

CHAPTER 11:

A Little Family Upheaval

You may remember how, in Chapter 1, we looked at this passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also God created the world. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

The passage started in a way which, whether we believed it or not, was a more or less recognisable form of discourse. However, pretty quickly, the author of the passage “jumped the shark” by telling us that the historical person to whom he was referring, Jesus, was somehow involved in the creation of the world—that everything had, in fact, been made through him. I compared this to a “Napoleon” moment: an apparently rational interlocutor suddenly slips into the conversation the matter-of-fact observation that he is, in fact, Napoleon, and then carries on unembarrassed, as though no normal listener would be phased by the revelation that l’empereur himself is addressing them.

Now, in this penultimate chapter, we are in a better position to make some sense of that apparent “Napoleon” moment. And, like all true crazies, rather than blushing and backing down from my little slip, I’m going to double down on it because it’s not just an incidental “extra” in the New Testament, which turns up in one or two fringe texts. It is explicitly mentioned in several places (John 1:1-2; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:15-20; Ephesians 1:3-14). At the end of this chapter, it might be interesting for you to look up some of these texts for yourself, to see if they make more sense after what you will be exposed to

in the following pages!) And implicitly—which means narratively—it turns up, as I will show you, right in the centre of everything. The vision that yields that “Napoleon” moment is central to the whole explosion of meaning which has thrown up the New Testament as its monument. I rather hope that, during our course, we’ve undergone enough shifts in our understanding that now we will be able to find ourselves on the inside of this vision without too much difficulty!

Let me just remind you briefly of one of those shifts, to prepare us for the delicacy of what I hope to introduce you to. You may remember that, when we looked at the Burning Bush passage in Chapter 4, I tried to bring out the difference between an I AM account and a “He, She or It is” account of God. A god who can be referred to as “He, She or It” very quickly becomes a function of our manipulation, an object about whom we can talk, or which we can describe. In doing so, we become the starting place, and the god in question fits in with our scheme of things, making us effectively the real “gods” in the story. With I AM, on the other hand, the starting place is not us, and cannot be grasped by us. We discover ourselves to be peripheral beings as I AM approaches us. In this latter account, the more time we spend in the presence of I AM, the more we are aware that, not only we ourselves, but everything that is, is shot through with what I might call “secondariness”: we catch a glimpse of ourselves as real, contingent, alive; we find ourselves reflecting back that we are held in being by something prior to us, something not at the same level as ourselves at all, not in rivalry with anything. This “secondariness” is not a form of diminishment or being put down, but an accurate and objective sense of createdness—something that can be relaxed into with gratitude.

Exploring “Secondariness”

In order to have a better sense of this “secondariness”, I’m going to ask you to spend a little more time inside the shift I’ve been setting out. I’m going to ask you to recall a couple of illustrations from our earlier chapters. In Chapter 6, I asked you to engage in the imaginative exercise of remembering a moment in your past in which you had been forgiven

for something. To help kick-start the exercise, I gave the example of little Johnny, who had stolen a Mars bar from Mrs O'Reilly's corner store. I asked what it was like for little Johnny to be brought back to the store and to be approached by Mrs O'Reilly. She was not so much forgiving of him as she was not offended by him in the first place: the loss of the Mars bar from her stock had scarcely registered as somehow an attack on her. So interested was she in little Johnny's well-being that she had interpreted his having stolen the Mars bar as a sign that there was something wrong. More than anything else, she wanted to ensure that he was okay.

For Johnny, the experience of being forgiven—and for him it was indeed being forgiven, since he knew perfectly well that he'd done something wrong and was expecting punishment—felt at first like a disorienting challenge. He found himself held in eyes that were looking at him from a completely unexpected perspective: eyes that were not part of any tit-for-tat, any system of control, or payback, or desert. And yet, as he allowed himself to be looked at by them, as he consented to their gaze, he found himself being let go from his own guilty weddedness to what he'd done, and taken into the space of a new friendship with Mrs O'Reilly—a new space in which he'd actually become someone he didn't yet know, part of a new “we” into which he was being invited.

The second illustration appeared in our last chapter, as part of my attempt to bring out the raucous, laughter-filled nature of the joy that is central to the heavenly banquet. I asked you to consider a form of laughter which is not cruel: the laughter which flows when someone is enabled to laugh at themselves. Like experiencing forgiveness, a healthy learning to laugh at yourself is a very delicate and rich experience. It involves learning to detect the laughing eyes of, say, a group of people you are with, as affectionate—not hostile, and not out to get you. So if you laugh along with them, you are not simply agreeing to be “put in your place”, consenting to a cruel act of putting you down. Your laughing at yourself is not a subtle form of colluding with the gang of those who are against you, agreeing to your own lynching, as it were. On the contrary, you're able to intuit that the laughter in the eyes of the others is well-intentioned—that it likes you, rejoices in you, doesn't take you too seriously in some areas where maybe you've been tempted to take

yourself too seriously. Precisely because those merrily laughing eyes are looking at you with this affection, you find yourself able to accept their invitation to join in with their appreciation of you, to allow them to guide you in how you perceive yourself, to sit loose to whatever bits of self-importance were clouding your ability to join in with them. In fact, you are given the gift of being able to receive yourself back graciously and flexibly as part of a richer belonging with them. Far from being put down by this experience, you have been loosened up, opened to discovering how much more you are than you had thought, and how much more fun it is to be you with these other people than you had previously imagined.

I hope it is clear what these experiences have in common. Both little Johnny and the person learning to laugh at themselves started with some sense of self, which they more or less knew about and more or less held to. However, they found themselves undergoing a hugely healthy shift in perception, such that *who they are doesn't start with them*. Each of them starts to receive themselves from what is other—freely, and in a way which opens them out. Furthermore, each of them comes to perceive that this receiving of themselves through the eyes of others is something objective, real, and to be grateful for. Precisely because they are receiving themselves through the eyes of what is other than they, they glimpse that their own knowing, their own perceiving—formed as it is by that experience of receiving—is peripheral, is a symptom of something which doesn't start with them. In other words, there is a certain dependence—that “secondariness” I mentioned earlier, if you like—which corresponds to who they are, to their place in the world, to their way of learning about people and things. This secondariness does not go along with any sense of being “second rate” or “only second”. Instead, it is accompanied by a sense of relief and the possibility of opening out. The person undergoing this secondariness will find themselves becoming more than they had thought. Elements of their past, which seemed central and sources of fixity, if not fixation, are being relativised, and other elements of their past which had not seemed of importance or worth are gradually turning into having been, all along, unexplored, rich foundations for a direction, an achievement, and a shared flourishing that is only now opening up.

Let's hold these experiences of "secondariness" a moment longer, if we can, rather than rush through them and onto the next thing. Let's imagine that little Johnny spends time undergoing Mrs O'Reilly's generous move towards him, or that I spend time relishing the ways my friends are giving me back to myself by drawing me into their laughter at me in such a way that it enables me to laugh at myself. While I'm held in that experience, part of the aliveness of the moment in which I glimpse my "secondariness" is that it is a moment of someone else's presence towards me, which opens for me my own relationship to my past and to my future. The longer I'm held in their regard, the more easily I am able both to remember and to cope with my past, and to imagine a future to which I can aspire.

While I was just trudging along by myself, not catching myself in the regard of someone else, it was quite simple: my past was behind me, and there was nothing I could do about it. And my future was before me, and who knows what possible knocks or joys it would bring, other than the usual: death and taxes.

However, the experience of undergoing something in the present at the hands of someone much stronger than myself gives us something very curious: a sense, starting strictly in the present (which is the only moment at which I can be reached), that there is an outside to my past and to my future. On the one hand, my "becoming" is enlivened such that I experience being reached from a future that is not yet me but which is pulling me in; on the other hand, in ways I hadn't anticipated, my past is alive and flexible. Parts of it that seemed important were in fact heading nowhere, and surprising parts of it were already tending in a friendly way to whom I am now discovering myself to be. Who I thought I was, and who I think I am becoming, are both simultaneously altered by the quality of presence of the other who has moved alongside me—Mrs O'Reilly, or my group of raucous friends.

An Extra-planetary Interlude

To take this further, before exploring with you what's going on inside some New Testament narratives, I'm going to ask you to engage in a

further imaginative exercise. Please imagine that you are a large, complacent, bureaucratic ruler on a small, firm planet somewhere in space, rather like in one of those illustrations from *The Little Prince*. You are convinced that you are standing on stable ground, and appear to have good reason to think so. Things seem pretty regular. You govern all that you survey, dispensing order with what seems to you to be fairness, punishing the bad, and rewarding those who support you in keeping the good, good. You are able to deduce, from everything you can see, a considerable amount about how things work and how they should be. In line with that knowledge, you have made yourself, to your considerable satisfaction, the master of it all.

Now imagine that, in the far horizon of outer space, there appears a small dot. Not very important, really. However, this dot seems to grow, and grow, and grow. What was, in the first place, scarcely even an object of curiosity for you and your astronomers turns into something rather bigger. As it grows larger and larger, it also impinges upon and gradually fills out your field of vision. But in fact, the object is not growing: it is vastly bigger than your planet, an unimaginably large star that appears to be moving towards you at scarcely calculable speed. It seems to be moving out of nowhere, coming ever closer to your planet.

However, that is not what is going on at all. It is not *it* that has been moving towards *you*. On the contrary, *you* have been gradually pulled towards *it*. So big is it that its own movement is scarcely detectable, despite the fact that you are being drawn in by its gravitational pull. As you come closer to this star, its own gravitational forces adjust your planet to its orbit. This causes the axis of your planet to tip ever so slightly, completely throwing what had seemed like its stability and security. Now, all the dwellers on the planet begin to move in ways that—from your complacent, bureaucratic standpoint—are unexpected and unpredictable.

As your planet starts to undergo this new draw, finding itself in the train of a new direction, you—and of course your “grateful” subjects—begin to realise, as you look back at where you had been, that what had, up until now, seemed so stable and regular, so firm and predictable, was in fact no such thing. Up until the time when you started being drawn into the orbit of the colossal star—and way, way before you began to appreciate what was going on—the whole of your planet had already been

dangerously out of kilter: in a manner far beyond anything which your planet-bound, complacent, bureaucratic, powers might be able to control, your planet had been gradually tipping backwards into the maw of a black hole. This you can only begin to appreciate now, as you find yourself safely in the draw of the huge star, and can now look behind you to see what had really been going on. This is something which none of you, except for a few crazies whose opinions you had rubbished and whom you had kept out of circulation, had even begun to perceive before.

As the draw of the gigantic star pulls the little planet further into its train, a new kind of regularity begins to emerge in your way of life: a regularity wholly dependent on a star of whose existence you had until recently been entirely ignorant. Imagine your shock, stable and complacent as you are, as you come to perceive how all the stability, all the order over which you thought you had been presiding, had in fact been so much fakery. Real stability and security looks like nothing less than a wild adventure of being drawn into the tail of this hugely powerful star. Neither you nor anybody who mattered on your planet had even come close to perceiving what had really been running your show before, when fixity seemed all, and movement seemed so threatening. The power of the black hole had been entirely invisible, even as it had been sucking you in.

So, there's something of a shock, yes—especially for you, since you were so invested in stability and order, in what had until just recently passed as goodness. But there is also the excitement—especially for those under you, many of whom had been burdened by your pretentious righteousness. You can imagine them, rather to your discomfort, beginning to rejoice as they discover parameters of existence and ways of being about which your rule had known nothing, and of which it would have heartily disapproved if it had. While you are in shock, they are adjusting remarkably quickly to the delight of finding themselves to be an unfinished project being drawn into the movement of the immensely powerful star, learning the ropes of who they are to become. You, on the other hand, are more or less paralysed, not sure whether to batten down the hatches, proclaim nothing has changed, and try to re-assert your control, or whether, in some way, and preferably without being too greatly humiliated, to get to grips with the new direction

of things. To lower your pretensions and allow yourself to join those whom you thought of as your subjects in being redefined by the unexpected star.

I've given you this image for two reasons. In the first place, it illustrates the change of perspective which occurs when what seemed like a not-particularly-significant object in your ken begins moving towards you, and turns out to be not so much an object as a vastly superior force moving you towards it. In other words, it illustrates the shift from an "it starts with me" perspective to a glimpse of that "secondariness" I've been trying to bring out.

But more specifically: in the illustration I've just given you, there is a particular moment of awareness which I've referred to as the "tipping of the axis". This is the moment when, as you are being shifted into the new perspective, you are able to look back at where you were coming from and see it in an entirely new light. "Oh my God, to think that I used to believe that was normal and stable! As I move out of that space, I can see what it was really like, something that was really grinding me down, sucking me out of being. And what enables me to glimpse this is the hugely more powerful draw which is pulling me into a much richer and more enlivened space". Simultaneously, there is, coming upon you, both a sense of delight at what you are becoming and a sense of shock at how wrong you were about what you now find yourself leaving behind. You are on the dynamic cusp of something where two different realities are peeling away from each other: one is spinning round on itself, turning down into futility and nothingness; the other, inside which you are beginning to discover yourself, is being spun open into a richer and more demanding participation in the life of something beyond itself.

A Non-moralistic Account of Sin and Original Sin

One of my reasons for giving you this planetary image (which, like all such images, is severely inadequate) is that it brings out something which can very easily get lost in presentations of Christianity. When we talk about what Jesus came to do, did, and is doing in our midst, *we are talking about what comes upon us as an alteration of the axis of Creation,*

rather than as the resolution of a moral problem. Our being brought close into the life of God by Jesus being a forgiving victim in our midst has this as its effect: that we perceive, simultaneously, where we used to be heading—into an ever-shrinking world run by revenge, envy and death—and where we are instead finding ourselves drawn: into being forgiven, forgiving, and thus being opened up into true, insider knowledge of Creation as it unfolds dynamically.

In the order of apparent logic, an “it” God created an “it” world in which we find ourselves. We do something wrong, and need forgiving by an “it” intervention which puts things right. In the order of discovery, we only discover the beginning through our experience in the middle: I AM is determined to make alive in us the wonder of being God, and so decides to involve us in the inside of Creation. Our access to being drawn into this insider status comes as we discover ourselves as “being forgiven”, having our basic paradigm for being human altogether undone from within by our forgiving victim hoiking us into a richer draw—or pattern of desire—than that which used to run us. From within this richer draw, we can see the futility of what we were holding onto before. We were, in fact, resisting being created, while holding instead to our futile security; we were locked into a way of being less than human, a way that depends on making victims.

Being forgiven is prior to being created. This is really what the very ancient Christian doctrine of “Original Sin” teaches. Far from it being a moralistic doctrine based on dodgy palaeontology and insufficient knowledge of genetics, it is the insistence on that very delicate “backward glance from the cusp of the new creation” as vital to any understanding of who we are finding ourselves to be and of how we should behave. To bring out what I mean by how non-moralistic this is, let’s go back to our complacent ruler on the planet.

In that image, two quite different understandings of sin are at work. Both are operative simultaneously. There is the sense of sin as worked out and held onto by the complacent ruler, the one by whom the people on the planet were controlled. This sense of sin, naturally enough, depends on the ruler starting from a stable sense of how things are, how they must be, and therefore what is right and what is wrong. Its starting point is obvious—provided you’re the ruler.

The second sense of sin comes from a very odd place. It comes from the feeling of shock which all those on the planet undergo as they find themselves summoned up into the new draw. They are enabled, from their new and entirely unexpected vantage point, to glance back at what they had thought of as stable and normal and see that, far from being stable and normal, it had gradually been tilting backwards into the maw of the black hole. So part of the sense of shock—which is also one of delight—is the realisation that they had in fact been completely self-deceived about what was really going on, what was really running them, what was really right and what was wrong.

Their reaction is something like this: “Wow! To think that we used to think living like *that* was normal! Only now are we beginning to sense how small and narrow were the confines we thought of as goodness, badness, righteousness, sin and who got to judge us, to give us our criteria. How impotent we were within that framework! It’s only now, from the seriously *unstable*-seeming but in fact massively *safe* place of finding ourselves hoiked into a completely new orbit, that we begin to get a sense of what’s really going on, who we really are, and what we are really becoming. Even our quite accurate sense that we often fall short of what we are really becoming looks quite unlike whatever it was that we thought of as sin in our previous orbit”.

I hope it is apparent to you that, of these two senses of sin, it is only the latter which has a real claim to being part of the Christian faith. And in case you think I’m making this up, rather than being the boringly predictable Catholic theologian that I think I am, then here is the huge star describing the effect of the draw, which will start to affect those on the planet as its axis tilts:

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Defence Counsellor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. And when He comes, He will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment; about sin, because they do not believe in me, about righteousness because I’m going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment because the ruler of this world has been judged. (John 16:7-11)

It could scarcely be clearer: there was a notion of sin and righteousness and judgment that was proper to our world. It was a notion in which the prosecuting counsel, the accuser, always tended to win. However, in the light of the draw from the huge star—a draw which goes as far as to call itself the Counsel for the Defence—our whole understanding of what sin is, what righteousness looks like and in what judgment consists will be completely reshaped.

The reason for this change-around is not arbitrary: it turns out that the victim of this world's judgment, sense of righteousness, and definition of sin was God himself. Those who perceive this—who find themselves able to recognise what was going on in the putting to death of Jesus, which means those who find themselves starting to look at themselves from the perspective of their own victim who is in fact forgiving them—those people are receiving a totally new perspective on what sin, righteousness and judgment look like, a perspective which flows towards them from the regard of the forgiving victim. In this perspective, *sin is known in its being forgiven*.

The Beginning in the Middle—Luke

Now that we have explored some of the dimensions of that “secondariness” which I mentioned, I think we are in a good position to look at some of the narrative ways in which the New Testament brings out how a particular human intervention in history was in fact the fulcrum which tips the axis—the fulcrum by which the Creator involves us as active participants in Creation. We’ll look at Luke first, and then John.

You may remember that in the Book of Genesis, when Creation is still formless, and before there is any light, the Spirit moves over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1-2). Later, God creates Adam. But after a short time, Adam and Eve succumb to receiving their sense of “secondariness” through the eyes of the serpent, rather than through the eyes of God, and so start to imagine God as being in rivalry with them. This leads to the act of disobedience in which they try to become what they were always meant to be—gods—but do so in rivalry with God, rather than by allowing themselves to become gods held in gracious secondari-

ness by God. They need to grasp what is good and evil for themselves, and then to protect and hide themselves rather than trust the goodness of what they have been given and are. From this point, everything begins to wind down. Shortly before they are driven out of Eden, this prophecy is made: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

What we see in St Luke’s Passion narrative, en route to Jesus’ Crucifixion, is Genesis run backwards. After Jesus’ last eating of bread, he moves to the place by the Mount of Olives, which other Evangelists call Gethsemani. There, he prays: “Father, if you wish, take away this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) Rather than this being an insight into the psychology of the one praying—which is how modern readers are inclined to see it—I suggest that here, Jesus is standing in for Adam. He is putting right what Adam got wrong: the human pattern of desire, or will, is being drawn in once more to the Father’s pattern of desire. Shortly thereafter, we get this: “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like clots of blood falling down upon the ground.” (Luke 22:44) Hidden from us by our translations is a series of Hebrew puns concerning redness, blood, earth, and Adam, all of which are associated with the word “dam”. It is not that Jesus was sweating blood, but that the definitive “Adam’s sweat”, combined with reddish dust of the earth, looked like clots of blood, returning to the Earth whence it had come. In other words, Luke is indicating that here, the prophecy of Genesis 3, which we saw above, is being fulfilled: Adam’s being bound down into futility is being undone by the definitive Adam getting right what the first Adam got wrong.

Jesus then moves towards his Crucifixion. On the Cross, he indicates to the criminal who was being executed alongside him, and who we call the “good thief”: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43) This should be taken rather literally, as referring to the Garden before the Fall. The sense that the Book of Genesis is running backwards is brought out even more clearly in the next verses: “It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed.” (Luke 23:44) In

other words, the order of creation is running backwards, until we are prior to the moment when God made light. At that moment—and it could not be more appropriate—the symbol of the distinction between God creating everything out of nothing, and of the beginning of materiality, of everything that is, is torn: “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” (Luke 23:45) Now we are back at Genesis 1, before anything was created, and at this point: “Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said ‘Father into thy hands I commit my Spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.” (Luke 23:46) So finally, we are back to the Spirit hovering over the formless void of Genesis 1.

However, please note what has happened: in the Genesis story, the Spirit is portrayed as impersonal. By the time that Jesus breathes out his Spirit, the Spirit has a fully anthropological content. The Spirit of the Creator actually has shape: what the Creator looks like while creating is not what it appears to be from Genesis—an outside force arranging and ordering things out of some formlessness. What the Creator Spirit looks like, and is, is the pattern of desire of one who, in order to make it possible for us to live, occupies the space of being a dead person for us; one who has given themselves into the space of being a dead person before us out of love. This is not a space of “control” or “ordering” in any obvious sense; on the contrary, the power of the Creator has shown itself as personal in offering us the possibility of becoming persons from a position of complete powerlessness.

When Pentecost comes, a few weeks later, it comes as the full panoply of the New Creation, starting from a new, veil-less temple. This temple is henceforth to be made up of people from every language, tribe and nation who are being empowered to become humans through the presence in their midst of the open heavens—and, constantly available to them, the presence of the utterly alive forgiving victim.

Please notice what has happened: the real beginning has made itself present in what, for us, is the middle. This appearance of the real beginning in the middle resembles, and is, a painful upheaval—especially since it is the ability to occupy the space of shame and death that has tipped the axis of creation. But those who are able to occupy that space are, in fact, undergoing the shift of the planetary axis such that the real beginning, which is also the real purpose or end of everything,

is being made real in them now. Here is St Paul, making the same point in his own language:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole Creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the Creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:18-23)

I hope you can see the sense of living on the cusp of two realities: Creation is referred to as something which has been opened up, and which is drawing us into it with great zest. And at the same time, it turns out to have been spinning round and turning in on itself in futility, unaware of what it was destined to become. The axis-turning moment—the present moment, in which we are living—feels like an upheaval full of suffering, which is in fact an act of childbirth. Through it, the Creator, I AM, is bringing into being secondary I AMs—sons and daughters, the “gods” we were promised we would be—as our very bodies are drawn into being insider sharers of the life of God.

The Beginning in the Middle—John

Now, let us look at how St John narrates this same sense of a futile creation winding down, and of the real creation happening now. In Chapter 20, after the Crucifixion and burial of Jesus, it is now the first day of the week. Here, too, we are being tipped off that what is about to be described is somehow linked to the early verses of Genesis. This impression is deepened by the fact that there is, as yet, no light: “it was still dark”. After Peter and the Beloved Disciple have visited the tomb

and seen that it is empty, they go home. Mary, however, stands weeping outside the tomb, and then stoops to look inside. What she sees there are two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

So, in John, it is not the veil of the temple that is torn, thus transporting us outside the realm of creation. Rather, the open tomb turns out to be the now-vacated Holy of Holies. In the Holy of Holies, the seraphim were on either side of the Mercy Seat, where the Presence of God rested. This is precisely where the angels are in John, except they are now resting beside a vacated Mercy Seat. The Presence is elsewhere. The angels, reasonably enough, wonder why Mary is weeping. After all, from their point of view, Eve is now inside the garden again, for the Holy of Holies and the Garden of Eden are the same thing. Eve had been excluded from the garden, and cherubim armed with swords had turned “this way and that” and been posted over the entrance (Genesis 3:24). That would be a motive for weeping. But that exclusion from the Garden has now been undone.

Nevertheless, here in this scene of staggered vision, where nothing is quite as it seems, Mary Magdalene doesn’t exactly know where she is, confusing this place with a place in which there might actually be a dead person to find. She turns and sees an unrecognisable Jesus, who addresses her as “Woman”—or Eve. She wonders whether it is the gardener or Adam. It might also be YHWH wandering in the garden in the cool of the day. And it is indeed both of these, but not as she could imagine them. But then, Jesus addresses her by her name: Mary. And she recognises who He is by what she hears. She turns again. In fact, in this narrative, she is like the sword of the cherubim from Genesis, turning “this way and that”. Nevertheless, what she hears is still part of what was before his death; she hears and responds to “My teacher”.

We are still not quite yet in the New Creation. This is brought out when Jesus tells her: “Do not touch me”. You may remember that, in Genesis, God told the earthling, before he was divided into Adam and Eve, that he could eat of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God didn’t mention anything at all about not touching it. However, when the serpent enquires of Eve about what God had said, Eve embellished the instruction somewhat:

We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.” (Genesis 3:2-3).

In her enthusiasm, she has added the bit about not touching the tree. So, in John’s Garden, Jesus is taking her back to before that time, undoing Eve’s confused excitement. In this staggered vision of Genesis running down, he is still something of a corpse which, according to Numbers 19, should not be touched—still something of an object, rather than pure protagonist. He is not yet the Forgiving Victim who can show his hands and side. It is only when he has gone to his Father that he will open up the space of the New Creation completely. Genesis will cease to run backwards, and everything can move forward.

And so it is, towards the end of the first day, that we come to the room behind closed doors where the disciples are meeting. This first day now stretches backwards from an evening in Jerusalem until the beginning of the second chapter of Genesis, for that is the day that is at last being brought to fruition. And in the midst of the room—in the midst not of myth nor of narratives from the past, but of history and fear and tension—the Lord God appears. First, He announces peace. Then, He reveals his hands and his side: this is the forgiving victim, the Lamb slaughtered before the foundation of the world. Then He announces peace again and says: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21) The beginning has become contemporary; creation is now.

To prove this, Jesus then breathes into the disciples. The word is exactly the same word by which, in Genesis 2:7, the Lord God breathes into the nostrils of the earthling, who thus becomes a living being (see John 20:22: *ἐνεφύσησεν*). Here, however, the breath which is breathed into them is described not as “breath of life” but as “Holy Spirit”, and with it comes the ability to forgive or to hold. In other words, exactly as with Luke, it turns out that the Spirit from creation is in fact the Spirit of the Forgiving Victim, and that it is in the degree to which we allow ourselves to be enlivened by the Spirit of the Forgiving Victim that we participate as insiders in the opening-out of creation.

This sense of the cusp between the “not yet” and the “now” is shown by the parallelism between Mary Magdalene—who can’t rec-

ognise Jesus clearly, who hears his voice, calls Him “My Master”, and is urged not to touch him yet—and Thomas, who, a full week into the New Creation, sees Him, recognises Him clearly thanks to the wounds of the forgiving victim, is then invited to touch Him, and calls Him “My Lord and My God.” (John 20:28) Furthermore, the touching takes the form of Thomas placing his hand in Jesus’ side. In Genesis, just in case we had forgotten, it is from Adam’s side that a portion is taken and filled out with flesh. Those who receive the breath, and live according to the Spirit of the Forgiving Victim, are in fact becoming the flesh of the New Adam—Creation is strictly contemporary.

What I’ve wanted to bring out from these central Christian texts is how removed they are from seeing “Creation” as having been “a long time ago”, and God as only intervening moralistically among us by Jesus’ death, some time later, to sort out the problem of sin. The early Christian texts show something much richer than that: the true narrative of Creation is to be found in the account of Jesus’ death and Resurrection, where the definitive Adam emerges as a forgiving victim, thus opening up the possibility of our sharing in something utterly non-futile: Creation. At the same time, we can see everything which came before as folding back on itself in futility: the off-kilter planet being sucked into the maw of a black hole, while all along it was being reached towards in hope by a future of which it had no idea. The forgiveness of our sins, rather than being in the first instance a moralistic matter, is what it looks like for us that the Deathless One has opened up the battened-down culture which eventually makes outsiders of us all; the Forgiving Victim dares us to aspire to be valued insiders in the adventure of Creation, starting from our place on the cusp of the shifting axis. From Mrs O’Reilly’s perspective, forgiving Johnny was scarcely on her mind at all in the depth of her concern for him, her longing that he be able to share something much bigger with her. For little Johnny, locked in fear and resentment at what he’d done, allowing himself to be forgiven was the *sine qua non* of his being on the inside of the new “we” at all.

The Gentleness of Vision: The Grandeur in the Everyday

There is something peace-inspiring about the sheer hugeness of something coming into our ken. Like the sense of peace and majesty which comes upon those wrestling with the rigging of a small sailing vessel as a vast ocean liner comes alongside. However, where the planetary image I have been using is weak is that this peace is given off by the imperturbable hugeness of an impersonal “it”, rather than being part of what we receive from the imperturbable hugeness of I AM coming toward us.

Cast your mind back to the defining moment of Creation in St John’s Gospel: it comes when the Presence appears in—irrupts into—the locked room where the frightened disciples had gathered. The Presence announces “Peace” before and after showing Himself. Completely swathed in the peace out of which He has emerged, He shows his hands and side. By showing Himself in this way, non-verbally, I AM identifies Himself as the Risen Victim, dwelling in the midst of—coming from and giving off—all the peace that comes from before the foundation of the world. I AM then breathes life into the disciples: the Holy Spirit, which turns out to be the contagion of forgiveness flowing from the Risen Victim who is forgiveness.

What I would like to bring out here is the strange confluence of hugeness and banality in what is going on: the culminating theophany in which the very Presence of YHWH, the Creator, allows itself to be glimpsed in its most finely tuned form as “I AM, the Forgiving Victim from before the foundation of the world”; the fullest vision of all the power, splendour, weight, gravity, hugeness and majesty of the heavenly Presence creating humans. This takes place not on some suitably majestic mountain, nor even in a gloriously arrayed temple sanctuary, but instead in a hideaway, whose locked status “for fear of the Jews” is almost a parody of the veiled Holy Place of the Temple, for who did not fear to enter there?

This strange confluence of hugeness and the apparent banality of the everyday seems to me central to our understanding of what is meant by Incarnation. You may remember that, in Chapter 6, I pointed out to you some ways in which Luke depicts Mary, Jesus’ mother. This ordinary girl with marriage plans finds herself invited to be the portal

through which Creation out of Nothing takes place, to be in historical fact what had been symbolised by the Tabernacle overshadowed by the Presence of the Most High: the verb here translated as “overshadowed” in Luke 1:35 is the same as in Exodus 40:35, in the description of the Tabernacle. When pregnant Mary goes to visit her more heavily pregnant cousin Elizabeth—and what could be more domestic?—, the unborn John the Baptist dances in her womb, as David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, and Elizabeth cries out in the voice of the Levites recognising the Ark. Soon, the family goes to the Temple in Jerusalem for the most simple of rites, and only two aged weirdos, Ana and Simeon, see what has really happened: God has come suddenly to his Temple, fulfilling what the prophet Malachi foretold. At the same time (of course), the priests and temple authorities are far too busy keeping the show on the road to perceive the de-centred theophany.

The fascinating thing about the New Testament account is that it does not puff up the Virgin Mary by projecting her backwards, making her as glorious as the Temple artefacts of yesteryear—using her to reinstate them, as it were. On the contrary, it is as though we need to be led out of our fascination with the sacred kitsch of yesteryear if we are to perceive—irrupting in our midst, in and as history—all the real weight and glory to which, as we suppose, those artefacts once pointed. In an ordinary theatre production, initial rehearsals are done in street clothes, with more costumes and props introduced as the rehearsals progress, leading up to all being made ready for the dress rehearsal, where full makeup is worn. Finally, the first and subsequent performances are enacted with the full panoply of kitsch passing as what is real. The incarnation of YHWH into history follows the exact reverse route: the kitsch and the makeup were all in the rehearsals, and are gradually stripped down the closer we get to the real enactment. The real thing happens in street clothes, in a way the set designers and prop managers could scarcely recognise. The true grandeur is more visible in the apparent banality of this off-centre acting-out than it ever was among the theatre props of old.

And here it really is worth our while to spend a little time with Mary, for if there is any way at all that we can understand the things I’ve been trying to point towards in this chapter, it is in her company. Her

personal history is one of being stretched out of myth and into history. There is a continuity between the old Creation and the new—between the Old Israel and its institutions, and the new—that is lived out by Mary being stretched by what is done in her as she provides the flesh for the Lord God to come among his people; and then in what is done to her as the Lord God works among his people. She is the first and most complete example of that “secondariness” I’ve been trying to bring out in this chapter, receiving who she is through the regard of the Presence that has come into history through her.

In Luke’s Gospel, where she enters the story as the moment when all the artefacts and prophecies become history, she quickly becomes the one who is told that a sword will pierce her heart, and as things develop “she stores all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Later, she undergoes a further stretching in her own apparent relativisation at the hands of her son:

Then his mother and his brothers came to Him, but they could not reach Him because of the crowd. And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:19-21)

Only someone who was very secure in being held in their secondariness could undergo such an experience without wanting to grasp onto being special. But Mary is not in rivalry with the huge elective family her son is bringing into being, not humiliated by the evident collapse of generations into one single contemporary generation which Jesus is producing.

At the beginning of Acts, we glimpse her again. At first, she is named as one of the group who gather for prayer after Jesus’ Ascension, before Pentecost. But by the day of Pentecost, she, like all the others, is included but no longer named: “They were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). For those who are born again on Pentecost are all of the same generation. Mary’s motherhood of Jesus has been stretched into her being the sister to her son’s new sisters and brothers. The one who provided the raw material for the New Creation has become an insider within that new creation.

Or, as Dante says it:

Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio,
umile e alta più che creatura,
termine fisso d'eterno consiglio,

tu se' colei che l'umana natura
nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo fattore
non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura.

(*Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 1-6)

(Maiden yet a Mother, daughter of your son; at once the most humble of creatures yet higher than them all; for in you the plan from before all time rests as in its final end; So much did you ennoble human nature, that its creator had no second thoughts about becoming its creature.)

John tells us the same thing in a slightly different way. In the immediate run-up to Jesus' death, several things happen as the ancient Atonement rite is fulfilled by being stretched out of theatre and into history: Jesus' garments are divided among the soldiers—except for his tunic, which is explicitly described as without seam, and woven from top to bottom. This is a description of the high priestly vestment, which is woven in the same manner as the Temple Veil. Over this garment, the soldiers cast lots, reminding us that the High Priest would have cast lots to decide which of the unblemished lambs would get to stand in for YHWH and which for Azazel.

Shortly after this moment, Jesus is going to announce that he thirsts, and will be given vinegar to drink, thus bringing together the way in which the priests consumed the “portion of the Lord”—the entrails of the lamb they had slaughtered—with the help of vinegar (John 19:28-29). And he will then announce, “it is completed”, “finished”, “consummated”, or “settled by sacrifice”—all of these translations bring out elements which underlie Jesus' last word in John's Gospel (John 19:30).

In between these two moments in which Jesus fulfilled elements of the rite, there is an apparent interlude in which Jesus' mother, his mother's sister (Mary the wife of Clopas), Mary Magdalene, and the beloved disciple are found standing close to the cross: a mixture of people from both Jesus' family of birth and his elective family.

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:26-27)

This exchange is often read as though Jesus were addressing his mother, pointing her, perhaps with a slight nod of the head, towards the beloved disciple, whom he thus indicates should now be treated by her as her son. He then addresses the beloved disciple and, again with a nod of his head, indicates to the disciple that Mary should now be treated as his mother. I wonder, however, whether that is really what is going on here. It would be very much part of John's style to indicate something rather richer than a little last moment "family arrangements for when I'm gone" scene.

To me, it makes much more sense that, within this scene by the cross, John is exploring the image of "travail"—or birth-giving—which he used before when Jesus was preparing his disciples for his forthcoming execution:

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:20-22)

If that is the case, then I wonder whether it isn't better to read both uses of "behold" in the scene by the cross as drawing the eyes of the person being addressed *to Jesus*. He is urging his mother—whom

he here greets as “Woman”, as though she were Eve—to behold Him, her son. In doing so, He is both indicating the old creation going out of being, which is killing her son, and indicating to her that she is in travail with Him for a birthing that is taking place now. Then, he draws the eyes of the beloved disciple towards Himself *as mother*, indicating that in His going to death, He is bringing to birth a new family. From that hour, a new family is being born, and it makes perfect sense for the relationship of Mary and the beloved disciple to be recast as one in which they are of the same generation. The elective family which has been brought into being by Jesus’ birthing stretches towards and welcomes into it the woman whose motherhood was both honoured and yet emptied of any cultural meaning as it was stretched into a sisterhood in the new creation.

Isaiah had already foreseen something along these lines in a passage to which the image of “travail” seems to refer:

Before she was in labour she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she was delivered of a son. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labour she brought forth her sons. (Isaiah 66:7-8)

This sense of Jesus Himself being involved in giving birth, producing the new generation of those who are on a complete level of equality with Himself, is further brought out when, after his death, a soldier pierces his side with a spear: “And at once there came out blood and water.” (John 19:34b) This is remarkably like the appearance of afterbirth. If this were not enough, we can still be sure that John is trying to show us that a new kind of family has been brought into existence by these events, since when Jesus speaks to Mary Magdalene in the Garden, He tells her: “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (John 20:17) This is the first time in the Gospel that Jesus refers to his brethren as “my brethren”. More significantly, while He has frequently referred to God as his Father, never before in John’s Gospel was there any indication that God was, properly speaking, the father of anyone else. In going to his death, having become the mother of the new

generation of brethren, Jesus has opened out the possibility for them to be sons and daughters of God, for God to be their Father in exactly the same way that he was Jesus' Father.

However, please notice once again what has happened: all the grandeur of Creation has erupted quietly into some very subtle changes of relationship among very ordinary people. This is a constant throughout the Gospels. What is being birthed is a new family, one in which the elective has a huge priority over the biological. In this new family, there are no fathers, and no one is to be called father. Biological progenitors are intergenerational brothers. Cultural paternity is very much part of the planet that was winding down into futility, part of the reach into our lives of the maw of the black hole that was sucking us out of being.

Instead, we find ourselves being brought into a new family, all of the same generation: all of us sisters and brothers are becoming secondary beacons of I AM—which means to say, all of us finding ourselves living out being Sons and Daughters of the Father as we learn to live out being sisters and brothers to each other. And we find that Jesus is both in the midst of us as Presence, in whose regard we are beginning to glow, and that we are in the midst of Him—becoming Him, without thereby being displaced or becoming any less ourselves.

Furthermore, this creation of a new family doesn't happen by decree, anonymously. It happens by ordinary, named individuals finding themselves drawn out—thanks to the words and examples of other named individuals—from being tied down into the various forms of cultural togetherness that are going nowhere and to which we so often attribute such a sacred worth. Instead, they find themselves, over time, undergoing the process of being adopted into a new, elective family, which may even include some of their family of birth—but with the relationships quite transformed.

This happens slowly, gently, and with enormous patience and affection, since what looks like an enormous upheaval for us is only the space needed for God's smile to break through the sadness of our angry futility. This, for me, is one of the reasons it is so good to remember the slowness, the gentleness, the stretched-ness of God's regard, which brings into being with joy. This regard is most memorably reflected back on us by the presence within the new family—sometimes called

the communion of saints—of our living sister, the Mother of God, she who birthed the One who birthed her: a gentleness and a patience, undergirded with joy, by which, even in the midst of violence, murder and mayhem, she patiently helps us undo the knots that tie us into the old creation, so as to help us reflect the new.

But please, don't be put off by the pious-sounding language of the "communion of saints". This is simply a way of referring to the elective family of named persons within history who know and like each other, starting within very ordinary sets of relationships. These people have found that all the joy of the new creation has been birthed in them as they have undergone a shift in their relationships with each other, empowered by the forgiving victim to step out of rivalry, revenge and resentment in all its glorious-seeming cultural masks, and to run instead the risk of being held together only by the light that flows from the lamb:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundred-fold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. (Mark 10:29-31)

I hope it is clear how all we have been looking at here is of a piece with something we glimpsed in Chapter 2: we saw two disciples—one named Cleophas and one unnamed—walking on the road to Emmaus. I wanted to call the unnamed disciple "N" or "Name to be supplied", so that any one of us might inscribe our name into the story alongside Cleophas.

I hope you can now see that "N" matters more than may have seemed the case. Luke was not setting out a formal recipe for the involvement of yet-to-be-named individuals in an automatic mechanism; he was setting out an invitation by which we may find ourselves as named members of a real family, creating real and lasting ties, and discovering who we really are in the presence of the Forgiving Victim, around the One who, in revealing Himself to us, not only enlightens us but lightens us up into being transmitters both of lightness and of light.