels. What is being birthed is a new family, one in which the elective has a huge priority over the biological. In this new family, there are no fathers, and no one is to be called father. Biological progenitors are intergenerational brothers. Cultural paternity is very much part of the planet that was winding down into futility, part of the reach into our lives of the maw of the black hole that was sucking us out of being.

Instead, we find ourselves being brought into a new family, all of the same generation: all of us sisters and brothers are becoming secondary beacons of I AM—which means to say, all of us finding ourselves living out being Sons and Daughters of the Father as we learn to live out being sisters and brothers to each other. And we find that Jesus is both in the midst of us as Presence, in whose regard we are beginning to glow, and that we are in the midst of Him—becoming Him, without thereby being displaced or becoming any less ourselves.

Furthermore, this creation of a new family doesn't happen by decree, anonymously. It happens by ordinary, named individuals finding themselves drawn out—thanks to the words and examples of other named individuals—from being tied down into the various forms of cultural togetherness that are going nowhere and to which we so often attribute such a sacred worth. Instead, they find themselves, over time, undergoing the process of being adopted into a new, elective family, which may even include some of their family of birth—but with the relationships quite transformed.

This happens slowly, gently, and with enormous patience and affection, since what looks like an enormous upheaval for us is only the space needed for God's smile to break through the sadness of our angry futility. This, for me, is one of the reasons it is so good to remember the slowness, the gentleness, the stretched-ness of God's regard, which brings into being with joy. This regard is most memorably reflected back on us by the presence within the new family—sometimes called

the communion of saints—of our living sister, the Mother of God, she who birthed the One who birthed her: a gentleness and a patience, undergirded with joy, by which, even in the midst of violence, murder and mayhem, she patiently helps us undo the knots that tie us into the old creation, so as to help us reflect the new.

But please, don't be put off by the pious-sounding language of the “communion of saints”. This is simply a way of referring to the elective family of named persons within history who know and like each other, starting within very ordinary sets of relationships. These people have found that all the joy of the new creation has been birthed in them as they have undergone a shift in their relationships with each other, empowered by the forgiving victim to step out of rivalry, revenge and resentment in all its glorious-seeming cultural masks, and to run instead the risk of being held together only by the light that flows from the lamb:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundred-fold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. (Mark 10:29-31)

I hope it is clear how all we have been looking at here is of a piece with something we glimpsed in Chapter 2: we saw two disciples—one named Cleophas and one unnamed—walking on the road to Emmaus. I wanted to call the unnamed disciple “N” or “Name to be supplied”, so that any one of us might inscribe our name into the story alongside Cleophas.

I hope you can now see that “N” matters more than may have seemed the case. Luke was not setting out a formal recipe for the involvement of yet-to-be-named individuals in an automatic mechanism; he was setting out an invitation by which we may find ourselves as named members of a real family, creating real and lasting ties, and discovering who we really are in the presence of the Forgiving Victim, around the One who, in revealing Himself to us, not only enlightens us but lightens us up into being transmitters both of lightness and of light.

CHAPTER 12:

Neighbours and Insiders: What's It Like to Dwell in a Non-moralistic Commandment?

We have at least reached our final chapter, the one where I told you I would trespass onto the terrain of morality. You will agree, I hope, that up until now I have avoided not only morality, but even the appearance of morality. From the beginning, I have been trying to insist on something which every presenter of the Christian faith knows in principle, which is that Christianity is a religion of grace, not of laws or morals.

Unfortunately, presentations of the Christian faith often collapse back fairly quickly into pointing people towards a religion of laws, or morals: one in whose basic storyline God created everything good, humans fell, and then Jesus came to put that right. That's usually the moment when grace appears in the story. However, in some presentations, after Jesus has put everything right, all that is left for us to do is behave well according to a pre-existing code which we must just accept. After an initial conversion experience, such “grace” as we might encounter turns out to be some sort of power, enabling weak-willed individuals to stick to pre-established rules.

I hope it is by now obvious to you that a presentation of this sort is not helpful. An account of faith which postulates a mysterious event in the past leading to painful morals in the present reveals its distance from the original by making Christianity boring. That, above all, is the trap I've been trying to avoid. Instead, I have been attempting to set before you a rather different take on the same events: one in which a rambunctiously Alive One—the one I have described as “the other Other”, effervescent beyond words—comes rushing towards us, taking us by surprise, undoing us from bonds we scarcely knew were there, and bringing us to life.

In this picture, the Alive One turns out to be drawing us into himself, opening us up to the realisation that where we were before was dangerously out of kilter. Now Creation—rather than being a boring “given” somewhere in the background—is something towards which we find ourselves being fascinatingly drawn by a “not yet” that is both given to and beyond us, rather than by something “already fixed” that is behind us. Our route from the “dangerously out of kilter” place of something constantly tending to close down, and towards the rich, fascinating, solid “not yet” that is opening up for us, passes through the breaking-open of our hearts. That breaking-open of our hearts, so as to make room for larger hearts, is the effect in our lives of the forgiveness of sins.

In this picture, it’s the new way of being which is coming upon us, which leads to a new way of behaving. And that is very much the approach to be found in the New Testament. In Paul’s letters, the approach is not “Do X, and then you will become Y”, but rather “Because you are finding yourselves X, so do Y”. So, for instance:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on Earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you. (Colossians 3:1-5. Paul argues similarly in Romans 6:3-14)

The understanding is pretty clear: something happens that takes us somewhere quite new. As we find ourselves on the inside of the new life, allowing our imaginations to be re-jigged, so the ways of behaving which flow from that new life become second nature to us, and we are able to ditch those which don’t flow from it. What we are becoming comes first, and the transformation of our behaviour flows from that.

This makes sense to me: it is as I discover myself on the inside of a new way of being that I find out the meaning, and the richness, of different ways of behaving. Indeed, we find ourselves on the inside of discovering for ourselves quite why these new ways of behaving corre-

spond to our Creator's richest and deepest loving intentions for us. In other words, there is something genuinely exciting about learning to be fascinated by a goodness we didn't know.

And this, of course, has been the whole burden of this course: how it is that someone coming towards us, and into our midst, catches us by surprise and enables us to be turned into ... *ourselves-for-each-other*—something much richer and more zest-inspiring than we could guess while we thought we knew who we were. The very reverse of boring!

WWJD

To kickstart our look at the shape of good living which flows from the Christian faith, I'm going to be polemical with a little tag, which is often used as a quick guide to Christian morality. The tag “What Would Jesus Do?”

Many of you will have heard this before. In fact, there was a period when many people wore bangles or wristbands with “WWJD” inscribed on them, as a reminder of their moral compass. I've been told that, though these wristbands were very popular in the United States before the events of September 11th, 2001, their sales declined precipitously thereafter. Presumably, because it was pretty clear that blind revenge, pre-emptive warfare, legitimating torture, and lying about weapons of mass destruction were not What Jesus Would Do.

But, to the phrase itself: “What Would Jesus Do?” I think it has a certain positive value, as a moral guide, since its first demand is that you should remember stories. Any answer to “What would Jesus do?” is always going to take the questioner back to stories in which Jesus interacts with people: “Jesus would do what he did with the woman taken in adultery, or with the moneychangers in the Temple, or with his executioners. He would act according to the stories he told about the two people praying in the Temple, or the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son”. This, as I understand it, is the positive value of asking “What Would Jesus Do?”: it pushes us into remembering stories, and into thinking our way into situations with the help of those stories.

However, I think there is also a less helpful element to the tag—an implicit presupposition. After all, the phrase, “What Would Jesus Do?” is only half a sentence. The unsaid second half is “If He Were Here”. In other words, the tag presupposes that Jesus isn’t here. And this means that the person who is saying “WWJD” is working out of a space something like this: “Look, I’m on my own, I’ve got to take responsibility for getting something right, and I’ve somehow got to work out what Jesus would do if he were here, which He isn’t, and then push myself into doing it”. I hope you can see that this takes us straight back to a world in which working at morals presumes absence and a straining of the will.

What we’ll be looking at, however, is what I would call a *presumption of presence* rather than a presumption of absence. From this perspective, the question is not “What Would Jesus Do?”, but “What is Jesus doing?” This is, of course, both a much more difficult and a much more interesting question to answer. For the answer to this second question—which might also be framed as “What is it like to live according to the Spirit which Jesus is breathing into us?”—requires us to be alive to all the things we’ve been looking at through all these chapters. Things like being approached by improbable people with foreign accents on strange roads who turn your story upside down; things like being forgiven, totally unexpectedly, by your victim, and therefore dragged into re-imagining your world as you find yourself being given to be someone you never thought you might become. As you can imagine, thinking through this second question—“What is Jesus doing?”—takes much more time and is not so easy to sort out quickly.

So, what is Jesus doing? By beginning with this presumption of presence, I’m going to explore how we learn to sink into, or develop, a habitual sensitivity to a certain form of imitation, to the being challenged by the mode of Jesus’ presence, which we saw in our Emmaus chapter. As I become acclimatised to this habitual sensitivity, I can learn to discern what Jesus is doing under my current circumstances. Just as he continues to give me his body, entrusting me to take it where I will and to make of it what I will, so can I give my body to Him, to carry on doing what He is doing. In doing this, I’m being drawn into a flexible imitation of Him. I’m not imitating him mechanically. Instead, I’m imitating him creatively: “Oh, yes, I can see that this is what he’s doing now, and I’m getting to be

on the inside of it. It's just like what he was doing in the past, but in very changed circumstances. The past serves as my reference point, as it were, a banister to hold onto, as I check that I am indeed on the inside of what he's doing now, being carried up into his project; that I am indeed, to use Jesus' own language, his friend, rather than his servant".

Luke's Testimony: The Lawyer's Question

To give you a clearer sense of what I'm talking about, we're going to look at the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The context of the parable gives us a good frame:

Just then a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Inheriting eternal life" is a more interesting phrase than simply another way of saying "What must I do to go to heaven?" Inheriting is what the ultimate insiders did (in those days, sons, but not daughters) and "eternal life" was a way of referring to the life of God. So St Luke frames the parable as a discussion of what it looks like to become an insider in the life of God.

First, the lawyer sets out his challenge: what sort of complex answer will Jesus come up with? In fact, Jesus remits the lawyer to something entirely non-esoteric, something entirely public and available to any listener:

He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?"

Knowing perfectly well that the texts of the law can be made to say many things, Jesus asks the lawyer not only *what* the text says, but also *how he* interprets the law. (The Greek, followed by the majority of translations, gives, "How do you read?" The NRSV, idiosyncratically, gives, "What do you read there?")

The lawyer answers very properly, not by quoting a single text but by putting together two texts from two different books of the Torah. The first is from Deuteronomy 6:5:

...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

The second is from Leviticus 19:18:

... you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

So the lawyer makes an act of legal interpretation, bringing together two laws in such a way that they interpret each other: what it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God is to be stretched towards God with every faculty of your being, and the form this takes is being stretched towards your neighbour.

Jesus commends the lawyer. He is not only a good lawyer, he has good moral sense as well, since he has made an act of interpretation which, while it was probably not innovative, is—in the different variants in which it has reached us—definitive: He has turned two different commandments into one single commandment which will never be abrogated. Henceforth, being on the inside of the life of God and being stretched lovingly towards my neighbour can never be separated. This is not merely a moralistic matter; it shows a firm anthropological insight: we are animals whose “selves” are brought into being through our relationships with others. We are reflexive. So how we treat our neighbours and how we treat ourselves are inescapably linked, and no amount of either apparent egoism or of fake altruism can do anything other than disguise this fact from us! Thus, indeed, our only access to finding ourselves loved is through our learning to love someone else.

And Jesus said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this, and you will live.”

The lawyer, however, wanted to take the matter further:

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

I wonder what Luke means when he says that the lawyer wanted to justify himself. It's a curious phrase, and the sentiment occurs several times in this Gospel, with the sense of a person who wants to make themselves good in their own eyes. Here, it is not clear whether the lawyer thought he was asking a difficult question and was expecting a more complex answer. Perhaps he was somewhat underwhelmed when Jesus, having drawn from him a fairly succinct answer to his own question, simply commended him. Imagine: you try to challenge someone with a potentially complex technical question and clearly, by your demeanour and style, expect a detailed answer which will flatter you for being intelligent, as well as expose possible weak flanks in your interlocutor's approach to things. Your interlocutor hears you out, and then, after a deep-looking pause, simply answers: "Yes, I agree". Well, it takes the wind out of your sails, and your colleagues giggle at you: the class clever-clogs who tried to catch the teacher out, but ended up firmly but gently put in your place.

Or maybe the point of the lawyer's original question—literally, "Doing what, will I inherit eternal life?"—was that he wanted an answer that gave him a specific "What's the legal minimum necessary?" In other words, when Luke says that the lawyer wanted to justify himself, maybe what the lawyer wanted was a more immediately applicable answer to his question—the sort of instruction that someone can "get right", fill in the right boxes, thereby becoming one of the good guys. If that's what he wanted, then an answer that sets out the overall framework but leaves a huge field for the hard work of interpretation and application to life situations would not meet his need.

In any case, the lawyer has a follow-up question, and it is by no means stupid. He is not merely asking Jesus to be more specific; he is asking a reasonable legal question about the interpretation of Leviticus 19, whence the second part of his own answer had been drawn. For the verse from which the lawyer had culled the phrase "and your neighbour as yourself" contains more than the part he had quoted. In full, it reads:

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18)

Here, the word “neighbour” appears to refer to “the sons of your own people”—fellow Hebrews.

What makes the lawyer’s question legally interesting is not that the bit of Leviticus which he quotes has a circumscribed meaning, but precisely the reverse: a few verses later, in the same chapter of Leviticus, following on a number of commandments to do with intermingling cattle, sex with slaves, hair trimming, witchcraft, and respect for old age, we get the following:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:33-4)

So Leviticus appears to interpret itself, for the same phrase “You shall love him as yourself”, which was previously applied to the word “neighbour”, here acquires a new density: the stranger who sojourns among you is declared to be the exact legal equivalent of one of the “sons of your own people”, and therefore a neighbour in the strict sense of the commandment. In other words, the text of Leviticus seems to be heading in the direction of the term “neighbour” becoming universal, and that is legally worrying since, if everyone is your neighbour, then the term “neighbour” no longer has any precise legal meaning at all. How are you to know if you are obeying a commandment when it has no precise meaning?

It appears, then, that our lawyer is actually asking Jesus to interpret Leviticus, urging him to flesh out the relationship between being on the inside of the life of God, and the discussion concerning applicable forms of neighbourliness. And Jesus agrees to take the matter on:

And taking him up, Jesus said (...)

The Greek is interesting: of the possible words or phrases for “reply”, the one used is not the more contestatory, “in your face” sort of reply, but rather the kind that a legal authority would give who had

agreed to take on the matter. In other words, Jesus is not here showing the lawyer up. Rather, he's saying "OK, you're on. Let's see where we can take this". The parable that follows is his acceptance of the challenge simultaneously to show what it is like to be on the inside of the life of God, and to interpret Leviticus well in the matter of the neighbour.

Let us read it:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

So, here is the setting. The man is unspecified. It is not evident that he was a Hebrew, merely that he was a human. Whatever sort of human he was, he fell into the hands of people who did not discriminate between "sons of your people" and "sojourners in your land"—they were disobedient to Leviticus under any of its interpretations.

Their proximity to him was of entirely the wrong sort.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

I particularly like the word "by chance". It, too, forms part of the answer to the question. Nothing in Jesus' story is stable or ordered; everything is fluid and contingent. Whatever the teaching to be derived from this parable, it will have to do with navigating the fluxes not of what should be, but of what just happens.

The priest was, as it happens, going down the road. Interestingly, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is downhill, so the priest was in fact going away from Jerusalem, and towards Jericho. In other words, he wasn't on his way to his Temple duties in Jerusalem. And the text doesn't tell us anything about the psychology of his motivation in passing by on the other side. It doesn't say that he was disgusted, or a coward, or in a hurry. Merely that he was a priest and that, seeing the wounded one, he passed by on the other side.

There were, in fact, perfectly respectable reasons for a priest to pass by. The man had been left half dead, and that means it would not be obvious, without going close to him and perhaps turning him over, whether he was dead or not. In any case, there was certainly blood all over the place, and if you were a priest, you had pressing professional reasons to avoid being close to a corpse or to spilt blood. In fact, central to the whole holiness code and the life of the Holy of Holies in the Temple was that it was a place utterly removed from death. The priests, whose ordination included the notion of a “resurrection” by which they became sharers in angelic life, must have nothing to do with corpses and their corruption, or blood other than that of sacrificial beasts. Indeed, a priest’s ability to serve God in the Holy Place would have been severely impaired by such contact, and he would have to undergo a complicated series of ablutions if he had touched an unclean thing. (All this is set out in Leviticus 21 and 22, not at all far from our passage).

So the Priest—and similarly, but to a lesser extent, the Levite—both had quite solid motives for giving a wide berth to the potential corpse by the side of the road. The potential corpse either might, or definitely would, impede their service of God. In fact, it was an obstacle to being on the inside of the life of God as enacted liturgically in the Holy Place. You can imagine them, maybe without any personal sense of disgust or fear of corpses, or any psychological issues to do with hygiene and contagion, thinking entirely in good conscience “I do hope someone else comes by soon to attend to the poor fellow, if it isn’t already too late for him. In fact, if the mobile phone had been invented, I would call a non-priestly friend for backup. However, my role in life is clear: it is to serve God in his Holy Place, and share in his life by my anointed service, and I shouldn’t let this accident, this unfortunate happenstance, upset the true order of the world—the unruffled stability in which the Almighty rejoices, and which it is my job to help promote. So, I’d better pass by on the other side”.

Then, along comes the Samaritan:

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

Now, the interesting thing about the Samaritan is that he is not, from the perspective of the Jewish lawyer, the totally outside “other”—a complete foreigner. He occupies the much more infuriating place of being exactly the wrong sort of other: the one who is sufficiently like us to get us all riled up—a classic trigger for the reaction produced by the narcissism of minor differences. The Samaritans, after all, worshipped the same God, with a slightly different but overlapping set of Scriptures. They didn’t acknowledge Jerusalem as a sacred centre, worshipping instead on Mount Gerizim. So Jews and Samaritans were a perpetual reproach to each other, sources of reciprocal moral infuriation.

Please notice what Jesus is doing here. As part of his picture of what it is like to be on the inside of the life of God, he is nudging his listeners into being stretched out of their comfort zone, into traversing their own hostility by having to look at the situation through suspect eyes. In other words, built into his story is the same perspective we saw in our reading of the Road to Emmaus: the one who will turn out to be the bearer of what is true is the one who seems, to us, like the sort of person who “wouldn’t get it” since they’re “not one of us”.

Moving along, then, the Samaritan immediately draws near the half-dead man. We get the parable’s bombshell word: *έσπλαγχνίσθη*, which our translation gives as “was moved with pity”. In fact, the word is much stronger than that: it means “viscerally moved”, and so is much more like our English, “gut-wrenched”. This is the Greek form of the Hebrew word by which God was also described as viscerally moved, moved in the entrails or the womb.

In other words, right there, in the midst of this happenstance, what it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God has burst forth. And what it looks like is an entirely different relation to a potential or actual corpse than might have been expected. The priest, who had kept himself pure for sacrifice, might well find himself in the Temple alongside the corpse of an animal he had just sacrificed. He might even, depending on which feast it was, find himself having to eat the entrails of the animal in question. For it was the entrails that were known as “the portion of the Lord”; by eating them, the priest would be taking part in the life of God. Yet here the entrails, the life of God, burst forth towards

the utterly vulnerable victim by the side of the road, in the flesh of the Samaritan who is moved towards him:

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

So, first of all, he moves close to him, instead of away from him. Then, using oil to soothe the wounded flesh, and wine, which was the basic disinfectant of the period, he bandages the half-dead one and brings him to an inn. Once he gets to the inn, please notice what he doesn't do: neither he nor the text make any reference to the ethnicity of the wounded one. He doesn't say to the innkeeper: "Look, I found one of yours on the side of the road, and have done far more than my bit by bringing him here, but now he's your responsibility"—something a foreigner might easily say to a co-national of the wounded one.

On the contrary, even being with him in the inn, the Samaritan doesn't pass the buck but continues to take care of him:

The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

Come the next day, and the Samaritan still doesn't distance himself from the wounded one. Even when he is going to be physically distant about his business, he leaves a generous first instalment with the innkeeper—two days' wages—and pledges himself to make good on an open-ended debt, for who can foresee the time necessary for healing and the possible expenses incurred as the result of wounds sustained?

In fact, the Samaritan becomes an indefinitely extended source of invisible succour for the wounded one, working through the local ministrations of the innkeeper. Jesus then addresses the lawyer:

Which of these three, do you think, was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?

Even here, his phrasing is most suggestive. The lawyer had asked him “Who is my neighbour?” with the implication that the term “neighbour” referred to the passive object of mandated benevolence: “If we can define who my neighbour is, then I will know towards whom I am obligated to behave in a neighbourly way”. But Jesus has it the other way round: the word neighbour refers not to the passive object of benevolence, mandated or not, but to the active creator of neighbourliness—a further hint that he is answering the question “What is it like to be on the inside of the life of God?”

The lawyer answers Jesus very exactly, and without any reference to the ethnic issues involved:

He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Please notice, however, that in order to give that very exact answer, the lawyer has had to be dragged through all the discomfort of learning to discover real goodness through the viewpoint of someone who was, in principle, highly suspect. He has had to traverse his own hostility and repugnance in order to have clarity:

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

In other words: if you want to inherit the life of God, there is no safely circumscribed definition of who your neighbour is. Instead, you will find yourself swept up into the inside of an infinitely attentive creation of neighbourliness amidst all the victimary contingencies of human life. And that attentiveness will be refined as you learn to avoid being seduced by sacrificial forms of religious goodness and as you overcome your own formation in the resulting culture of hostility.

Luke’s Testimony: The Samaritan’s Learning Curve

Having looked at the parable from the lawyer’s point of view, now we are going to explore it from the perspective of the Samaritan. It was, after all, he who was finding himself on the inside of the life of God. What did it look like for him?

One of the things the parable takes for granted in the midst of contingency is the centrality of victims. Victims appear in two valences in our story: sacred victims—the sort to be found in temples, and which inspire certain attitudes towards blood and corpses—and contingent victims, who are to be found in the midst of violent human interactions. We might, following the passage from Hosea at which we looked in our eighth chapter (Hosea 6:6), call the human attitude towards the first sort “sacrifice”, and the human attitude towards the second sort “mercy”. Concentrating our attention on the first sort of victim leads to a certain habitual blindness towards the second sort, while attention to the second sort leads to a particular kind of insight concerning the first sort. Those involved in both valences—the priest and Levite on the one hand, and the Samaritan on the other—are drawn by a pattern of desire which is intimately involved with a victim.

So here is the first hint of the shape of being on the inside of the life of God, what it’s like to become sensitive to where Jesus is and what he’s doing now: there is something ineluctable at its centre. The human pattern of desire is such that we either create goodness by displacing victims or find ourselves being made good by moving towards them. But a form of goodness which is entirely unrelated to dealing with the human reality of victimhood is not something available to our species. So much is this so that René Girard, with whose understanding of desire we have been working throughout this course, wondered what it was that first led proto-humans to discover the distinctions between “good” and “bad”, “in” and “out”, “us” and “not-us” which are set into the bedrock of distinctively human culture.

Girard postulates that human culture emerges from an (often repeated) act of lynching amongst groups of proto-humans that came as we constructed goodness and badness. “Good” and “bad”, “in” and “out”, “us” and “not-us”, and all their related culture-sustaining binaries would only have emerged fully within our race as a result of the frenzy of a group’s all-against-all yielding to the all-against-one in which anthropoids discovered ourselves as humans. The lack of differentiation in the horde starts to yield to the beginning of regular culture as a source of meaning and structure emerges: the one who is “not us”. The one who, being “out”, enables us to be “in”. The one who thus enables us to sense

the “goodness” of what we have done, and detect them as “bad”. This does indeed illustrate how the emergent difference that it later became possible to call a “victim” is at the root of our hominization, and how victimhood is an ineluctable reality in our species.

Goodness or badness according to “sacrifice”, then, is what enables us to be good by contrast with some defiling other. And goodness or badness, according to mercy, is discovered in our being moved (or not) to show neighbourliness to one considered defiling. Thus, we may find ourselves relating to victimhood in a way that dances around it, as it were, being given an apparently strong identity in our going along with the various forms of fascination with, and repulsion from, victimhood. In this way, we will merely be continuing the founding gestures of human culture, seduced by our own lie about the one who “is not us”. Or, with much greater difficulty (at least in my case), we can allow ourselves to face the centrality of the victim in a way that is not run by a mixture of fascination and fear: be given to be who we are to be, starting from our recognition of ourselves in the one who is just there. The attitude to victims is the criterion for neighbourliness.

Let’s watch the Samaritan a little. As he comes along the road, he undergoes a certain draw. The verb is passive. His entrails did something to him; they moved him. In fact, he saw the wounded one entrail to entrail, saw the altogether too-visible entrails of the other as his own—which is, as we have seen, what God does in the Temple sacrifice with the Lord’s portion, the entrails, of the victim. So this is what it is like to find yourself on the inside of the life of God! It means being gut-wrenched by your likeness with vulnerable flesh.

Finding himself on the inside of the life of God means that the Samaritan is able to draw near to the place of death, actual or potential, with no fear. He is not moved by death. It doesn’t exercise any draw or fascination for him. The possibility that the person to whom he is drawing close might actually be, or shortly become, a corpse—an instrument of defilement—doesn’t concern him. Just as it doesn’t concern him that his beast of burden would have been rendered unclean by carrying a bloodied person or a cadaver. Being unmoved by death, he is fully able to draw close to a fellow human being without fear.

Let us think through this attitude towards death a little more. It does seem to be completely central to how we understand being on the inside of the life of God, for in the parable we are dealing with two approaches to the same reality: the deathlessness of God. In the one approach, God's deathlessness is somehow thought to need protecting, and protecting in two senses: protecting *against*, because it is thought to be a hugely violent and unstable reality that might swamp mere humans with wrath; and protecting *from* contamination, as though God's deathlessness would somehow be diminished if allowed to be brought close to corruption and mortality.

In the other approach, the deathlessness of God is such that it is not in rivalry in any way at all with the reality of death. It is able to move towards, and around, and with, mortal beings and mortal remains without in any sense being weakened by them. On the contrary, it is the deathlessness of God which gives life to mortal things. So, faced with a half-dead stranger on a road, one understanding of deathlessness interprets the half-dead one as on the way to death, and thus to be shunned. The other interprets the half-dead one as able to be brought to life, and thus to be nurtured.

In Jesus' Resurrection, God demonstrated to us—fully, firmly, three-dimensionally—that God's deathlessness is of this latter sort: a life so completely deathless as to be able to assume being a shameful victimary corpse, and become as such the source of life for others. So what is meant by the Resurrection as an impetus for moral life is that we are inducted into beginning to live as if death were not, being able to befriend our mortality in all its extremities—extremities which include human victimhood in all its moral and physical dimensions. The outward and visible sign, if you like, of the Resurrection in our lives is the fear and stigma of death having become moot for us, and thereafter for our creativity, our longing for justice and flourishing, to have been unleashed into the beginnings of practical responses, with death no longer their circumscription.

Here again, I think Girard's mimetic understanding of desire is very helpful in exploring how this works in our lives. As you may remember, what is central to that account is that *we desire according to the desire of another*. So, it is through the eyes of a model that an object

acquires desirability. For instance, I, who know nothing about art, find myself becoming friends with someone who is a connoisseur of fine art. As I spend time with her, her knowledge about, sensitivity towards, and enthusiasm for fine art “rubs off on me” (as we would say without thinking about it too exactly). I find myself on visits to museums and galleries, even when she is not present, appreciating and enjoying the works of art vastly more than I did before I knew her. In fact, what has happened is that I have started to see art through her eyes. It is not, of course, that I have put her on, like a mask or a space suit, so that her eyes are on loan to me. It is the pattern of her desire which has reproduced itself in me, by my being drawn to imitate her, such that it feels at first as if someone else were looking through my eyes, and I am gradually coming to see what they see. Then, little by little, this becomes connatural to me, with my being scarcely aware of all the other pairs of eyes that have drawn me into my ever-richer appreciation of the objects in question.

It seems to me that this is the human and anthropological pattern that the Resurrection has in our lives. If the model is God, and the object “Creation”—or everything that is—then the question becomes “How do we learn to love, to desire, everything that is, in the same way God does?” The difficulty is that God is not a model in any obvious sense. If we do not have a human model to imitate, one at our level, then we have no ability to desire according to God, and we will be left at the mercy of modelling each other’s desires while claiming that we desire according to a frightening sacred object who is in fact a projection of ourselves and of our fears and of our violence—what is traditionally called an “idol”. We will be stuck, in fact, with that draw towards and repulsion from victims, a kind of unstable and two-faced fascination which characterises the archaic sacred.

However, what we have in Jesus’ Resurrection is a fully human set of eyes for whom death is not; a real human life story that is a living-out at the anthropological level of the deathlessness of God. Because of this, that life is able to get alongside us and into us in the same way as the fine art connoisseur’s pattern of desire; we start to be able to look at creation, at everything that is, through those same deathless eyes. The pattern of desire of the deathless one opens our eyes to what

really is in the world, without us having to run away from, or be run by, death. It becomes possible for us to be towards everything that is in the same way as the deathless one, and so to be creative and daring and imaginative without fear or hurry. The deathless one has opened up the possibility of our pattern of desire being towards everything that is in this quite specifically deathless way. And of course, everything that is actually looks quite different if looked at with humanly deathless eyes. Observation affects reality, as quantum physicists tell us. Just as the reality of creation underwent a real change when human consciousness was born, and anthropoids started looking at everything around about them through those hugely more powerful and dangerous things—human eyes—so that same reality has been undergoing a further change as, ever since Jesus' Resurrection, reality has been able to be observed from within itself by the deathless One looking through fully human eyes, into whose gaze we find ourselves drawn.

Let's get back to the Samaritan. So far, we've noticed that he has been drawn towards the victim in a completely non-repulsed way and that he is simply unmoved by issues of death. So proximity is not a problem. But what is just as interesting is that absence is not a problem either. As we carry on watching him, we can see that part of the gut-wrenching he is undergoing is sensed as a tremendous privilege. He is finding himself on the inside of the life of God! So he is quite unconcerned about sensible limits to goodness; he is just delighted to find himself on the inside of this adventure. He doesn't try to palm off the wounded one on the innkeeper. He seems to realise that he's found a centre to his life and activity that is worth sticking to. Rather than saying to himself "How little can I get away with and still be a decent person?"—which is what I find myself thinking whenever I'm in an analogous situation—he seems to realise he is being given something good by sharing the life of this victim. And this means he owns the situation—makes it his own. Which, of course, means: he allows the victim to be the one who owns him.

However, this doesn't mean he is now condemned, in some thoroughly unhealthy way, to fixate morbidly on hanging in there with the victim, as though the victim needed to see him the whole time, or as though the only real forms of love or compassion were some perpetual

and intense face-to-face with the vulnerable other. Nor does the Samaritan have any need to be seen to be doing good. Part of the privilege, on the inside of which he has discovered himself, is that he is able to take responsibility for the victim as a project over time. This means not being obsessively present or obsessively absent. It means being able to be quite invisible while still caring for and looking after the victim, setting up intermediary agents and instruments who will be rewarded—and know they will be rewarded—for playing their part in his generosity. The Samaritan makes an open-ended commitment to the well-being of the victim without any fear of limiting himself, of getting tied down, trapped in a responsibility that would in some way diminish him. On the contrary, it is as though he has discovered with joy that he is going to be brought into being himself—going to become something much more, be added to enormously—precisely in his commitment to this precarious and unpredictable healing process. Being owned by the victim has turned out to be something much less panic-inducing and much more creative of spaciousness than he would have thought possible.

This, I think, is a second dimension to the process of beginning to live the life of the deathless one in the circumstances of contingent humanity. As death loses its power, so commitment to the flourishing of what is fragile and precarious becomes possible, and our relationship with time changes. Pledging yourself in an open-ended manner to make good on the hospital expenses of a severely injured person without any guarantee of payback is mostly a terrifying possibility. What is to stop you from being “taken to the cleaners” for everything you’ve got?

But what if time is not your enemy? If time is not your enemy, then what you achieve or don’t achieve—whether you are “taken to the cleaners” or not—is secondary. Whatever you have will be for the flourishing of the weak one, for as long as it takes, since you know that you will be *found there*. Being on the inside of the life of God looks like being decanted by a generosity you didn’t know you had in you, making a rash commitment which makes a nonsense of death, of worry, and of the panic of time, because you know you want to be found in loving proximity to what is weak and is being brought into being. Wanting to be *found there* is a huge statement of joy at the power and gentleness of One for whom it is the apparently weak and futile things that are going

to be enabled to be brought into being. Being given the daring to lose yourself in being *found there* is recognised as a privilege, to be greeted with praise.

This, I think, is what the Samaritan was discovering in his slow-burning, gentle and intelligent excitement—what St Paul would describe as “rightly reasoning worship” (Romans 12:1-2). That God is the One who brings into being *what is not*, and dwelling on the inside of the life of God means being prepared to lose sight of all the apparently important things, to give yourself away in extreme gentleness and tenderness towards that which is apparently not, yet which is being brought into being out of the brink of nothingness by one not ashamed of mingling with the least important of all, who has nowhere more important to be (1 Corinthians 1:22-29).

So, what *is* Jesus doing now? What is it like to share his life? My own answer includes a tinge of jealousy: the Samaritan had it lucky, having God rush through his entrails like an express train. For most of us, the process of having our hearts turned from Sacrifice to Mercy is incredibly, incredibly painful: the more any of us loves and is given a heart of flesh, the more alive that heart becomes. And the more alive it becomes, the more raw and painful the world comes to seem, even if it is also much, much richer and more interesting.

John’s Testimony

Let us turn now to how St John deals with these matters. I’m going to put before you two different moments from the same discourse in St John’s Gospel. Here’s the first:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34)

Now, at first blush, it appears an instruction is given, and then its sense is unfolded by an example. We start with an instruction: that you love one another. However, just telling someone to love someone is not

very useful. Left at that, it might simply be an injunction to strain your heart or your will towards someone, which you may or may not be able to do. So the example—"as I have loved you"—is supposed to add a little content to the demand that has been made. But we're still in the universe of moralistic instructions.

I want to suggest a slightly different approach. As I read it, the second half of the verse is an exact paraphrase of the first part, a repetition with the deepest meaning brought out: Jesus' *giving* a new commandment *consists in his doing* something for his disciples. It is his doing something for them—loving them, in a quite concrete way—which sets something in motion such that they find themselves impelled and enabled to reproduce it for each other. What He is doing—giving Himself up in love for them—can equally be described as the giving of a new commandment.

Can you see how this is the reverse of a moralistic instruction? This gift of something done becomes a unique kind of commandment because it sets something in motion which then itself stands as a summons, inviting you in to reproduce it. It is as if Jesus were saying: "For you to be able to love each other, you first need to know what it is like to be loved, and as you sink into knowing the shape of my love for you so you will be able to love each other".

I hope you can see the difference: in one vision, something done for us becomes a defining source of our acting for others; in the other, we receive a moral injunction to do something huge but unclear. This difference fits straight in with the picture of being human that we've been looking at throughout this course: we are not individuals, locked in on ourselves, who must be told to do things; rather, we are all little, imitative, mimetic interactors who do what we see done. In other words, we desire according to the desire of the other, as we've been learning since our first chapter. The question is always: which other? When the other is Jesus, then, as we see Jesus doing for us, so we do. Love has a content from somewhere else, and the commandment is a commandment to imitate: "Even as I have loved you, so love one another."

This picture is filled out even more in our second chunk from St John:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. (John 15:12-14)

I hope you can see that there would be a glitch in this passage if we were to assume the moralistic “authority gives instruction” mode of teaching. In that mode, Jesus has friends, lays down his life for them, and then commands them—who are already his friends—to do the same to others. However, that’s not what the passage says! The passage presupposes that those for whom he gives his life *are not yet his friends*. On the contrary, he is opening up the possibility for them to become his friends by his doing something for them, on the inside of which they will then find themselves as multipliers of exactly what he has done, which is how they will become his equals, his friends. They will become people who are empowered to give themselves away, freely acting out of being insiders in something that has been opened up for them by someone who loved them.

In other words, the gift of creating this possibility for his friends and the commandment to create it... *are the same thing*. There is no moralism here! There would be moralism if something were done, and as a result, something was then commanded. That could indeed be a sort of emotional blackmail: “Look at me, I’ve done something for you, gone to so much trouble and suffering for you, now at least show I have purchase on your heartstrings: do what I say”. Instead of that, what we have is a personal invitation, such that each of the disciples—which is each one of us—finds him or herself being taken out of the realm of blind commandments into that sharing in equality of spirit which is friendship:

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another. (John 15:15-17)

Servants are told to do something, and if they don't understand why they should do it, they're told: "You don't need to understand why, just do it, you're a servant. I, the Master, know why I want it done, and your ways are not my ways". Morals are often taught in this way! Friends, however, are chosen freely and become trusted insiders on a level of equality with each other. They are not given compartmentalised tasks, but are entrusted with being imaginative, creative sharers in the whole project. As they share in a project, discovering for themselves the open-ended parameters made available by the One Who Gave Himself, so they will find they are not only friends of the One who inaugurated the project, but brothers, heirs, the ultimate insiders, fully adopted into the life of the Son. Jesus makes it possible for us to share his desire at the level of equality, which is friendship. We are enabled to desire as Jesus desires, according to the Father. Given that, it makes perfect sense to ask the Father for whatever we want, *as if* we were the Son, because we will, in fact, be becoming the Son, the ultimate insider in the life of God.

Paul, and Receiving Ourselves Through the Eyes of One Who Loves Us

I hope you can see what is central here, and this is essential to being inducted into the Christian faith: it presupposes that, before we do anything, we are drawn in—by an initiative not our own—into becoming aware of what has been done for us. Do you see how quickly and easily we can jump over and forget phrases like "Even as I have loved you" and remember only the "Love one another" part? Yet it is our being-loved *before we knew it* that has opened all this up. And that doesn't only mean we are asked to remember *how much* we have been loved, as though it were in the first place a matter of emotional degree. It is more properly *the shape* of our being loved: that someone was prepared to occupy the place of victimage and shame and non-being, patiently and gently, out of love for us, long before we sensed how much we depended on such a thing. Or, as we read once again in John:

For it was in *this* way that God loved the world: that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16).

The majority of translations read “For God so loved the world”, suggesting that the word “so” is a matter of emphasis or psychological force, short for “so much.” However, exactly the same words in Greek can be read to bring out a demonstrative sense: “God loved the world *in just this way*: namely, that he gave his only Son”. I find this demonstrative sense more congruent with John’s overall approach to Revelation. As we get a sense of what it is like to be loved from that space of God’s giving, we begin to be empowered and impelled to open it up for others.

That, I think, is the challenging part of Christian morality: not what we do, but perceiving what has been done for us, becoming attentive to the one who is speaking us into being. It is so much more difficult to allow ourselves to undergo something, to appreciate what we are finding ourselves on the inside of, and to allow ourselves to be stretched by it towards others, than it is to say: “I haven’t got the time for all that ‘being loved’ stuff, just tell me what to do”.

Yet this sinking into appreciation of being loved is no mere passive exercise. In fact, it is usually through little acts of being stretched out towards others that we find ourselves becoming more aware of being loved. The two moments, activity and undergoing, then enrich and inform each other.

In any case, I would like to offer you an exercise: one to enable you to sit, over time, in a sense of being on the receiving end of being-loved. We’re going to look at the famous passage from 1 Corinthians about love. Owing to its use in weddings; it tends to have associations with a particular account of love, and a specific moment of love, neither of which are bad things. But the passage is much richer than that. I’m going to read this passage—not, if you like, as a piece of abstract moralism defining what love is, but as an invitation to dwell in what it looks like to undergo the presence of One who loves you. In other words: to dwell in everything we’ve seen about Jesus, the forgiving victim coming towards us, and our sitting in his regard:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

You may remember from our ninth chapter that we looked at prayer as “sitting in the regard of the Other other”. Here I’m asking you to allow *yourselves* to be looked at from the regard which Paul sets out.

What does it mean to realise that the One looking at me is doing so in a way that is *patient*? Not in a hurry, not impatient with my slowness and waywardness, needing me to get things right already. Able to take time, not needing to correct me yet; approaching me without edge, gently, in a way that is not out to get me, that doesn’t need to put me down—that is a kind regard. Those eyes are looking at me in a way that is not jealous, not in rivalry with me in any way, not disturbed if I’m having a good day, nor trying to manipulate me for Brownie points. They aren’t determined that I shouldn’t have too good a time, since that will make me big-headed, nor are they only wanting me to be successful so they can feel successful through me, as though I were a means to their end.

They are genuinely hugely glad if I get something right, since they genuinely want my good—for no other purpose than that they like me. They are not arrogant, grasping things for themselves, marking off their turf and making me feel small by contrast, diminishing me with funny little names or labels that put me into a box and make me less. They have no need to put me down by damning me with faint praise. Their praise is that of genuine delight in something equal to themselves.

What is it like to pick up that I am loved in this way? “*Love does not insist on its own way*”. What a very extraordinary thing to say! We are talking about the regard of God, the eyes of the Creator of the Universe—the one to whom we pray “Thy will be done”—looking at us. Yet the presence and regard of love is not in rivalry with our will. It is not someone trying to steamroll us, getting us to do something we find awful, trying to use us for a nefarious end. This presence of love has been prepared to put itself under us, and from that vulnerable place

actually wants to join us in discovering our way, rejoicing and saying, “Oh, that’ll be fun! I wonder where she’ll take it? Why would that be interesting? You really want to do that? OK, I’m with you!”

This regard is not irritable, or resentful—and don’t we know what it is like to be held in an irritable or resentful regard! We’re always too much, or too little; we don’t measure up. Someone who is not irritable is saying: “You know, you’re just right! What fun it is to be with you! Are you having a wonderful time? That makes me *soooo* pleased!” Love doesn’t rejoice at wrong—no schadenfreude here, no sense of “I’m just waiting for you to trip up on some banana skin and then you’ll get your comeuppance, your contentment now is just pride before a fall”. This regard doesn’t take any pleasure in my discomfiture, is not at all keen to see me getting things wrong, “so that you’ll learn”. It shows no smug satisfaction in my mistakes and my follies; instead, it is just beaming when I get it right.

This regard, this presence of love *bears all things*. What on earth is it like to bear all things? We can bear a certain amount of other people’s sickness, other people’s betrayals, their infidelities. All these things we can bear to a certain extent, though it’s a great strain. So what is it like to discover that all my sickness, all my slowness, all my laziness, all my infidelities are being borne by someone for whom I am still, just as I am, an exciting project?

This same love *believes all things*. It believes in me as an investment that, despite all the evidence, is going to give fruit. When I occasionally say something aspirational, that I would really like to be true—what I would really like to become and to achieve, but which is pretty unlikely given who I usually am—this regard doesn’t say: “Oh yeah, that’s the kind of thing he says when he’s in a good mood, but it’s just a flash in the pan, we know what he’s really like”. No, the regard of love takes me at my best, most aspirational word, and believes in me over time so that the rest of me can catch up with the wildcard dream I would have difficulty recognising as myself. The regard of love says: “It is going to be so much more fun to take you at your most daring, and make that true, rather than tease you and belittle you for having ideas above your station”.

“Believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love doesn’t take no for an answer, doesn’t recognise things being closed off, shut down. Instead, it is constantly re-imagining us as potential, as adventure. Love has already occupied the place of shame and rejection, of being a non-person in our midst, so it doesn’t allow itself to be deflected by my hostility. It looks past my anger, my resentment, my taking myself too seriously. Love is prepared to occupy the place of the loser, to endure loss, to be dead. Love not only puts up with all that but, while going through it all, never loses sight of a “me” I often give up on, a “me” by whom this lover wants to be enriched forever.

Paul’s language fills out dimensions of the Forgiving Victim’s regard in our midst. This is the space which Jesus has opened up for us, so as to show us how God looks at us. As we find ourselves being looked at in this way, as we sink into allowing this regard to tell us who we are, we find ourselves impelled from within, contagiously, to do the same for others.

EPILOGUE:

The “Mmmmm!” Factor

Now, at the very end, we can go back to the beginning. Except that, as we have seen, in the Christian understanding, the beginning is not at some chronologically remote place in the distant past. The beginning has erupted into what looks, for us, like the middle. It summons us into becoming insiders in what the beginning’s really about: dwellers whose being is given to us from a future opening itself into our midst, making us alive to it as it does so.

So let’s go back to Genesis, which, as you remember from Chapter 11, was brought to fruition in the Garden in John’s Gospel. At the beginning of Genesis, God starts to make things, on different days. And after each day’s work, God sees that it is good. On the sixth day, God makes all the earth-bound living creatures (the aquatic and the winged variety had been made the day before). Again, in God’s regard, it is good. But then, before the sixth day fades, God seems to have a sudden seizure. Not content with the good things created that day, God decides to double down on the earth-bound creatures and creates humanity in God’s image and likeness. Having pulled off this feat, and just before resting, God looks at everything. This time, God does not merely notice that it is good. Now it looks to God to be *very* good.

Of course, those words have been read countless times over the last two and a half millennia. Each generation reads them according to its preconceptions. One reading sees this passage as a narrative way by which God declared creation intrinsically, objectively good, a kind of philosophical remark to ensure proper morals flowing from the order of creation. I wonder whether it wouldn’t be closer to the much more personal, relational way in which the Hebrew texts tell us of such things if we look at the passage slightly differently. It seems to me that what

we have in verbal form is God purring with contentment and delight at what God sees coming into being: “Mmmmm, I like it”. It is the apple of God’s eye. Then, on the sixth day, having indulged his adventurous eccentricity by bringing humans into being: “Mmmmm, I *really* like it”.

I use the word “like” deliberately, since we usually use the word “love” when talking about how God imagines the world. But the word “love” often enough has control-freak associations, such that people can tell us they love us, and that is why we must become something else. In other words, their “love” serves as an excuse for not actually *liking* the person in front of them. One of the reasons I prefer the word “like” is that it is much more difficult to lie about. We can tell whether someone likes us or not. Their body language and way of being present to us speak more loudly than their words. Someone who likes you enjoys being with you, alongside you, wants to share your time and your company, doesn’t control you but is curious to see where you’re going to take things. They will delight with you wherever it goes.

So, with that “Mmmmm” of God, the goodness of everything that is... is not a decree, nor a definition. It is a relationship of *really being liked* by the one who is bringing it into being, whose regard is out-of-himself delight in what we are and may become. What we’ve been looking at in this book is how that regard, that liking-us, came alive for us in our midst, occupying the space in our world—the victim space—whose existence is our sad tribute to our inability to believe that we are liked. This coming into our midst was to try to prove to us that most difficult of truths: in the midst of all the mess, the fear, the violence and the hatred which abound in our world, we are liked—irrepressibly, lyrically, chucklingly, light-heartedly, wastefully, as we are. A word of morality flowing from a heart that does not “like” is indeed part of vanity, because creating and liking are the same thing. And those liking eyes, made even more alive for us by having shared our story from within, look at us and say (as in John 16:33):

Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 2:

Luke 24:13-35³

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking (ἐν τῷ ὀμιλεῖν αὐτοὺς) and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognising Him. And He said to them: “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other (οὓς ἀντιβάλλετε πρὸς ἄλλολους) as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad (σκυθρωποί). Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him: “Are you the only visitor (παροικεῖς) to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” And he said to them: “What things?” And they said to him: “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see.” And He said to them: “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them (διερμήνευσεν αὐτοῖς) in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. So they drew near to the village to which

³ RSV + inserts from Nestle/Aland 27 GNT.

they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained Him, saying: “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So He went in to stay with them. When He was at table with them, He took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened (*διηνοίχθησαν*) and they recognized Him; and He vanished out of their sight (*αὐτὸς ἀφαντος ἐγένετο*). They said to each other: “Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?” And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said: “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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In *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, priest-theologian James Alison offers a journey into the Christian Faith suitable for individual readers and group sharing. While much catechetical material is either informative or lays down “what must be believed”, the inductive method (insisted on by Pope Francis and used here) invites readers, or course participants, into the inside of a rich and penetrating mystery: God who does not demand sacrifice but offers a love far greater than any of us knows. One which empowers us to shift from a way of being together that creates victims to one received peacefully from the Risen Lord.

Alison uses the anthropological insights of René Girard to allow the most traditional doctrines to come alive as you explore a human story where death no longer has the final say and every “outsider” is welcomed home. Through the eyes of the Risen and Forgiving Victim, learn to see yourself, your neighbour, and the world in a startlingly new—and deeply liberating—light. While obviously Catholic in content and methodology, this work has been widely used ecumenically without causing scandal.

James Alison (London 1959) is a Catholic Theologian and Priest. He had the privilege of studying theology under great Dominican and Jesuit teachers in both Europe and Latin America. His life's work has been exploring the fecundity for theology of the insight concerning desire and violence of René Girard (Avignon, 1923 - Palo Alto, 2015). Here, he shares the paradigm shift that thought offers as an inductive entry into Christian Faith for adults.



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