Chapter 8:

Inhabiting Texts and Being Discovered

I hope that, by the end of the last chapter, you may have felt yourself being caught up in a strange dynamic, finding yourself taken to a new place. Becoming part of a new people, through the work of an agency not your own, was quite disturbing. Yet it was ultimately extremely friendly to you. In this chapter, and the two that follow, we are going to spend more time exploring the strange dislocation and relocation which comes with finding yourself on the inside of this project. We will see how this process works, respectively, through text, desire, and sign—or, in more traditional language, how Scripture, prayer, and life in the Church can all be part of undergoing the act of communication we've been sinking into ever since the first chapter.

In fact, all of this has been an attempt to flesh out the picture we got from the road to Emmaus in our second chapter—to fill out the dynamic of the Crucified and Risen one coming alongside the confused disciples, interpreting and revealing himself to them, and their undergoing something as a result of his presence and its particular style. We've been adding layer upon layer, as it were, so that we get a richer and denser impression of what the Forgiving Victim in our midst is like, what he's about: the overall shape of our being shifted by him.

One of the dimensions of Jesus' presence to his disciples on the road to Emmaus was mediated to them through texts. You remember how Luke describes it: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:27). You may also remember the sense I gave to Luke's use of the word "interpret": that the crucified and living victim had become the living interpretative principle in their midst. I emphasised that the forgiving victim had not merely added to their store of infor-

mation by producing a list of proof texts. Instead, he took the whole story which was familiar to them and which had given them being—through the texts of Moses and all the prophets. He gave this back to them in such a way that they found themselves occupying a new place through those texts, one they could never have reached off their own bats but which, once received, made unified sense to them. It told them the truth about who they were, where they were coming from, and where they were going.

In this chapter, I aim to offer you glimpses, through various New Testament texts, of this dynamic at work. The dynamic of people undergoing the dislocation—and potential relocation—of being inducted into a new people, by having a familiar story given back to them from an entirely unfamiliar starting point. And this is part of the process of their enlivening: being taken out of roles within the stories they were used to, and finding themselves given quite new roles and challenges within stories that empowered their imaginations towards new ways of acting. In short, people who discover that the living hermeneutical principle, which I identified with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, can become a constantly loving, self-critical presence in their lives. These are signs in our life of the Holy Spirit's presence: a sometimes tough, sometimes gently received, but always loving capacity for self-criticism, opening out into a new way of being human together.

Before we start looking at some New Testament texts, I want to remind you of an element of how we've come to understand being human since the first chapter. And that is how important stories are to our being human. Humans are story-receiving, story-sharing, and story-telling animals. This is a vital part of our physicality, of the relationship between bodies, space, time, growth and change. Often enough, we sense that, if we are to be real truth-tellers, we must flee bodiliness and the muck of human remembering. We must aspire to some immutable, perhaps mathematical or ideal, form of truthfulness. But it is as bodies and through bodiliness—which means, through the processes of working through memories, feelings, habits and so on—that we have access to what is true. Remembering really does mean re-membering, putting together in new ways things that had become narrative-free, or narrative-toxic—things strewn about without healthy connections making them part of a bearable story.

So undergoing any induction into a new people will work through the same mechanisms. The status of stories as constitutive of our humanity is not suddenly going to be suppressed; rather, it will be opened up and given new dimensions. And one of the ways this works is that the double status of stories will be constantly before our eyes. Events can be described in a way which closes down reality—which is comfortable, repetitive, reinforces tribal belonging, and ultimately depends on the right "bad guy" getting it in the neck. But the same events can also be recast in a way that challenges, discomfits, pulls us out of our comfort zone, and enables us to see ourselves as less than the completely admirable people whom we like to flatter ourselves that we are—but people who can nevertheless aspire to more.

Someone engaged in self-deception or self-flattery (which is almost all of us, much of the time) is not someone who has gotten a piece of information about themselves wrong. It is someone who is telling a story which may well be true, but from the wrong position within the story—taking our own part as too important, or as not important enough, persistently regarding as "light matter" things which have devastating effects on others, but remain invisible to us. Being unable to lose ourselves in the discovery of what is really going on in a story, instead creating a narrow survival zone with limited communication. Or, trying to re-tell the story in a way that flatters our current self-interest, turning it into a story "over against" others, whose story it might also be, and whose hopes for flourishing may depend on us losing our fake "goodness".

Throughout these chapters I've sought to bring out that all these positions within the telling of stories can relate to the central axis of the same story, either as told by those who find their togetherness at the expense of a victim, or as told by the forgiving victim at whose expense that togetherness was, and need no longer be, built. The discombobulation, the alteration, the enlivening power of the new story, is precisely that it shakes you out of your position in the story which was hardening into myth and lie, and drags you—in a way that is both painful and comforting—into having a story which we might call "new Creation": discovering what really is, and what your minor but real, dependent but collaborative role in it is. How it really is far more fun and enlivening than anything the old story could imagine.

Now let us turn to some New Testament glimpses of the Master at work: Jesus doing among his listeners what he would later do more fully on the road to Emmaus, and continues to do to us, through the same texts, by means of his liturgical presence in the Eucharist. And please note something about how I handle these texts: not as solemnly finished works of prose to be read out loud and assented to, but rather as carefully prepared manuals for preachers or expositors. In short, for storytellers, whose job it is to help the listener recover not only the events that happened, but also the dynamic sense of what was really going on in the interactions being re-membered, so that they can find themselves inside the stories. I think this is a more accurate take on what those texts are about.

Approaching the Gospel stories in this way also helps us understand why different Gospel writers tell the same story in different ways, and why the texts themselves are peppered with allusions and references to other texts and stories. This is not because the Gospel writers were trying to be clever, introducing subtle and complicated word games into their plots for later scholars to get their teeth into—as if they were saying: "Well, here's a simple story for the plebs, and hidden within it, a complicated set of word games for the Times Crossword addicts". Quite the reverse: the authors, following well-known techniques of their time, introduced cues, guidelines, and reminders into their texts so as to make it easier for the storytellers to tell the story well. Far from being some exercise in erudition, it is better to see the Gospel writers' technique as more like compiling "Cliffs Notes" or "Norton's Notes"—"The Dummy's guide to what Jesus Messiah was really about".

Mark 3:1-6

To get us going, let's look at a miracle story from early in Mark's Gospel (3:1-6):

> Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he

> said to the man who had the withered hand: "Come here." And he said to them: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man: "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

On first hearing this, you might think: "Well, it sounds perfectly straightforward: Jesus works a miracle on the Sabbath, which was against the Law, and the Pharisees get annoyed". In fact, read this way, the story is rather odd, since it makes the reaction of the Pharisees altogether over the top. It says they went out and immediately held a meeting with some other important people in order to destroy Jesus. But why did they get so worked up? Looked at this way, it makes it sound as though they were really Very Evil People, whose job it was to stand around like stage baddies watching on the Sabbath until Jesus did a miracle, then gnash their teeth and go off in a huff in order to plan some new trap—an ancient, bearded version of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner. Their reaction is completely excessive if we consider the story to be simply an account of a miracle. Even if you do have strictures about things happening on certain days, if something obviously good—like someone getting cured from a visible affliction—happens on such a day, you shrug and find wiggle-room to accommodate it and be pleased.

I once showed this passage to a Rabbi who wasn't familiar with the New Testament, and he immediately picked up the references at which we'll be looking. His training had prepared him well for just this sort of storytelling technique. So, let's see what's really going on here, and why it is a much more interesting story than Wile E. Coyote, and where the real rage of the Pharisees came from.

> Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

So here we have them preparing for a liturgical gathering, watching him. Also present is a man with a withered hand. The man with the withered hand is not asking to be healed; he's just there, maybe hoping for a healing, maybe not. The Pharisees are keen to see how Jesus copes with the situation. It's interesting that our word "accuse" translates a Greek word which gives us our word "category": they want to categorise him, put him in a box, fit him into the categories of their story. It is precisely this that will explode in their faces:

> And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here."

Jesus accepts the implicit challenge that he can read from the situation and calls out the man with the withered hand. It is as if he is saying "How awful that these people are using you as a prop in their testing of me. But bear with me if you can. I want to do something for you. If you allow yourself to be my overhead projector, my PowerPoint Presentation, then you will find yourself becoming very much more than a prop in an argument. I accept that there are category problems here for your brethren, boxes into which things apparently don't fit, and for breaking which I may be accused. But with your help, I'm going to turn this into a teaching opportunity—which is, after all, what is meant to happen in Synagogue on the Sabbath".

Next comes Jesus' comeback:

> And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

He now turns to the gathering and does to them what they thought they had done to him. He puts them on the spot by means of a difficult question. If they were to answer it, it would put them in contradictory boxes, rendering them liable to accusation.

Let's see what they would have understood from his tricky question. In the book of Deuteronomy, a text central to the Jewish project where Moses explains and teaches the Law to the people, there are several key moments of punctuation where Moses draws breath, as it were, and gets everybody present to assent to what he's teaching them.

Two of these very well-known passages, with which any adult male at least would have been familiar, are found roughly in the middle and at the end of the great liturgical gathering, which is how Deuteronomy represents Moses' sermon. So, in Deuteronomy 11:26-28, we read:

> Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods which you have not known.

Then, close to the very end of his speech, Moses says:

> See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

So Jesus is doing what should be done in a Sabbath liturgy: he is re-enacting Moses for them. It's as though he's saying: "OK guys, so Moses' Law prohibits certain things on the Sabbath? But here we are, celebrating the Sabbath by re-enacting Moses, and here we have someone with a withered hand. Well, I'm putting before you a choice, in exactly the same words as Moses did, because any attempt to re-enact Moses is always going to put before you this choice: the blessing if you obey, and the curse if you disobey. And obeying means pursuing life and good, and disobeying means pursuing death and evil. So here you are: are you really celebrating the Sabbath according to Moses? If you are,

you will certainly want me to choose life and good, and if you are not, then who are you to accuse me of disobeying the Law of Moses?"

Well, as you can imagine, this is an annoying question. Those gathered were not really expecting to have Moses re-enacted by this radical reinterpretation—one that went back to the roots—in their midst. It is an uncomfortable reminder that Moses, too, requires interpretation, and that he himself offers this interpretative principle, which Jesus has just brought out. If the choice is to follow the commandments, or not to follow them—to do good and choose life, or not to do good, and not to choose life—which is it to be? You can't, when faced with this choice, say: "I will obey the commandments, which means not choosing life". He's got them in a quandary: the whole point of what Moses was about, versus a particular passage from within that intention.

Well, they get it at once. They know exactly what he's saying, and they are paralysed by it. For them, Moses was someone they might use against him. But now, rather than retaliate, he's offered them real Moses as a question, insinuating that real Moses is against their Moses in a way that is perfectly clear to them. He's given them a self-evidently authoritative interpretation. When stuck, silence is the best answer:

> And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart (…)

Here we have a splendid example of a "Dummy's Guide" giveaway: the little phrase "hardness of heart". To anyone even slightly acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures, there's one person above all others who suffers from hardness of heart, and that's the Pharaoh of Egypt. God tells Pharaoh, through Moses: "Let my people go", and every time that the Pharaoh is about to do just that, he hardens his heart (or God hardens his heart, or in some way arterio-sclerosis creeps upon him), he desists from generosity, and he keeps the people in slavery.

So please notice what the Gospel writer is telling us that Jesus is doing when he observes the hardness of heart in those gathered. He's saying that Jesus, who had just interpreted Moses to them definitively, has gone a step further back than the giving of the Law. Now he is Moses, looking at the assembled Pharaoh, wondering with sadness why

the gathered Pharaoh, in its stuckness, will not "let my people go". And the man with the withered arm has become a stand-in for the people of Israel:

> (…) and [Jesus] said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

This crowns his teaching, rubs it in, if you like. First, they try to trap Jesus with a Moses trap. He says: "OK, you want Moses? I'll give you real Moses. But remember, if that is real Moses, then you are not the real Israel. No, this guy with the withered hand is Israel, and you are a kind of collective Pharaoh, but without the classy headgear".

And then, in order to make his point, he does something rather terrible to them: he enacts YHWH. On several occasions during the buildup to the Exodus, YHWH says to Moses "Stretch out your hand" or "Stretch forth your hand", which Moses then does, bringing confusion upon the gathered Egyptians (see, for instance Exodus 9:22; 10:12,21; 14:26—and also, suggestively, Numbers 11:23). YHWH's enactment through Moses' hand and arm had become central to the Exodus account as all of Jesus' listeners remembered. Let's look at Deuteronomy 4:32-35:

> For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the Earth, and ask from one end of Heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides Him.

Again, please remember that this was not an obscure passage for Jews. This is a central passage, of the sort that every bar-mitzvah kid would have recognised. It was as familiar to Jesus' listeners as the Sermon on the Mount is to kids brought up in Christian homes today. So when Jesus gets the man with the withered hand to stretch out his hand, he is in fact doing something totally recognisable to his audience: he has made the man a symbol of Israel rescued by YHWH. YHWH's mighty hand and outstretched arm suddenly has a symbol of its presence in the congregation. This means that Jesus has not only enacted Moses in their midst, but, much more bafflingly, he has enacted YHWH. For what else could possibly be the power behind, and the meaning in, this newly stretched-out hand and arm?

So Jesus has not only interpreted the Law of Moses from within, as it were, bringing out its deepest intention; he has not only shown how, in the light of that deepest intention, those who thought of themselves as Israel were behaving much more like Pharaoh. He has also confirmed his teaching, his interpretation, and their new place in a story his audience knew well, with an indisputable sign that it is YHWH who is at work in him.

Do you begin to see now why they might have gone out and held counsel with the Herodians on how to destroy him? What he has done is much worse than the peccadillo of curing someone on the Sabbath. He's told them a story, one they know perfectly well. But bizarrely, he's told them this story with their trap, the man with the withered hand, turned into a sign, such that they are hearing the story of their hero Moses as if for the first time, and from an uncomfortable angle. Not the familiar story of "We are the good guys, we are the spiritual heirs of Moses" but the contrary: "You are acting like the Pharaoh of Egypt, using Moses' law for exactly the reverse purpose of what Moses wanted. Moses, after all, was the person who led the people out of Egypt. And just in case you're wondering whether my interpretation is true or not, what was it that YHWH did? Oh yes, something about a mighty hand and an outstretched arm—you mean, like this guy here? Oh, and on the Sabbath? Oh, so sorry, YHWH's bad!"

Do you see what's just gone on here? It's not just a miraculous healing: it's a sign. Jesus' miracles are always signs, always within a con-

text. They're always pushing an interpretation, if you like. Something comes to be seen that was not seen before, and those who were convinced that they occupied a certain place in the story (usually a rather complacent and self-satisfied place) suddenly find themselves having to say "Whoa! Do you mean that, all along, we've been making Moses our prisoner, rather than allowing God to use Moses to set us free?" What Jesus has done is not merely the friendly act of making someone better on Saturday: he's thrown into the midst of his listeners a sign which, as they work out what it means, challenges—and threatens to up-end—their whole understanding of goodness and togetherness. We might insinuate ourselves into this scene: what story of ourselves as the good guys are we wedded to? How might that story be so turned around that its challenge produces in us the depth of anger we see here? How might we allow ourselves to be moved on from that anger, finding ourselves occupying a less flattering part of a new story—but one where we are actually liked as ourselves?

Luke 11:14-20

As we move on to our next glimpse of the Master, please remember the distinction I made between a miracle and a sign: the difference between something happening, and the meaning which people give to the happening. This is important, since in principle, happenings are undecidable. If you produce a cure, it might be a work of God—or it might be a work of the devil, depending on how the group in whose midst it occurs perceives it as affecting them. Signs are always part of an act of communication, and in the passage we're going to look at now, interpreting signs is very much in the foreground. So, to Luke 11:

> Now he was casting out a demon that was dumb; when the demon had gone out, the dumb man spoke, and the people marvelled. But some of them said: "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons."

Everyone present agreed that the demon had been cast out and that the person was now speaking. About the facts, there was no discussion.

The question was: "Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Does it come from a holy source, or is it someone's black arts?" The same facts could be read both ways. And, indeed:

> others, to test him, sought from him a sign from Heaven.

Others of those present say: "OK, we recognise what you've done, but what we need now is some sort of guarantee, to sort out the problem of interpretation. We need the divine "Made in Heaven" stamp to come down and brand this happening and assure interpretation. Miracles, as you know, are undecidable, so please produce the requisite sign from Heaven to back up your authenticity". Jesus, Luke tells us, knows quite well that this is what is going on—a discussion about the undecidability of signs, and what this means about his listeners—:

> But knowing their thoughts, (…)

So it is precisely to this discussion that he replies, by taking them straight into the middle of a very familiar story where the difference between silly, superficial signs and the real sign that is from God couldn't be clearer:

> …He said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

Luke gives us his "Dummy's Guide" hint towards the end of this passage, in the rather strange remark: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons…" The phrase "finger of God" doesn't appear very

often in the Scriptures. In a couple of instances, God uses his finger for writing. But there's a rather special place in Exodus where the finger of God appears, in an episode which every bar-mitzvah kid would know, because it's during the account of the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 8:19). This is a highly memorable story—and, actually, one of the great comic passages of the Bible.

Moses and Aaron go in to see the Pharaoh, to tell him to "Let my people go". Pharaoh tells them to prove their authenticity by working a sign (the same Greek word in Exodus as in our passage in Luke). So Aaron casts down his rod, and it turns into a serpent. Pharaoh calls his wizards, and they, too, use their magic arts to turn rods into serpents. Now, Aaron ups the stakes by turning the Nile into blood, something which would have devastated the lives, harvests, and economies of the Kingdoms of Egypt. A sensible Pharaoh with minimal public service instincts would have had his wizards turn the Nile back into sweet water. But no: caught in rivalry, Pharaoh's wizards manage the same trick as Aaron, except that it's entirely against their own interests—purely self-destructive.

For his next trick, Aaron produces a plague of frogs which covers the land of Egypt, causing chaos and discomfort everywhere. And once again, Pharaoh's genius wizards demonstrate their fecklessness by rivalling Aaron and producing yet more frogs. After these have been killed, gathered, and left to stink (thus causing yet more public distress) and the Pharaoh has yet again done what he does best (which is to harden his heart), Aaron produces a plague of gnats—an even sillier and more annoying magic trick. And, of course, Pharaoh's sorcerers go into a huddle to do the same.

But they can't. Something is wrong. The volume on spontaneous gnat production is missing from Hogwarts' library. Of all stupid things, it is the production of gnats that has them beat. So they go to Pharaoh and say "This is the finger of God"—their act of surrender.

That's the cue Luke gives us, which enables us to glimpse Jesus at work. It even provides us with a glimpse of Jesus' humour, adding a quirky touch to what is already a near-comic passage of Scripture. Effectively, Jesus is saying to them "OK, you're on! I've cast out the dumb demon. Some of you are saying this is the work of Beelzebub, and others

are asking for a sign to authenticate what I've done. Well, doesn't this take us back! Didn't Pharaoh ask Moses and Aaron for a sign? Don't you remember the silly fight between Aaron and the magicians of Egypt? In principle, no one could tell the difference between those tricks, each more idiotic than the other. There was only one difference, which is that, in Aaron's case, the plagues were produced to bully the Pharaoh into letting the people go. However, blinded by their rivalry, Pharaoh's court magicians produced identical tricks, but to purely self-destructive effect: every one an own-goal. What could be more stupid than evil men casting out evil spirits? That merely hastens the collapse of their power, just as Pharaoh's sages hastened the collapse of the Kingdom of Egypt by doing tricks against themselves.

"So, that's the playing field we're on: who's playing tit-for-tat with whom here? You have your own exorcists who cast out spirits just as I do. Which of us is Aaron, and which of us is acting out the blind rivalry of Pharaoh's magicians? Of course there is a real answer now, as there was then. Because the real sign from God wasn't any of the magic tricks, but what was at work underneath them all: the bringing of the people out of Egypt, making them into a new people with God. The real sign is on a completely different level from the tricks. So you tell me: this man, who had a dumb demon, now speaks. Which of us is Aaron and Moses, leading people out of slavery? And which of us is caught in self-destructive rivalries, which means we're part of Egypt and not part of the real Israel? (And for the record, doesn't the name "Beelzebub" often get corrupted to "Lord of the Flies", a derogatory term suggesting a turd, around which gather hosts of worshipping insects, devouring its incense? And wasn't the very next plague after the gnats a plague of flies? So, my delightful fellow countrymen, who are the real turd-sniffers here?)"

Do you begin to get a sense of what's going on? A story they would all of them have known, yet they find themselves suddenly occupying unexpected positions within that story—positions they would never have imagined themselves occupying without this shift. And yet the shift makes complete sense with relation to something they could see straightforwardly before their eyes, challenging them to consider their position within Israel or Egypt in their reaction to what is unfolding before them.

I also hope you get a sense of how much fun is going on in these teaching moments, as in so much rabbinical story telling: how many references to incidents which children will have known and understood well. The texts to which the Gospel writers point may be esoteric to us, but they were by no means esoteric to Jesus' audience.

Luke 13:10-17

Let us take another teaching moment, one which also contains both something very serious and a rich vein of fun:

> Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, He called her and said to her: "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." And He laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." Then the Lord answered him: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" As He said this, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by Him.

Well, once again we have a cure in a synagogue on a Sabbath—quite our regular backdrop. And again, we have an apparently over-the-top reaction: why would his adversaries have been that put out by what he did? After all, it was well-known in rabbinic literature that, in matters of injury and illness, the priority should be to save life on the Sabbath. And what was it that got all the people rejoicing at "all the glorious things" Jesus did? Luke, as always, is generous with his clues. He

takes us straight into the realm of ancient Israelite history, an episode with which you are probably not familiar but which the kids would have adored, for reasons which will soon become clear.

Luke's starting hint is a woman in the synagogue, who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years. Numbers are always good clues. So, you ask yourself, what else happened for eighteen years in the Hebrew Scriptures? The answer can be found in Judges 3:12-30, and you can imagine how well this would have gone down in bar-mitzvah class:

> And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. The LORD gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

So we have our eighteen years. In fact, the king of Moab had become a kind of symbol of evil oppressing the people of Israel.

Israel had been bent down by oppression for eighteen years, just like the woman in the synagogue…

> But when the people of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.

Eventually, the people cry out, and God gives them a deliverer. Interestingly, this is almost the only time in Scripture we get a reference to a left-handed person. You will see why it's going to be important:

> The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he girded it on his right thigh under his clothes.

Security checks at the time would have assumed right-handedness. Any visitor would have been patted down on his left thigh, which

is where a right-handed man would have strapped his sword. Not so Ehud; he could be patted down on his left thigh while keeping his sword hidden on his right.

> And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.

Why, it gets better and better! We have a fat baddy king, Eglon. We can imagine him rather like Jabba the Hutt from *StarWars*.

> And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people that carried the tribute. But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said: "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he commanded: "Silence". And all his attendants went out from his presence. And Ehud came to him, as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said: "I have a message from God for you." And he arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly; and the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out.

You can imagine how the kids would have loved this—it is gross in a suitably kid-titillating way!

> Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber upon him, and locked them. When he had gone, the servants came; and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought: "He is only relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber."

As any storyteller can imagine, it's not only the locked doors that will have given the servants the impression their boss was on the loo. The emanating smell must have given them a hint that he was having a bad attack of flatulence.

> And they waited till they were utterly at a loss; but when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, [*Or, when they realised not even Jabba the Hutt could have flatulence that bad…*] they took the key and opened them; and there lay their lord dead on the floor.

Ehud, of course, escapes and leads the people of Israel in an uprising, delivering them from the power of Moab and giving them eighty years of peace. You can imagine the bits of this story at which the kids would have laughed—what's not to love? We have the people of Israel bound down, crying out to the Lord, and the Lord sending them a deliverer. We get a wonderful hero of old, a famous lefty, a very fat baddy king, smelly details, and an incredible rescue.

What a contrast from the synagogue where Jesus finds himself on this Sabbath! Here is a woman who has been bound for eighteen years. But is she crying out? Is she asking for a deliverer? Not a squeak from her or anybody else. She's just there. Jesus sees her and calls her out. She hasn't asked for it. But her unexpected—and unrequested—cure is going to be another rich sign not only of her being loved, but of what being Israel is all about. He lays his hands on her, and she is immediately made straight.

The man in charge of the synagogue, however, is not amused. In fact, he behaves like Eglon, saying to the people the equivalent of "Silence!" and sending them away. Effectively, he's saying "Get your delivery elsewhere. Here, you should be ordered and well-behaved, and just stay bowed down". In other words, a re-enactment of Eglon rather than Ehud. Not only are the contemporary people of Israel not crying out for a deliverer, unlike their glorious forebears, but when one turns up, the leader of the synagogue turns all Moab on him! (As you can imagine, the synagogue leader would not have been amused at the insinuation that he is impersonating old toad-features).

Then we get a fascinating exchange. After the Synagogue leader has done his Eglon impression, sending the servants away and being an old fart (to use Scripture's implicit imagery) while trying to prevent people from being delivered, Jesus answers him in rather strange language. He says

You hypocrites.

And, oddly, he explicitly addresses the synagogue leader with the plural word, before turning to all those present: this suggests that, once again, we have a clue to help us interpret what is going on. And so we do: for while the word "hypocrites" is quite familiar to us, it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures hardly at all—in fact, only in one place, in the plural form, in the Greek of the book of Job, Chapter 36. We will have a look at it, so as to see Jesus doing something which he does not only here, but in a number of different places. He puts together entirely unrelated texts, which seem to have nothing to do with each other, and from out of them he produces a quite specific point.

So here is the passage from the book of Job:

> Behold, God is mighty, and does not despise any; He is mighty in strength of understanding. God does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right. God does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings upon the throne he sets them for ever, and they are exalted. And if they are bound in fetters and caught in the cords of affliction, then God declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. God opens their ears to instruction, and commands that they return from iniquity. If they hearken and serve Him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. But if they do not hearken, they perish by the sword, and die without knowledge. **The godless in heart cherish anger**; they do not cry for help when he binds them. They die in youth, and their life ends in shame. God delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity. God also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no cramping, and what was set on your table was full of fatness. (Job 36:5-16)

The phrase, which is here translated as "godless in heart" is the phrase which in Greek is translated "Hypocrites". We can see exactly why Jesus used this word. It beautifully describes what he has found in

the Synagogue on this Sabbath: people who cherish their own resentment, and do not cry out for help when bound.

In fact, we can begin to get a glimpse of Jesus' teaching by the way he brings together the Ehud story and the Job passage around his healing of the woman who had been bound for eighteen years. He comes into the synagogue, which is supposed to be the gathering of Israel, and what does he find? Israel bound down in affliction, symbolized by this woman here with her eighteen years of suffering. But unlike the Israel of old, is anybody crying out to the Lord for delivery? Not a bit! In fact, the Synagogue leader is behaving much more like Eglon than like Ehud. Both he and those present have become godless in heart—hypocrites—since, rather than cry out and actually long for help, they would rather sit complacently, gnawing over their own affliction.

But this is not what the Real Israel is about at all! The real Israel cried out to YHWH for deliverance and, in the absence of that, YHWH comes into their midst to give the afflicted their right. If they are bound in fetters, and caught in the cords of affliction: "he declares to them their work… that they are behaving arrogantly." So please notice that Jesus is even now enacting in their midst what YHWH does: rebuking them from their arrogance and their weddedness to resentment, which leads them to fail to cry out. But he is also delivering the afflicted by her affliction, and opening the ears of all of them through her adversity. You can even imagine Jesus pointing out that the whole point of the Synagogue meeting is for Israel to be taken out of distress, led to a broad place, and given a table full of fatness—not the sort of fatness symbolized by Eglon and his silence-commanding contemporary stand in!

The overall dynamic is of YHWH visiting His people in the midst of a synagogue meeting, so as to bring out what Real Israel is genuinely all about, full of power and excitement as in the sagas of old, showing them in three dimensions what it truly is to be a child of Abraham. You can begin to get a sense of how a synagogue full of people suddenly found itself hoiked out of its ordinary routine. All its participants find themselves occupying different places within the stories; brought, if they could accept being urged to cry out more, to a real sense of what all the glories of Israel were really all about. These people were undergoing a visitation from YHWH; no wonder they rejoiced "at all the glo-

rious things that were done by him." As for those for whom synagogue has become a Moabite cult—in which, as it says in the book of Job, resentful people go down to their graves in shame because they don't cry out—well:

His adversaries were put to shame.

Luke 19:1-6

The shifts in understanding that Jesus provokes are not only accomplished by means of texts, along with the aid of three-dimensional props. The teaching is conveyed through physical actions, such as gestures and the undoing of potentially dangerous crowd mechanisms, as we will see in our final example: the story of Zacchaeus. It is a wonderful example of how highly compact details can yield a rich psychological account of an interaction.

In this passage, we find ourselves towards the end of Jesus' public ministry. Owing to the spreading accounts of his various signs in both Galilee and Judaea, He is a well-known public figure with a reputation—the sort of person on whom the gaze of the crowd is easily fixed, what we would call a celebrity.

He entered Jericho and was passing through.

So, as far as everybody in Jericho is concerned, Jesus is just walking through the city. He's not coming to stay. He doesn't have a gig planned for them, so those who want to catch a glimpse of the celebrity will have to watch him as he passes through:

> And there was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature.

We get a number of interesting hints concerning Zacchaeus. The first is that he was a chief tax collector. Now this doesn't mean, as it would probably mean for us moderns, that he was a high-ranking em-

ployee of the Inland Revenue Service. Even if we all dislike taxes, we don't automatically think that government bureaucrats are wicked individuals. But that wouldn't have been the case then. Zacchaeus would have been something much closer to a quisling, a traitor, than a modern public servant. The Romans, as the colonial power, naturally wanted to tax their subjects. But they couldn't be bothered to set up a complicated bureaucracy of their own to do that. So they did something much simpler: estimated the revenue they could squeeze out of a particular location in a year, then sold the right to farm those revenues in that locality to the highest bidder. Thus, they got a good proportion of the revenue they would have gotten had they done so themselves, but without the cost of enforcing collection. The Revenue farmer effectively became the local enforcer of foreign taxation and someone who would expect to profit from it.

As you can imagine, such persons were not popular with their fellow citizens! Even if any rational compatriot of Zacchaeus knew perfectly well that taxes would be levied and collected, whoever was in charge, verbal darts like "Profiteer" and "Quisling" would doubtless have come zinging towards Zacchaeus' ears on a regular basis.

In addition to being a tax collector, Zacchaeus is rich. Whether it is because he was rich that he was able to afford to buy the right to farm the taxes, or he had become rich owing to his zeal in the collection of the same, we are not told. But the combination of these two factors—his position and his riches—already speaks to the complicated nature of his relationship with his fellow citizens. He is, in fact, in a dangerous situation: on the one hand he is a half-insider, half-outsider: one of us, but also one of them. On the other hand, he is also rich, so the object of a certain fascination and envy, as well as perhaps of interested friendships in order to get occasional loans. Apparently, however, he is enough of an insider to be tugged by the same allure as the crowd. They are drawn by fascination with a celebrity figure, and he is drawn with them. Normally, someone like him would be very wary of the moments when his fellow citizens might coalesce into a crowd. If you were as ambiguous a friend to them as he was, their crowd moments would be good times to make yourself scarce, but here he is aware of being drawn by the same fascination as they.

However, Zacchaeus has a further reason to be careful in crowds: he is small. Small people get trampled in crowds. They get trampled by mistake because sometimes people in crowds don't see what they're doing. But if, in addition to being small, you are a person of ambivalence to the crowd members, then accidental trampling can acquire inverted commas—becoming "accidental", as when that which is deliberate, that which is deniable, and that for which no one need take responsibility conveniently come together.

Alongside this, there come to mind some reasons why those small in stature are sometimes driven, ambitious, Napoleon-like: you're constantly having to look up to people, to prove yourself, to be noticed. You're often looked down upon by people, accustomed to being made to feel inferior.

You can begin to see the many different insights into the relationship between Zacchaeus and his fellow citizens that Luke gives us with a very few brushstrokes:

> So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way.

Zacchaeus—driven by the same desire as the crowd but taking appropriate, prudent steps to achieve that desire without the inconveniences of the *mêlée*—climbs a tree on the route that Jesus is likely to take. Please notice what he has done: he has shown himself run by the same desire as the crowd, but with a capacity to stand back from that desire somewhat, not to be so run by it that he is put in danger. Like them, he seeks to see who Jesus is, but he is wise enough to know that—in order to see who Jesus is—he needs to be at one remove from a crowd.

Luke's key words in this passage are directional and interactional, seeking and seeing within the context of crowd dynamics:

> And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Here we have this rather wonderful, physical moment. Jesus has been moving along through Jericho like the eye of a hurricane, with the outlying crowd milling all around him to see him. The centre of attention has been calm and peaceful. Suddenly, the centre of attention looks up to where Zacchaeus is, carefully hidden in a place from which he could see but where he wouldn't easily be seen.

Please consider how odd this is for Zacchaeus: small of stature, he was entirely unaccustomed to being looked at from beneath by anyone at all. On the contrary, part of his complex relationship with everyone was that they looked down on him, and he had to look up at them. Yet here, without any warning at all, for the first time in ages, he is looked at from underneath. He has no armour underneath. He has no habit of protecting himself from being looked at from beneath. He is well accustomed to deflecting less than friendly looks from above, but the only people who could conceivably look at him from beneath were infants and children, people not dangerous to him.

And it is not any old glance that he now receives from beneath. Zacchaeus has been following the crowd's fascination with Jesus, has been watching them watching Jesus, and has been drawn in by their fascination with Jesus. Jesus occupies the centre of what is, for Zacchaeus, a potentially dangerous whirlwind. That is where he does not want to be. All that chargèdness is now standing directly beneath him. But the one who stands there, looking up, is not in any way mediating all the dangerousness, the stress, the ambivalence of the crowd. It turns out that the one looking at him doesn't sear his soul with a terrifying regard. Quite the reverse. This regard has nothing at all to do with the spirit of the crowd. Zacchaeus is suddenly seen, called by name, and summoned down with haste. The centre of group fascination—playing host to whom would have been the dream of not a few in the crowd—has pushed right through all their potential for jealousy, fear and violence. He has simultaneously commanded hospitality and also made himself vulnerable to put himself beneath the regard of this complex little fellow:

So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully.

Personally, I find it difficult to imagine the depth of joy, the shake-up to his entire being, which this regard from beneath would have produced in Zacchaeus with its demand to be hospitable by making itself vulnerable. At one blow, the fear has been taken out of all of the complexities of his relationship with his fellow citizens. All its strange double binds have been loosed. He is suddenly set free to relate in an entirely new way.

> And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

The fellow citizens themselves don't get it at all. They still behave very much like a crowd. And crowds have very fickle relationships with celebrities. Crowds want celebrities to be the standard bearers of their values and passions. Their fascination can turn from curiosity to adulation, to murmurs, to rage in very short order. Here, they are not at all amused that the celebrity hasn't backed up their sense of good and bad, right and wrong. The murmuring of a crowd is always an ominous sign:

> And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold."

But Zacchaeus is no longer cowed, no longer hiding, no longer small, no longer run by the way he was tied into the crowd before. Luke emphasises the physical gesture: Zacchaeus stands tall, and immediately sets about reconstructing a whole new way of "being together" with his fellow citizens. He is not concerned with his goodness or badness, only happy to work through the details and accusations of impropriety, about which the murmuring crowd will have had more than a thing or two to say. But more than that, he is completely concerned with his new way of belonging to Israel.

> And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham."

This is what Jesus emphasizes, as in our previous passage from Luke, where the straightened woman is also a daughter of Abraham: YHWH delights in including people, in bringing the most improbable and indeed unsuitable people back in;YHWH has no delight in resentful righteousness:

> For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

Luke ends by pointing up something which was, I hope, also clear in the Emmaus passage which we looked at in Chapter 2. There, the two travellers thought they were the hosts and Jesus their guest, only to find that he was hosting them and had all along been the protagonist in the story of which they had thought themselves knowledgeable. Part of what Jesus' presence feels like in the midst of people is just this curious inversion of perspective and protagonism. At the beginning of our story here, it is Zacchaeus who seeks to see who Jesus is, working around all the complexities of his relationship with the crowd so as to get a glimpse. But from the moment that Jesus looks up at him, calls him by name and tells him he must spend the night in his house, it is clear that the whole protagonism has been inverted. Not only is it, once again, the apparent guest who is the real host: all along, it was the regard of another Other that was deliberately seeking this particular person, Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus' seeking of Jesus had been real, if still embryonic; it was the seeking of someone who was tied up in a very complex pattern of desire. Perhaps the beginning of Zacchaeus' being found lay in the fact that, as part of his lostness, he had to begin uncoupling himself from the immediacy of crowd desire, just to get a look at Jesus. Even that uncoupling, leading to his moment of unexpected vulnerability, is part of the process, part of receiving the regard which recreated him. It is part of what being sought and found by another Other looks like.

The Hosea Instruction and Putting Our Own Examples to Work

As you can imagine, there is no shortage of other passages from the New Testament which we could read in the same way, bringing out what I

have called "glimpses of the Master" as well as hints at the sorts of shifts we might find ourselves undergoing in his presence. I'd just like to end by pointing out that this business of inhabiting texts and being turned around by them is not simply something which clever people after Jesus have come up with as a way of reminding us what Jesus was about. Nor is it something Jesus did merely because he was a great teacher. It is something he very solemnly instructs people to do for ourselves.

There are a couple of occasions in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus quotes the same passage of Scripture to the same effect. The passage in question is Hosea 6:6:

> For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

Some of our translations read "mercy" rather than "steadfast love", but the sentiment is the same. On the first occasion that Jesus uses this passage (Matthew 9:13), He says to the Pharisees who have just been grumbling about the people He is hanging out with:

> Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Jesus is not saying to them "I think you should go and look up the text of Hosea". He's saying "You all know what God says in the Prophets: 'I want mercy and not sacrifice.' But this is not just a particular commandment. It is a reading instruction, a hermeneutical key. Whenever you interpret anything, you can read it two ways: in such a way that your interpretation creates mercy, and in such a way that it demands sacrifice. It is perfectly possible to read the law such that it creates a group of the good and casts someone out. It is also perfectly possible to read the law as something always to be made flexible for the benefit of those who need reaching and bringing into richer life, for leaving the good to look after themselves and going after the lost sheep. But only one of these two is acting in obedience to the word in Hosea".

So when Jesus tells the Pharisees "Go and learn what this means" he is saying: "Go and sit under this word, and allow it to become the in-

terpretative key in your approach to your fellow human beings". "Mercy" and "sacrifice" are not here discrete religious gestures; each is an entire anthropology of God's desire, and they are incompatible with each other. This is even clearer in Jesus' second use of the word from Hosea (Matthew 12:7):

> And if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the guiltless.

What is meant by "sacrifice" is not only whatever goes on in the Temple. It is the act of creating goodness over against others who are then judged, condemned as guilty and treated as sinners. In other words, there is a whole anthropology behind the word "sacrifice", and Jesus is telling his listeners: "Hosea is giving you a reading instruction. Allow whatever you do—your teaching, your whole moral enterprise—to be rocked to the core by this question: am I discovering my equality of heart with potentially inconvenient others, and thus welcoming them in—or am I acting out in such a way that I'm making myself good at someone's expense? However, please note that it's always one or the other, and it's always a matter of taking responsibility for your interpretation. Don't think that, by getting the rules right, you will always obey the commandment. It is only by sitting under this word over time, sinking for yourselves into a sense of where the two anthropologies clash, that you will learn how to live it out".

I want to stress that Jesus is not being rude to the Pharisees. He is offering a lesson in reading technique, something with which they would have been familiar. He is supplying them, if you like, with the hard grammar of a criterion from outside themselves, something that is constantly available to them to challenge what they're doing. This criterion is the shape by which the other Other is available to us, in our midst. In each case that we've looked at, this is what we have seen Jesus reveal, and here—in his quotations of Hosea—He is explaining what we've seen him do.

I hope you can begin to imagine how many ways we can find of putting this to work for ourselves, just by taking famous passages of Scripture which we know perfectly well. Think, for instance, of John's passion narrative, which is sung or recited each year in our Churches on

Good Friday. If we take part in this, we typically think of ourselves as doing something good and imagine that, if we had been there, we would have been on Jesus' side, not swept up into the hostile crowd. In fact, the liturgy asks us to do precisely the reverse: it requires us to come together to shout out "Crucify him! Crucify him!" at different points, reminding us that we would most likely have been full of enraged righteousness, blind to what was going on. And there is the other Other, puncturing us from the place of the victim and taking us into a different perception of who we are and what we do, so that we may be caught, here and now, in whatever analogous situation we find ourselves in, and taken into a new way of being.

You remember the story we heard in Chapter 6, of the Gerasenes and Crazy Joe? At what moments might we find ourselves rocked as they were by our apparently less-than-human other becoming human? In the last Chapter, we will look in detail at the story of the Good Samaritan. Still, it won't spoil the story if even at this early stage you can imagine how that might work: someone who thought of themselves as on the right side has their sense of goodness challenged as they are forced to recognise that it was a repugnant other—a despised foreigner—who showed real goodness. And real goodness looked like attention to a real victim, and not making sure that sacrifice was properly carried out in the Temple.

Similarly, the story of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8:2-11), the different accounts of Jesus' interacting with prostitutes—all of these can leave their pages as stories about a more-or-less caricatural "them" in some distant past, and become moments in which we perceive that another Other has uncovered us. They haven't uncovered us so as to humiliate us, but to give us more. They want to share with us their joy, their enthusiasm, at their discovery of us.