

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-imagination, 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 refulgent 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 emissaire*—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? Somewhere 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 “also-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 also-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.