

CHAPTER 7:

Induction into a People

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter continues:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter firms up his point by making a reference to the Prophet Hosea, a reference which is worth our while to pursue a little:

Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy, (...)

You may remember that God ordered Hosea to go and marry a prostitute called Gomer. Gomer bears him three children, of which the last two are a daughter named “not-to-receive-mercy,” and a son named “not-my-people”. They are a prophetic sign of God repudiating his covenant with the people of Israel. Where the covenant said “You will be my people, and I will be your God”, the child is called “not my people”.

Of course, the whole point of the prophetic gesture was that “not my people” and “not pitied” should act as reminders to those who thought of themselves as “my people” and “I have received mercy” of what it really looks like to be God's people. And this would culminate in the prophecy which Peter sees as having been fulfilled at last, the covenant definitively restored:

...and I will sow him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Not pitied, and I will say to Not my people, “You are my people”; and he shall say “Thou art my God.” (Hosea 2:23)

What Does it Mean to Say that Jesus Founded the Church?

Why do I start with all this? Typically, when we hear the word “church”, we are inclined to think of a more or less voluntary association of people who have certain beliefs about Jesus. What I want to point out is how far away that is from what was originally understood! Early on, it was quite clear that Jesus had effected a massive change at the anthropological level—something to do with the very conditions of being human—and that the whole point was to bring into existence a new

way of being together. So, not a group of people with an interesting idea (e.g. “Jesus died to save us”), who come together and form a new association. Instead, the interesting idea and the new form of association becoming available are absolutely simultaneous and inseparable from each other. From the outset, the project aimed to establish the possibility of reconciliation for all people.

In other words, it is not the case that Jesus did certain things which you’re supposed to believe, then each of you individually gets an indelible brownie point on your forehead, and then you join up with other people who have similar brownie points on their foreheads and work out how to be good together. On the contrary: it is because Jesus is to be found in the place of shame, wherever that is in any of our societies, that it becomes possible for us to start realising what we’ve been doing, to see what has been done for us so gratuitously, and thus be empowered to form a new sort of togetherness that is not over against anyone at all.

Do you see how the Atonement and the birth of a new people are two different yet interconnected dimensions of the same thing? I want to stress this here, since it is very common to hear sentiments like the nineteenth-century witticism: “Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, but what came along was the Church”. This is taken to mean that Jesus never founded, or wanted, the Church which has been foisted onto him. Rather, he was all about the Kingdom, which was all mercy and light, and Paul was the one who invented the Church, along with all that ecclesiastical obscurantism and hypocrisy of which we are so rightly wary.

This picture is nonsense. Of course, Jesus didn’t sit down with a corporate lawyer and draft the deeds for setting up the institution which we call the Church. But this is because the Church is not an institution in that sense. Jesus was fulfilling the gathering which began around the Presence on Sinai with Moses. And it turned out that the fullness of the Presence wasn’t the frightening presence of God as had been perceived at Sinai. It turned out that the presence of YHWH at Sinai had been that of a forgiving victim, the scapegoat come back, the class fairy shown to have been actively creating this breakthrough all along. All the wrath perceived round Sinai had been projected from wrathful people onto a

voice that could scarcely be heard breaking through to them. Instead, it turns out that Presence is a victim, one who is forgiving us, and we are starting to say “Oh, so that’s what I’ve been involved in—and now I can become something else”. Hearing the voice of the forgiving victim automatically inaugurates a new sort of relationship. The coming into being of the Church is not an add-on, but central to the entire project.

So, when I say that Jesus founded the Church, it means something very definite. It means that, starting with his words in the Eucharist—“This is my body which is given up for you”—Jesus was deliberately enacting the “laying in Zion the new foundation stone”, as Isaiah had prophesied. He was demonstrating in advance, by means of a solemn mime (which he urges us to extend in time and space), that he was about to become the victim around whom the new unity would be created. In fact, the Gospel says this very clearly indeed—so blindingly clear that it is almost invisible. In St John’s Gospel, there is a meeting of concerned parties trying to work out what to do about Jesus: He is creating such waves that they fear the colonial power, the Romans, will take advantage of the disruption as an excuse to destroy the Temple and their nation (Jn 11:49-52). Caiaphas, who was acting High Priest, says to the meeting:

You understand nothing at all. You do not conceive that it’s expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.

Well, we’ve all heard this before: it is the classic statement of sacrificial political ethics. What we rarely remember is what follows:

He did not say this from himself, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

In other words, the same double valency of sacrifice that we saw in Peter’s Epistle was familiar to John and set out clearly: a person going to his death is, on one hand, described as a temporary political solution, creating unity in a threatening situation. On the other hand, it is de-

scribed, in the very same words (and, despite himself, by the very same mouthpiece), as the project that YHWH is deliberately inaugurating to bring about a new sort of unity.

What is being founded, for those enabled to enter the perspective of the victim, is the possibility of being forgiven—literally let go—from the victimising way of creating and maintaining togetherness. Thus, they begin to relate to other people without the need to gang up in order to survive.

How Does a Sacrifice Build Unity?

I would like to point out here that we are not discussing something “churchy” or apparently “religious”, but rather something universal in human culture. Our Joshua reading was a classic account of how sacrifice builds unity when the demoralised troops were brought together over against one who is blamed and destroyed. It seems to be a fairly effective method, and one that is by no means restricted to ancient religious texts. When the Argentine military junta was falling apart in the early 1980s, it was awfully convenient for them to invade the Falkland Islands as a means of creating national unity in support of their regime. A significant series of protests and riots had occurred, and their control was slipping. What better way to find a distraction and enthuse people about something else? Their only mistake was to assume that the British Government wouldn’t really be interested in defending the islands.

Many commentators have pointed out how dependent we all are on our “evil other” over against whom we can unite. A stunning loss of identity threatened the West after the sudden collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989-1990. Along with that threat came the realisation of how cosily reliable our enemy had been in giving us a sense of safety and security. It actually took quite a long time before militant Islam (whether in its real or its imaginary form) took the place of the wicked other over against whom “we” might unite. During the period of flailing around, there was a brief attempt in the early 1990s to portray the Japanese as the stage villains, with a rash of Hollywood films highlighting both the deviousness of their conspiracies and their threatening wealth.

But it didn't last long, since Japan was too small and its economy too fragile for it to be a plausible "wicked other". Resentment-driven jihadis turned out to be a much better "wicked other", not least because they are such willing accomplices in the game: they know precisely how to get mileage out of victimary identity-building.

In any case, there are myriad examples of how this works in every culture and at every historical period—and also, in all probability, from your own personal experience of relationships. So when we talk about how sacrifice creates unity, we are not referring to a narrowly religious issue. We are discussing a cultural function that is universal. We are not aware of any human culture where identity is not achieved and maintained in this manner. And "this way" is not simply bad. Without it, we would not have achieved the measures of peace and stability that we have, however short-lived they may be. Humans without boundaries, without group identities, would probably have wiped themselves out. Unbridled imitation leads to unbridled vengeance, and without the apparent magic of a seemingly impartial finger directing and limiting the vengeance to one party and legitimising it, we would probably have ceased to exist as a race a long time ago.

My reason for stressing this here, in this context, is that Jesus did not found the Church merely as a particular religious institution. Instead, he inaugurated the possibility of undoing all existing forms of cultural togetherness without causing a total collapse of the human species. In other words, his project is an anthropological one, completely recasting the ways humans live together. This project is, of course, instantiated in a thoroughly particular and unsatisfying institution, populated by thoroughly unsatisfactory characters such as ourselves, which we call the Church. But don't let what looks like a crusty epiphenomenon fool you! An earthquake project has been initiated, and what we call the Church has been thrown up by it, even as it often tries to hide it.

This means that, in principle, Jesus' creative and founding activity—living out the role of the Forgiving Victim—is available wherever any group of people creates unity by ganging up against others. It is available regardless of the particular cultural forms or identities that are forged over against others. For it is this cultural fact, if you like, that is being undone by Jesus' foundation. It is not that Jesus came to attack

a particular “bad religious system” called “Judaism” and substitute for it a new religious system called “Christianity”. On the contrary, with the help of the tools and instruments made available to him through Ancient Hebrew and Jewish texts and institutions, Jesus came to reveal something about what humans do in such a way as to make it possible for a new way of being human to emerge.

This distinction is going to be very important to us in later chapters, since it is only by having a firm sense of the original project that we will be able to stand back from, relativize, and not be made too angry by the farcical contortions of identity-grabbing and hate-fired contrast which flourish amongst we who should know better in and as the Christian Church.

What Might a New Unity Look Like?

All this, of course, raises the issue of what on earth a new unity might look like? One that isn’t derived over against some other, and thus doesn’t hark back to a human culture dependent on expulsion and murder? And this is, for all of us, no purely theoretical question because the easiest thing for any of us is to be reactive. If you are in some doubt and don’t know who you are, get somebody to tell you who you should be against.

I don’t know if you’ve ever had the experience of joining a new group of people—migrating to a new country, or joining the Marines, converting to a new religion, or even joining a particular group within a religion. You find yourself in the new group, and you are not at all sure who you are supposed to be. As a result, you are incredibly open to any suggestion as to who you should become, eager to learn. Scarcely aware of what you are doing, you watch for markers from respected old-timers, as though you were a hugely thirsty sponge, saying: “Daddy, Daddy, tell me who I am to be”. And the results are acquired as if by an amazing osmosis: incredibly quickly, you become the poster child for all the values of the group. Not the real values, of course, for those are challenging to acquire, and can only be acquired over time, and the one thing you haven’t got while grasping for identity is time! No, instead of

the real values of the group, you acquire what I might call their frontier values: you become an expert at singing the tribal song. If you join the Marines, for instance, you'll very quickly learn to bond with your new fellows by rehearsing the ways in which the Marines are way different from other parts of the Armed Forces.

Upon becoming a Catholic, I myself was very tempted by a cheap identity over against the Protestantism of my upbringing. Then, upon joining a religious order called the Dominicans, I was tempted again by finding ways to score points against the Jesuits. Not because Jesuits are at all hateful, but because in some ways, the Jesuits are the group most like the Dominicans among male Catholic religious orders. Naturally enough, part of the tribal song I picked up was: "Here's how we are not like the Jesuits". The quickest way to some sort of belonging: ask, "What am I not supposed to be like?" You can imagine someone who has never had a hostile thought about Jewish people, but on becoming a Muslim quickly becomes a caricature of anti-Jewish diatribe, perhaps still without ever meeting an actual Jewish person. Or, you can imagine someone who discovers Christianity and becomes Amish, the sort whose observance demands the use of hooks, not buttons, in their clothing and for whom the very worst thing you could be is one of those "worldly" Amish who use buttons, not hooks.

Whatever your new group, there'll be older, wiser members who can see your identity-hunger for what it is, and will hope that you settle down soon enough. But it may be many years before you find whatever is central and creative in your new group and are able to be formed by that, moving beyond these boundary issues. And naturally enough, you will not be in a great place for creating unity with your apparent enemies if you really need to believe your caricatures about them in order to know who you are.

So, given that the standard mechanism for group formation includes a shortcut which asks, "Who am I supposed not to be like?" or says, "Give me difference", what is it going to look like to not be over against anyone at all? What is it going to look like to start finding similarities with the other, rather than grasping onto some pseudo-difference to make yourself feel good?

Well, we're given a picture of exactly this happening in Acts 10.

Acts 10

Acts 10 is Luke's account of an extraordinary anthropological earthquake—perhaps the most crucial day in history outside Judaism. This was the day when the Hebrew religion went universal, and what we now know as Catholicism—Universal Judaism—was birthed into reality. Let us look at the passage:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God.

So, we have a Roman soldier on duty far from home. He is described as “a devout man who feared God with all his family”. Herein lies a technical term. Jews recognised a category of Gentiles called “God-fearers. These were non-Jewish people who had come to believe in the one God of Israel—who worshipped regularly in Synagogues, listened to the preaching of Moses and developed the sort of moral life that flowed from monotheism—but who were not prepared to go through with circumcision, actually convert to Judaism and take on the whole yoke of the Law and its 613 commandments.

This was a thoroughly respectable group of people who were, if you like, half-insiders and half-outsiders. Second-class citizens to be sure, but genuinely welcomed in the Synagogues, where there would be a special area set apart for them. It might be seriously complicated for a Roman centurion to actually convert to Judaism. However, to adhere to ethical monotheism would by no means be thought of as a bad thing, and many such “God-fearers” would have taken their religious duty very seriously. You may remember the incident in Luke's Gospel where Jesus cures the servant of another centurion (Luke 7:1-10). Just before he does so, some of the locals tell Jesus that the Centurion is worthy of his help since “he loves this nation and has built us our synagogue”. He is another example of a “God-fearer”: someone who is “basically on our side but is not prepared to go the whole way and become one of us”.

Back to Cornelius:

About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him: “Cornelius.” And he stared at him in terror, and said: “What is it, Lord?”

In the mid-afternoon, our Centurion has a clear vision, something very frightening to him. As a God-fearer, he understands his Judaism enough to know that an angel is not a Hallmark-card herald, but a local instantiation of God’s very self, something deeply awe-inspiring, and so he addresses the angel as “Lord”:

And he said to him: “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.” When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those that waited on him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. [That’s about midday.] And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the Heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the Earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat”. But Peter said: “No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”

Here we have some more technical words: common or profane, and unclean or impure. These refer to the sort of things that, according to the book of Leviticus, Jewish people are forbidden to eat.

In many cases, these things were not only called unclean, but were referred to as “toevah,” which is often translated as “abomination” but which we might paraphrase better as “absolutely taboo”. The text follows:

And the voice came to him again a second time: “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to Heaven. Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood before the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there.

What has Peter seen that so inwardly perplexes him? Well, he has seen, amongst the animals in the sheet, some of those which it was explicitly forbidden for Jews to eat: pigs, snakes, lobsters, and many others. It is not that they were considered evil beasts in themselves, merely that, according to the holiness code by which the people of Israel were set apart from other nations, these beasts were ritually unclean.

Keeping the purity code from Leviticus was part of maintaining the holiness of God’s people. Peter, as a good Jew, would never even have considered eating such things. Yet here he is, being told to kill and eat them, which might at first be regarded as a satanic temptation. Yet the voice assures him that God has cleansed these things, so he must not call them unclean. In other words, he is being told to overcome his repugnance at what is being shown to him. And this happens three times.

This is not the first time that Peter has experienced something in batches of three. The first time was in the High Priest’s courtyard where, under persistent questioning, he had denied Jesus three times. He had been unable to overcome his fear of sharing the place of shame with Jesus. After his third denial, as you may remember, the cock crows, or in Greek: “calls out”. Luke is certainly being deliberate when, after Peter’s third refusal to eat the repugnant food in his vision, Cornelius’ men stand outside his gate and “call out”. The verb is the same as the one used for the cock:

And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him: “Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down, and accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them.”

You can begin to imagine, perhaps, something of Peter's perplexity. Two apparently different things are coming together for him as the same: his shame—having run from him such that he wanted nothing to do with a man he loved when that man was standing in the place of shame—and his ritual goodness, which ran him such that he would have nothing to do with the sort of people who kill and eat such repugnant beasts.

Nudged by the Spirit out of his place of shame, Peter doesn't hide and pretend to be someone else, as he had done earlier, when three other people tried to put him on the spot. Without knowing why these three have come, or indeed what their ritual status might be, he finds himself emboldened to openness:

And Peter went down to the men and said: "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" And they said: "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say." So he called them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went off with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends.

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying: "Stand up; I too am a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered; and he said to them: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; (...)"

Let us be clear here: Peter finds himself addressing outsiders, Gentiles. True, the sort of Gentiles who know what the Jewish law is about and respect it, who live in close proximity to observant Jews, but who have also accepted second-class status in this sphere, who would not have been deeply scandalised if Peter had asked them all to come

out so he could speak with them rather than risking his own impurity by entering a Gentile dwelling.

Nevertheless, Peter has already come into the house. And it is here, in a Gentile household, that he utters the following line, which I would strongly suggest you underline about three hundred times with all the highlighters and coloured markers that you can muster:

but God has shown me that I should not call any human common or unclean.

This simple sentence is the first hint of what is to come in the following few verses: this scene will be the only time in the New Testament that Peter uses what we now call the Petrine Authority, the power of the keys he was given by Jesus (Matt 16:19). He uses that authority to unbind the Gentiles, which is to say, to open Heaven for the non-Jewish portion of the human race. He does so as a result of his own experience, in which what appeared to be a vision about ritually unclean food had become inseparable from the shame he felt at his betrayal of Jesus. He has understood, from his own experience, the relationship between the expelled victim and the rituals and prohibitions by which people keep themselves at a distance from the victim in a state of fake goodness.

Peter now knows he can no longer, in good conscience, regard the purity laws as genuinely holy. But he's still not quite sure where all this is leading him, and it is delightful to watch him responding to events as they overtake him:

“So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.” And Cornelius said: “Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, saying, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside.’ So I sent to you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

Cornelius hasn't got anything particular to request of Peter, has no intention of trying to pry something out of him, or indeed of getting him to do anything. He merely has a narrative of being told to do something, doing it, and now waiting to see what comes next. And what comes next is the final portion of Peter's authoritative pronouncement:

And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Peter's understanding has clearly been developing on the road, catching up with what's going on. First, he has understood that he, personally, has been shown not to call any person impure or unclean. Now he sees that this is not merely something for him personally, but that God has set up events with Cornelius in order to drag out of him a recognition that something has happened which has much broader—indeed huge—implications: there is no over against in God. Therefore, being "on the inside" of the life of God cannot legitimize any form of group identity which includes self-definition over against another.

Peter now begins to tell a thoroughly Hebrew story, setting out an act of communication which began within the referential terms of Israel, of Judah and Jerusalem:

You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; (...)

It is interesting, in the context of what he himself has been undergoing, that Peter doesn't say "they crucified him". Instead, he uses the term which would have indicated clearly that Jesus died under a curse

from God, for that is how Deuteronomy regards one who is “hanged upon a tree” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23, see Galatians 3:13).

Peter could count on his God-fearing Gentile listeners knowing this reference. You can almost sense the shock of the anthropological earthquake as it becomes clear that the shamed one, the cursed one, is in fact the source of honour and forgiveness:

...but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

The logical consequences of this breakthrough travel faster than either Peter’s or his audience’s capacity to understand what is going on.

The transformation of the cursed one into the one who opens up belonging and new reputation has completely collapsed any notion of goodness through contrast with a shamed other:

While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

Notice what has happened. Before Peter has even reached for himself the logical conclusion he has already been nudged towards conceding, it suddenly turns out that the half-insiders/half-outsiders have already become insiders, just as he is:

And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Peter and his companions are significantly amazed. This is not what they expected. They could imagine, perhaps, in their generosity,

extending courtesy to these second-class citizens. But what was happening did not depend on their generosity, their superiority, or their initiative. In fact, they are discovering that they are now equal insiders with the formerly semi-shameful other, the initiative not belonging to either of them.

Then Peter declared: “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Peter magnificently catches up with what’s going on by authorizing the sign to match the reality. With this, the first Gentiles are baptized, insider status ceases to be over against anything at all, and Judaism goes universal.

Learning to Receive Identity in the Collapse of Identity

Now, I want to stress that what we have just read is actually much more difficult and produces much more of a shake-up than seems to be the case from St Luke’s account. We are all far more run by our systems of purity, the things which keep us “us” and the other “other”, than we realize. Peter, for instance, was not in principle a citizen of the world who just happened to hold to a purity code as a pleasing cultural option. He had been completely brought up within a system, had taken it for granted. The system had given him his identity. It didn’t even occur to Peter for quite a long time after hanging out with Jesus—after Jesus had risen from the dead and after he had been performing miracles in Jesus’ name—that all this was going to have unpredictably enormous cultural consequences. We witness him being taken to the very limit of his experience, asked to do something he finds repulsive.

Let’s remember that, if you are brought up in a purity code, it’s not merely that you have theoretical knowledge that certain things are impure for you while neutral for people outside your cultural group. You actually learn to feel repulsed by unclean things. You will learn to

regard the unclean other as disgusting—to feel a physical reaction, a frisson of horror, when faced, for instance, with pigs or pork products. Ritual uncleanness is often accompanied by a physical reaction; not merely “I know I shouldn’t touch that” but “Ugh! Get it out of here”. That’s the kind of reaction that a purity code will induce in you. You become a function of it.

So here is Peter, who has been living as a function of a purity code, imagining it to be good—indeed his imagination of the good utterly suffused by it. Suddenly, he finds himself taken to a place where he’s going to have to step across a huge boundary, go into the wrong sort of person’s house, eat the wrong kind of food with them, and start to recognise that “being good” is entirely unrelated to all the things that gave it shape, taste, and bearings before.

Furthermore, those whom he is visiting have to do the same. They are going to start seeing people whom they have regarded as “special but different” as on the same level as themselves. And that too is no minor disturbance. This dynamic is familiar to Catholics, since one of the ways we avoid taking our faith seriously is by putting priests on pedestals. We thereby create a safe space for us not to have to do something, because it’s the kind of thing that priests do. We are then genuinely quite shocked when we discover there is no real difference as regards humanity between priests and lay people. But priests being on pedestals for Catholics is not merely the result of priestly arrogance; it is very often the result of lay convenience. A ritual difference helps to give us an identity apart.

Here, though, we see two groups finding themselves face to face in an extraordinary situation where it has become clear that there is no barrier between them. And both groups are losing their identity. Any of us can cope with a situation in which the “other” crosses the line and becomes one of us—or, more painfully, betrays us and leaves us for the other side. But what is it like when what used to be an insider group discovers it doesn’t lay down the terms by which someone becomes “one of us”? Or when an outsider group loses the ability to grasp onto a certain resentment at second-class status, which at least lets it know who it was? The massive loss of identity occurs as a group finds itself

overcoming revulsion, repugnance—strong identity—and discovering the profane, threatening, other as its equal.

Even worse, this former other is inside the same thing as you, and on the same terms as you—terms which you do not control. It isn't that you can reach out to them from a position of firm identity, saying: "I'm such a kind, generous person that I can let you in, and you will become like me. In fact, that's all you need to do: become like me". That would be easy. But what has happened here—what Peter is discovering—is that, in fact, finding the other on the inside alongside you, on terms not dictated by you, means you are never going to be "you" ever again. You will find yourself becoming someone entirely different from who you thought you were. A new "we" is being created, and neither party yet knows what it is going to be like to be this new "we", what its goodness and security is going to look like. This is deeply disturbing to someone with firm boundaries. Rather than "Do this and become like us" it's "Yipes, we are finding ourselves on the inside of something new. We are both going to have to discover what this means". All over the world, this is the experience of host nations with growing immigrant populations: both cease to be what they thought they were and, after much painful tension, they come to rejoice in who they are becoming.

This is what I mean by the process of learning to receive identity in the collapse of identity. It is a process by which we find ourselves learning who we are to the degree that we discover a similarity with others, which can be very painful. It will feel like a loss of identity. It will feel profoundly destabilizing. Where is it going to go? It can be difficult to imagine, but what feels like a loss is in fact not a loss. It is the pain of being given a new identity, of discovering who I really am, of becoming "you are my people" rather than "not my people".

It is one thing, learning to see the other as not really a threat to me. But seeing the repulsive other as that which makes it possible for me to become who I really am? Yet this is the one foundation of the Church: a shamefully crucified victim. And from that one repulsive other begins the gathering-together of all people out of every nation, tribe, and language, all of whom are discovering who they are for the first time as they drop their boundaries over against each other.

The Universality and Contingency of this Process

We've seen how a single anthropological Earthquake—an act of communication which began turning all the normal markers of human culture around from within—also began a new “being together” which is, in principle, over against nothing at all. This means that the new “being together” is universal, or catholic, which is just a Greek word meaning: “according to the whole”, or “universal”. We are, of course, used to the word “Catholic” having acquired a tribal meaning—something like “loyal to the Pope” or “as opposed to Protestant” or meaning some kind of spiritual or liturgical flavour within Christianity. However, this is a debasement; the notion of catholicity is not an add-on to the Gospel, not an optional extra once you've got your basic Christianity sorted out. It is an essential dimension of what Jesus was about.

What Jesus inaugurated was the possibility of a being-together in which there is, in principle, no social “other”. There is no group or nation, ethnicity, gender, or any other identity that we typically create in a binary fashion (slave or free, Jew or Greek, male and female, black or white, straight or gay, and so on) that cannot be brought into the gathering, the *ekklesia*, the new people of God. For such people live in a reconciled way thanks to their living forgiving victim.

This means that the one thing the Catholicity of the Church can never be is a matter of identity politics. Identity politics stems from the most profound and primitive tribal notions of identity, built over against another. And there can be no greater betrayal of Catholicity than attempting to create an “in-group” called Catholics. But what sort of group definition could possibly persist in the face of there being no “in-group”, because there is no “out-group”? It is worth remembering how we are supposed to be living signs of this—and how frequently we betray it, short-changing the Kingdom we are being inducted into by grasping onto a cheap shot of identity politics.

So, *one* act of communication has inaugurated *one* new way of being together, one that implies no over against, no social other, and thus, the chance of universality. However, I would like to point out that this matter of universality is not something that happens by decree. It is not that someone says: “Oh, now we have a universal Saviour who has saved

us universally. Therefore, we must now treat everyone with universal benevolence”. This would make what happened a moral or intellectual matter—rather like the French Revolution decreeing *Égalité*, as if the mere decreeing brought it about. No, the universality that is the essence of the Christian faith works in a much more contingent manner.

It comes about in every particular place where there is an “in” group and an “out” group. It comes about by overcoming the war between the “in” group and the “out” group, in a usually bloody process of someone bearing witness to the truth—in other words, getting it in the neck. Then, other people stand up for the person who bore witness to the truth by getting it in the neck. And then, still other people begin to realise that the game is over. In other words, catholicity is not a decree, it’s a process—a process of reconciliation produced by witnesses to the truth. It can happen wherever a group of people defines itself over against another, which is to say, absolutely everywhere, and amidst every group. We know of no ethnic group anywhere on the face of the planet, no gang in the periphery of any major city, which is not inclined to build its unity at the expense of a social other. And this means that catholicity is everywhere latent. The possibility of it is just there, wherever people are doing that. Wherever people sacrifice, it is possible for the one being sacrificed to become the Christ.

So, in any group setting, anywhere at all, it is possible to become a witness—a *martus*—to what Jesus achieved by being prepared to stand in the place of shame, and so turn a particular conflict into a sign of the universal overcoming of conflict. The walls begin to come down. But this is a bloody process, not an automatic one. We are not talking of some grand sweep of history in which a peaceful dialectic simply advances. We are talking of a process that, once unleashed, is inevitable—but its inevitability is not despite us. Its inevitability includes us as actors who choose to stand and bear witness over a painful time. It is worth remembering that our addiction to violently achieved identity is so strong that we do not necessarily take kindly to the plug being pulled on our security. It would be nice to think that, once the plug had been pulled—once someone has occupied a space of shame and managed to de-toxify that shame—then we no longer need to fight each other. And some do get that. Others, however, will constantly try to re-establish the apparent security and togetherness that came with having such a convenient other in the place of shame. And they are

going to react with real wrath and rage at the loss of their defining other. Even though the attempt to re-establish unity over against is always going to be losing its power, that doesn't make its flailing around any less dangerous.

Imagining Heaven and Being Saved With the "Other"

I want to conclude this chapter by reflecting on a different dimension of this process of induction into a new people—a dimension that is sometimes called “holiness”. We say, in the Apostles’ Creed, that we believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and we’ve seen something of what this Oneness of the Church might mean: there was a single foundational act which brought into being (that is to say, genuinely instantiated and inaugurated) the first signs of the “being together” of all people. By definition, there cannot be more than one of these; someone who thought there was more than one Church in this strict sense would demonstrate that they don’t know what is meant by the word “Church”. We’ve seen that the word “Catholic” means “universal” in the sense that the one-ness is over against nothing at all. And we’ve looked at part of what is meant by the “Apostolicity” of the Church in seeing how the development of that one-ness over against nothing at all requires the real instantiation—in recognizable, messy, bloody, history—of genuine, named, historical people, mucky and unsatisfactory as we are, bearing witness to what Jesus did by doing it ourselves in vastly different circumstances, linked back across history to those in whose midst Jesus enacted his inauguration in the first place.

In some sense, the most counterfactual of all these dimensions of being inducted into a new people is “holiness”. I say counterfactual for three reasons. The first is that it is not at all clear what, in ordinary parlance, “holiness” means, or if indeed it is a good thing; a good deal of what passes as “holy” is either cosmetic, freakish, or frankly terrifying. The second reason is that holiness tends to conjure up pictures of moral superiority, or at least superciliousness. This clashes with what we have been looking at in the inauguration of a people not over against anything at all. How could such a people be “holy” without there being someone “unholy” by contrast with whom they might appear good? Wouldn’t the

“holiness” of the new people actually be an obstacle to their being what they’re supposed to be?

The third counterfactual is, sadly, the evident absence of holiness in the lives of so many official representatives of, and public spokespersons for, the Church. Our lives are so obviously driven by the same pathologies, rivalries, and mendacities as those of everybody else that it is passing rare to find, in our midst, a visible witness to the interruption of the social other by another Other.

So, I’d like to bring back the discussion of “holiness” to its real starting place. There is only one source of holiness for any of us, and it comes from the Forgiving Victim. In the Christian understanding, there is no holiness except from forgiveness. You can’t be good, let alone holy, except insofar as you are forgiven. This is, if you like, the personal element of the dynamic we looked at before: learning to receive a new identity in the loss of an identity. That is just as true of every member of a group as it is of the group as a whole.

It really is worth mentioning this, since so many of us tend to think of belonging to the Church and being forgiven as two quite separate things. And, of course, this is very convenient in a number of ways. It allows us to play at a form of tribal identity—“being Catholic” or “being Christian”—in a way thoroughly over against any number of different groups or ways of being in the world, and then separately to have a list of more-or-less superficial sins for which we can be forgiven repeatedly, so as to remind us that “we are sinners” as a way of feeling good about ourselves, being “insiders” in this mysterious tribe.

However, in fact, there is no way into the Church except by being forgiven; or, as one might say, no new identity without undergoing the original Earthquake. There is no way of “being good” which doesn’t have a direct relationship to this anthropological happening: learning to see that the way “we” held ourselves together was, in fact, something terrible, and stepping away from it relieved of our burden of being righteous persecutors. The holiness of the Church just describes this process: a new people being brought into being as a process of forgiveness, hoiked (though painfully) out of a reactive “goodness” and then set free from all that painful, hard, self-defeating baggage—and from there, discovering equality of heart with your repugnant “other”.

Thus, real holiness is the very reverse of frightening. It is, on the contrary, warm, gentle, tentative, alive, and empowering, with things that seemed hard tending to be made supple. Because the person who shows hints of holiness is learning to receive themselves in being let go, and knows it is in the measure that they let go that they will receive more. It should on no account be confused with the frightening simulacrum of holiness which is the “sacred”. This latter thing is full of fixity, superiority, strong identity, double-binds and self-destruction, all masked as immutability.

It is also worth remembering that no office in the Church can be exercised well by someone who is not in the process of being forgiven. The teaching of Christ is passed from those who are being forgiven to those who are being forgiven. If a liturgy is of Christ, then it has at its heart a reviled other reaching out to us in forgiveness. And that forgiveness, which breaks our heart, has as its purpose our being brought to life and made part of a much larger-hearted sign—not given a patina of respectability so that we can be superior to others.

You might try this as an imaginative exercise: how do you imagine Heaven? When I’ve asked people how they imagine Heaven—apart from the usual stuff about harps and clouds—they tend to talk about it being a place full of the sorts of people they loved when they were alive. Lots of people “like us”. I wonder! I wonder whether that wouldn’t be just too boring. I wonder whether part of the sheer excitement and dynamism of Heaven—a dynamism which starts here—doesn’t consist in finding that even the deep, contented delight in a beloved spouse or child is enriched by the zest of discovering equality of heart with all those repugnant others over against whom I might have remained stuck in my smallness, all those of whom I was frightened, or disapproved. Might not Heaven be a universe of others that becomes vastly more fun and varied as I’m able to let go of the terrifying narrowness of what I thought was “goodness”, but which turns out merely to have been a well-disguised amalgam of defensive snobbery?

The phrase “This day you will be with me in Paradise” was first spoken to, and first heard by, a thief on a gibbet thrown up on a city dump. How many of us have even begun to imagine what it is like to find the company of such a person forever delightful?