

“Like being dragged through a bush backwards”: Hints of the shape of conversion’s adventure

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It is a very great honour to have been asked by you to share some thoughts about conversion in your midst. You have invited me to develop hints of the way that the understanding of Christianity which I have been pursuing in the light of the thought of René Girard, can open up insights for us. Insights into the role of participation and conversion in religious knowing; into the place of contemplation and the spiritual disciplines in developing ‘post-conversion eyes’; and into how belonging to the Eucharistic community of disciples, with all the attendant difficulties to do with processing conflict, plays its part.

Given that this is a modest little question, requiring no more than three or four months worth of lectures, but that I have only a single shot at it, I thought I would at least try open the matter up by means of reading the parable of the Good Samaritan with you, since I think that it plunges us directly *in medias res*.

The context of the parable gives us a good frame:

Just then a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Inheriting eternal life”, is a more interesting phrase than it might seem to those of us whose first reaction is that it is a simply another way of saying “what must I do to go to heaven?” Inheriting is what the ultimate insiders did (in those days, sons, but not daughters) and “eternal life” was a way of referring to the life of God. So we might say that what we are about to embark on is a discussion of what it looks like to become an insider in the life of God. Anyhow, the challenge is on: what sort of complex answer will Jesus come up with?

In fact Jesus remits the lawyer to something entirely non-esoteric, something entirely public and available to any listener:

He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?”

Knowing perfectly well that the texts of the law can be made to say many things, Jesus asks the lawyer not only *what* the text says, but also *how he* interprets the law. And the lawyer answers very properly, not by quoting a single text, but by putting together two texts from two different books of the Torah. First from Deuteronomy 6, 5, where it says:

... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might

And then from Leviticus 19, 18 where it says:

... you shall love your neighbour as yourself

So the lawyer makes an act of legal interpretation, bringing together two laws in such a way that they interpret each other. What it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God is to be stretched towards God with every faculty of your being, and the form this takes is being stretched towards your neighbour.

Jesus commends the lawyer. He is not only a good lawyer, he has a good moral sense as well, since he has made an act of interpretation which, while it was probably not innovative, is, in the different variants in which it has reached us, definitive: he has turned two different commandments into one single commandment which will in fact never be abrogated. Henceforth being on the inside of the life of God and being stretched lovingly towards my neighbour can never be separated. This is not merely a moralistic matter, but shows a firm anthropological insight: because we are reflexive animals, our only access to being loved is through loving someone else.

And Jesus said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this, and you will live.”

The lawyer however wanted to take the matter further:

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

I wonder what Luke means that he wanted to justify himself? It’s a curious phrase, and the sentiment occurs several times in this Gospel with the sense of a person who wants to make themselves good in their own eyes. Here it is not clear whether the lawyer thought he was asking a difficult question and was expecting a more complex answer. Perhaps he was rather underwhelmed when Jesus, having drawn from him a fairly succinct answer to his own question, simply commended him. Imagine: you try to challenge someone with a potentially complex technical question and clearly, by your demeanour and style, expect a detailed answer which will flatter you for being intelligent as well as expose possible weak flanks in your interlocutor’s approach to things. Your interlocutor hears you out, and then, after a deep-looking pause simply answers, “Yes, I agree”. Well, it takes the wind out of your sails, and your colleagues giggle at you, the class clever-clogs who tried to catch teacher out, but ended up firmly but gently put in their place.

Or maybe the point of the lawyer’s original question – literally “doing what will I inherit eternal life? – was that he wanted an answer that gave him a specific “what’s the legal minimum necessary?” In other words, when Luke says that the lawyer wanted to justify himself, maybe what he wanted was a more immediately applicable answer to his question, the sort of instruction that someone can “get right”, fill in the right boxes, thereby becoming one of the good guys. So an answer that sets out the overall framework, but leaves a huge field for the hard work of interpretation and application to life situations, is not what he wanted.

In any case, the lawyer has a follow-up question, and it is by no means stupid. He is not merely asking Jesus to be more specific; he is asking a reasonable legal question about the interpretation of Leviticus 19, whence the second part of his own answer had been drawn. For the verse from which the lawyer had produced the phrase “and your neighbour as yourself” contains more than the part he had quoted. In full it reads:

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

Here, the word “neighbour” appears to refer to “the sons of your own people” – fellow Hebrews. What makes the lawyer’s question legally interesting is not that the bit of Leviticus which he quotes has a circumscribed meaning, but precisely the reverse: it is the fact that a few verses later in the same chapter of Leviticus, following on a number of commandments to do with intermingling of cattle, sex with slaves, hair trimming, witchcraft, and respect for old age, we get the following:

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

So Leviticus appears to interpret itself, for the same phrase “you shall love him as yourself” which was previously applied to the word “neighbour” here acquires a new density: the stranger who sojourns among you is declared to be the exact legal equivalent of one of the “sons of your own people”, and therefore a neighbour in the strict sense of the commandment. In other words, the text of Leviticus seems to be heading in the direction of the term “neighbour” becoming universal, and that is worrying legally, since if everyone is your neighbour, then the term “neighbour” has no longer got any precise legal meaning at all, and how are you to know if you are obeying a commandment when it has no precise meaning?

So, it appears that our lawyer is actually asking Jesus to interpret Leviticus, urging him to flesh out the relationship between being on the inside of the life of God and the discussion concerning applicable forms of neighbourliness. And Jesus agrees to take the matter on.

And taking him up, Jesus said...

The Greek is interesting, in that of the possible words or phrases for “reply”, the one used is not the more contestatory, “in your face” sort of reply, but rather the kind that a legal authority would give who had agreed to take on the matter. In other words, Jesus is not here showing the lawyer up. Rather he’s saying, “OK, you’re on. Let’s see where we can take this”. The parable that follows is his acceptance of the challenge

simultaneously to show what it is like to be on the inside of the life of God and to interpret Leviticus well in the matter of the neighbour. Let us read it:

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

So, here is the setting. The man is unspecified. It is not evident that he was a Hebrew. Merely that he was a human. Whatever sort of human he was, he fell into the hands of people who did not discriminate between “sons of your people” and “sojourners in your land” – they were disobedient to Leviticus under any of its interpretations. Their proximity to him was of entirely the wrong sort.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

I particularly like the word “by chance”. It too forms part of the answer to the question. Nothing in Jesus’ story is stable, or ordered, everything is fluid and contingent. Whatever the teaching to be derived from this parable, it will be to do with navigating the fluxes not of what should be, but of what just happens. The priest was, as it happens, going down the road. Interestingly, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is downhill, so the priest was in fact going away from Jerusalem, and towards Jericho. In other words, he wasn’t on his way to his Temple duties in Jerusalem. And the text doesn’t tell us anything about the psychology of his motivation in passing by on the other side. It doesn’t say that he was disgusted, or a coward, or in a hurry. Merely that he was a priest and that, seeing the wounded one, he passed by on the other side.

There were in fact perfectly respectable reasons for a priest to pass by. The man had been left half dead, and that means that it would not be obvious, without going close to him, and perhaps turning him over, whether he were dead or not. In any case, there was certainly shed blood all over the place. And if you were a priest, you had very important professional reasons to avoid being close to a corpse, or to spilled blood. In fact, central to the whole holiness code and the life of the Holy of Holies in the Temple was that it was a place utterly removed from death.

The priests, whose ordination included the notion of a “resurrection” by which they became sharers in angelic life, must have nothing to do with corpses, blood, other than that of sacrificial beasts, or corruption. Indeed, a priest’s ability to serve God in the Holy Place would have been severely impaired, and he would have to undergo a complicated series of ablutions, if he had touched an unclean thing. All this is set out in Leviticus 21 and 22, not at all far from our passage.

So the Priest and similarly, but to a lesser extent, the Levite, both had quite solid motives for giving a wide berth to the potential corpse by the side of the road. The potential corpse either might, or definitely would, impede their service of God. In fact, it was an obstacle to being on the inside of the life of God as enacted liturgically in the Holy Place. You can imagine them, maybe without any personal sense of disgust, or fear of corpses, or any psychological issues to do with hygiene and contagion, thinking, entirely in good conscience: “I do hope someone else comes by soon to attend to the poor fellow, if it isn’t already too late for him – and in fact if the mobile ‘phone had been invented, I would call a non-priestly friend for back-up – but it hasn’t been yet, and my role in life is clear: my job is to serve God in his Holy Place, and share in his life by my anointed service, and I shouldn’t let this accident, this unfortunate happenstance, upset the true order of the world, the unruffled stability in which the Almighty rejoices, and which it is my job to help promote, so, I’d better pass by on the other side”.

Then along comes the Samaritan:

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

Now the interesting thing about the Samaritan, is that he is not, from the perspective of the Jewish lawyer, the totally outside “other” – a complete foreigner. He occupies the even more infuriating place of being exactly the wrong sort of other: the one who is sufficiently like us to get us all riled up – a classic trigger for the reaction produced by the narcissism of minor differences. The Samaritans after all, worshipped the same God, with a slightly different, but overlapping, set of Scriptures. They didn’t acknowledge Jerusalem as a sacred centre, worshipping instead on Mount Gerizim. So Jews and Samaritans were a perpetual reproach to each other, sources of reciprocal moral infuriation. Just a few verses earlier in St Luke’s Gospel, some Samaritan villagers had refused hospitality to members of Jesus’ group, because they were heading

towards Jerusalem, pilgrimage style¹. The hospitality which would undoubtedly have been shown to ordinary travellers was suspended for ideological travellers. Which is why, I guess, it may be important here that neither the Priest, the Levite nor the Samaritan is headed for their respective holy place. While both the Priest and the Levite were heading away from Jerusalem, the text doesn't say which way the Samaritan was going, up or down, and it clearly doesn't matter. The question of being on the inside of the life of God is here entirely abstracted from any question about the right place, the right cult.

And yet, immediately the Samaritan draws near him, we get the parable's bombshell word: εσπλαγγνισθη – which our translation gives as “was moved with pity”. In fact the word is much stronger than that. It means “viscerally moved” and so is much more like our English “was gut-wrenched”. What is important here, is that this is the Greek form of the word by which God was described as viscerally moved, moved in the entrails or the womb. In other words, right there, in the midst of this happenstance, what it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God has burst forth.

And what it looks like is an entirely different relation to a potential or actual corpse than might have been expected. The priest who had kept himself pure for sacrifice might well find himself in the Temple alongside the corpse of an animal that he had just sacrificed. He might even, depending on which feast it was, find himself having to eat the entrails of the animal in question. For it was the entrails that were known as “the portion of the Lord”. By eating them, the priest would be taking part in the life of God. Yet here it is the entrails, the life of God, which burst forth towards the utterly vulnerable victim by the side of the road, in the flesh of the Samaritan who is moved towards him.

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

So, first of all, he moves close to him, instead of away from him, and then using oil to soothe the wounded flesh, and wine which was the basic disinfectant of the period, he bandages the half-dead one, and brings him to an inn. Once he gets to the inn, please notice what he doesn't do. Neither he nor the text make any reference to the ethnicity of the

¹ Lk 9, 52-3.

wounded one. He doesn't say to the innkeeper: "Look, I found one of yours on the side of the road, and have done far more than my bit by bringing him here, but now he's your responsibility" – something a foreigner might easily say to a co-national of the wounded one. On the contrary, even being with him in the inn, the Samaritan doesn't pass the buck, but continues to take care of him.

³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

Come the next day, and the Samaritan still doesn't distance himself from the wounded one. Even when he is going to be physically distant about his business, he leaves a generous first instalment with the innkeeper – two days wages – and pledges himself to make good an open-ended debt, for who can foresee the time necessary for healing, and the possible expenses to be incurred as the result of wounds sustained? In fact, the Samaritan becomes an indefinitely extended source of invisible succour for the wounded one, working through the local ministrations of the innkeeper.

Jesus then addresses the lawyer:

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

And even here, his phrasing is most suggestive. The lawyer had asked him "Who is my neighbour?" with the implication that the term "neighbour" referred to the passive object of mandated benevolence: "if we can define who my neighbour is, then I will know towards whom I am obligated to behave in a neighbourly way". But Jesus has it the other way round: the word neighbour refers not to the passive object of the benevolence, mandated or not, but to the active creator of neighbourliness. A further hint that he is answering the question "what is it like to be on the inside of the life of God"?

The lawyer, again very exactly, and without any reference to the ethnic issues involved, answers Jesus:

He said, "The one who showed him mercy."

It is interesting that the lawyer uses a different word for mercy than the one Jesus used. Where Jesus refers to the gut-wrenching entrails, the lawyer uses the word *ελεως*. And, as is typical in Luke, this ordinary word for mercy, or act of compassion, also points beyond itself. For it is the word in the Greek version of Hosea 6,6

For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God,
rather than burnt offerings

There the Greek word *ελεως* translates the Hebrew word for “loving kindness” – *chesed* – a different, but equally powerful “take” on the inner life of God. Any doubt as to whether Luke’s use of this word here is intentional is removed when we glance at the parallel passage in St Mark’s Gospel², where there is no parable of the Good Samaritan, and it is a Scribe, not a lawyer who is Jesus’ interlocutor. There it is Jesus who answers the Scribe by linking the two commandments, and the Scribe who commends Jesus saying:

“You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he;³³ and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

So in Luke it does rather look as though the lawyer understood Jesus’ parable as being his “fleshing out” of Hosea 6,6. And Jesus ends his teaching by giving the lawyer the answer which the lawyer was by now probably dreading:

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

In other words: if you want to inherit the life of God, there is no safely circumscribed definition of who your neighbour is, there is merely finding yourself swept up into the inside of an infinitely attentive creation of neighbourliness amidst all the victimary contingencies of human life. And part of that attentiveness will be exercised in avoiding being seduced by sacrificial forms of religious goodness.

² Mk 12 32-33.

Well, what I would like to do now is explore this parable a little from the perspective of the Samaritan. It was, after all, he who was finding himself on the inside of the life of God. If anyone in this story underwent a conversion, it was he.

For those of us who are interested in conversion one of the things which this story takes for granted in the midst of contingency is the centrality of victimhood. And this victimhood appears in two valencies in the parable: sacred victimhood, of the sort that takes place in Temples, and which leads to certain attitudes towards blood and corpses, and contingent victimhood, which just happens. We might, following Hosea, call the human attitude towards the first sort “sacrifice” and the human attitude towards the second sort “mercy”. The first sort of victimhood leads to a certain habitual blindness towards the second sort. While attention to the second sort leads to a certain sort of insight concerning the first sort. What is in common is that those involved in both valencies, the priest and levite on the one hand, and the Samaritan, on the other, are drawn by a pattern of desire which is intimately involved with a victim.

So here is the first hint of the shape of conversion’s adventure: there is something ineluctable about what is at the centre of it. The human pattern of desire is such that we either create goodness by displacing victims, or find ourselves being made good by moving towards them. But a form of goodness which is entirely un-related to dealing with the human reality of victimhood is not something to which our species can relate. Human culture emerges from victimhood prior to our construction of goodness and badness. Indeed, victimhood is what structures these notions from within. “Good” and “bad”, “in” and “out”, “us” and “not-us”, all these culture-sustaining binaries only emerged fully within our race as a result of the frenzy of a group’s all-against-all yielding to the all-against-one in which anthropoids discovered ourselves as humans. The emergent difference that we later call a victim is at the root of our hominization.

Goodness or badness according to “sacrifice”, then, is what enables us to be good by contrast with some defiling other. And goodness or badness according to mercy is discovered in our being moved, or not, to show neighbourliness to one considered defiling. Thus we may find ourselves relating to victimhood in a way that dances around it, as it were, being given an apparently strong identity in our going along with the various forms of fascination with, and repulsion from, victimhood. In this way we will merely be continuing the founding gestures of human culture,

seduced by our own lie about the one who “is not us”. Or, with much greater difficulty, at least in my case, we can allow ourselves to face the centrality of the victim in a way that is not run by a mixture of fascination and fear, and be given to be who we are to be, starting from our recognition of ourselves in the one who is just there. The attitude to victims is the criterion for neighbourliness.

Let’s watch the Samaritan a little. As he comes along the road, he undergoes a certain draw. The verb is passive. His entrails did something to him, they moved him. In fact, he saw the wounded one entrail to entrail, he saw the altogether too visible entrails of the other as his own, which is, as we have seen, what God does in the Temple sacrifice, with the Lord’s portion, the entrails, of the victim. So this is what it is like to find yourself on the inside of the life of God! It means being gut-wrenched by your likeness with vulnerable flesh.

Finding himself on the inside of the life of God means that the Samaritan is able to draw near to the place of death, actual or potential, with no fear. He is not moved by death. It doesn’t exercise any draw or fascination for him. The possibility that the person to whom he is drawing close might actually be, or shortly become, a corpse, an instrument of defilement, doesn’t concern him. Just as it doesn’t concern him that his beast of burden would have been rendered unclean by carrying a bloodied person or a cadaver. Being unmoved by death, he is fully able to draw close to a fellow human being without fear.

Let us think through this attitude to death a little more, since it does seem to be completely central to any Christian understanding of conversion. In the parable, we are dealing with two approaches to the same reality: the deathlessness of God. In the one approach, God’s deathlessness is somehow thought to need protecting. Protecting in two senses: protecting *against*, because thought to be a hugely violent and unstable reality that might swamp mere humans with wrath; and protecting *from* contamination, as though God’s deathlessness would somehow be diminished if allowed to be brought close to corruption and mortality.

In the other approach, the deathlessness of God is such that it is not in rivalry in any way at all with the reality of death. It is able to move towards, and around, and with, mortal beings and mortal remains without in any sense being weakened by them. On the contrary. It is the deathlessness of God which gives life to mortal things. So, faced with a half-dead stranger on a road, one understanding of deathlessness

interprets the half-dead one as on the way to death, and thus to be shunned, while the other interprets the half-dead one as able to be brought to life, and thus to be nurtured.

If I may, I think that this is what is important about living a post-conversion life with Easter eyes. What the event we describe as the Resurrection is all about is God demonstrating to us, fully, firmly, three-dimensionally, that the sort of deathlessness that God has is of this latter sort: a life so completely deathless as to be able to assume being a shameful victimary corpse within itself, and become *as such* the source of life for others. So what is meant by the resurrection as an impetus for moral life, is that we are inducted into beginning to live as if death were not, being able to befriend our mortality in all its extremities, extremities which include human victimhood in all its moral and physical dimensions. The outward and visible sign, if you like, of the resurrection in our lives, is the fear and stigma of death having become moot for us. And thereafter for our creativity, our longing for justice and flourishing, to have been unleashed into the beginnings of practical responses, by not having death as its circumscription.

Here I think Girard's mimetic understanding of desire is very helpful in exploring how this works in our lives. As you may remember, what is central to that account is that *we desire according to the desire of another*. So, it is through the eyes of a model that an object acquires desirability. For instance, I who know nothing about art, find myself becoming friends with someone who is a connoisseur of fine art. As I spend time with her, her knowledge about, sensitivity towards, and enthusiasm for, fine art "rubs off on me", as we would say without thinking about it too exactly. And I find myself, on visits to museums and galleries, even where she is not present, appreciating and enjoying the works of art vastly more than I did before I knew her. In fact, what has happened is that I have started to see art through her eyes. It is not of course that I have put her on, like a mask, or a space suit, so that her eyes are on loan to me. It is the pattern of her desire which has reproduced itself in me, by my being drawn to imitate her, such that what it feels like at first is as if someone else were looking through my eyes and I am gradually coming to see what they see. Then, little by little, this becomes connatural to me, with my being scarcely aware of all the other pairs of eyes that have drawn me into my ever richer appreciation of the objects in question.

Well, it seems to me that this is the human and anthropological pattern that the resurrection has in our lives. If the model is God, and the object “creation” or everything that is, then the question becomes, “how do we learn to love, to desire, everything that is, in the same way that God does?”. The difficulty is that God is not a model in any obvious sense. If we do not have a human model to imitate, one at our level, then we have no ability to desire according to God, and we will be left at the mercy of modelling each other’s desire, while claiming that we desire according to a frightening sacred object who is in fact a projection of ourselves and of our fears and of our violence. What is traditionally called an “idol”. We will be stuck, in fact, with that draw towards and repulsion from victims, a kind of unstable and two-faced fascination, which is what characterizes the archaic sacred.

However, what we have in Jesus’ resurrection is a fully human set of eyes for whom death is not, a real human life story that is a living out at the anthropological level of the deathlessness of God. Because of this, that life is able to get alongside us and into us in the same way as the pattern of desire of the fine art connoisseur, and we start to be able to look at creation, at everything that is, through those same deathless eyes. The pattern of desire of the deathless one opens our eyes to what really is in the world, without us having to run away from, be run by, death. It becomes possible for us to be towards everything that is in the same way as the deathless one, and so to be creative and daring and imaginative without fear or hurry. The deathless one has opened up the possibility of our pattern of desire being towards everything that is in this quite specifically deathless way. And of course, everything that *is* actually looks quite different if looked at with humanly deathless eyes. Observation affects reality, as quantum physicists tell us. Just as the reality of creation underwent a real change when human consciousness was born, and anthropoids started looking at everything round about them through those hugely more powerful and dangerous things, human eyes, so that same reality has been undergoing a further change as, ever since Jesus’ resurrection, reality has been able to be observed from within itself by the deathless One looking through fully human eyes into whose gaze we find ourselves drawn.

OK, let’s get back to the Samaritan. So far we’ve noticed that he has been drawn towards the victim in a completely non-repulsed way, and that he is simply unmoved by issues of death. So proximity is not a problem. But what is in a sense just as interesting, is that absence is not a problem either. As we carry on watching him, it seems that part of this

gut wrench which he is undergoing is sensed as a tremendous privilege. He is finding himself on the inside of the life of God! So he is quite unconcerned about sensible limits to goodness. He is just delighted to find himself on the inside of this adventure. He doesn't try to palm off the wounded one on the innkeeper. He seems to realise that he's found a centre to his life and activity that is worth sticking with. Rather than saying to himself "How little can I get away with and still be a decent person?" which is what I find myself thinking whenever I'm in an analogous situation, he seems to realise that he is being given something good by sharing the life of this victim. And this means that he *owns* the situation – makes it his own. And that of course means that he allows the victim to be the one who *owns him*.

However, this doesn't mean that he is now condemned, in some thoroughly unhealthy way, to be morbidly fixated on hanging in there with the victim, as though the victim needed to see him the whole time, or as though the only real sort of love or compassion were some perpetual and intense face-to-face with the vulnerable other. Nor does the Samaritan have any need to be seen to be doing good. Part of the privilege on the inside of which he has discovered himself, is that he is able to take responsibility for the victim as a project over time, which means not being obsessively present, or obsessively absent. It means being able to be quite invisible while still caring for and looking after the victim, setting up intermediary agents and instruments who will be rewarded, and know they will be rewarded, for playing their part in his generosity.

This has involved him in making an open-ended commitment to the well-being of the victim without any fear that he would be somehow limiting himself, be getting tied down, trapped, in a responsibility that would in some way diminish him. On the contrary, it is as though he has discovered with joy that he is going to be brought into being himself, become something much more, be added to enormously, precisely by his commitment into this precarious and unpredictable healing process. Being *owned* by the victim has turned out to be something much less panic-inducing, and much more spaciousness-creating than he would have thought possible.

And this I think is a second dimension to the process of beginning to live the life of the deathless one in the circumstances of contingent humanity. As death loses its power, so commitment to the flourishing of what is fragile and precarious becomes possible, and our relationship with time

changes. I don't know about you, but pledging yourself in an open-ended manner to make good on the hospital expenses of a severely injured person without any guarantee of pay back for yourself, even less with any accumulated insurance premiums paid to you over many years against just such an eventuality, is mostly a terrifying possibility. What is to stop you being "taken to the cleaners" for everything you've got?

But what if time is not your enemy? If time is not your enemy, then what you achieve or don't achieve, whether you are taken to the cleaners or not, is secondary, and whatever you have will be for the flourishing of the weak one for as long as it takes, since you know that you will be *found there*. Being on the inside of the life of God looks like being decanted, by a generosity you didn't know you had in you, into make a rash commitment which makes a nonsense of death, of worry, and of the panic of time, because you know that you want to be found in loving proximity to what is weak and being brought into being. Wanting to be *found there* is a huge statement of joy at the power and gentleness of One for whom it is the apparently weak and futile things that are going to be enabled to be brought into being. Being given the daring to be able to lose yourself in being *found there* is recognised as a privilege to be greeted with praise.

This, I think, is what the Samaritan was discovering in his slow-burning, gentle and intelligent excitement, his λογικη λατρεια³. That God is the One who brings into being *what is not*. And dwelling on the inside of the life of God means being prepared to lose sight of all the apparently important things that *are* and to give yourself away in extreme gentleness and tenderness towards that which is apparently not, and yet which is being brought into being out of the brink of nothingness by one not ashamed of mingling with the least important of all, one who has nowhere more important to be.

Well, what the lawyer made of the Samaritan, the text does not tell us. But perhaps we can think of him going away with two concerns – one personal, and one institutional. The personal is the sure sense that the Samaritan had it lucky in having God rush through his entrails like an express train. For most of us, the process of having our hearts turned from Sacrifice to Mercy is incredibly, incredibly painful. Since the more any of us loves, the more any of us is given a heart of flesh, the more alive that heart becomes. And the more alive it becomes, the more raw

³ Romans 12,1-2.

and painful the world comes to seem, even if also much much richer and more interesting.

What would it feel like for the priest, or the levite, already several hundred metres further down the road beyond the wounded one, to find themselves suddenly pounced on by the love of God, and dragged backwards up the hill, divesting themselves of their virtues, their certainties, their status, constantly aware, even as they were being dragged backwards, that a huge smile was already breaking out in their soul, from just behind where they could do anything about it. They sense that part of them is already coming to life and excitement, losing fear of pain, being thrilled to be throbbing and sensitive at the thought of the One whom they will meet when they are finally able to stop walking backwards, turned round at last to see him face to face. And part of them is wondering how on earth they are going to handle the knowledge that the One whom they really did worship regularly around the altar, but as if from behind bars, and the One who is pummeling them into life from the entrails of the victim, really is the same One, but with no bars. How are they going to share that everything they always knew *is true*, but its truth feels like being dragged through a bush backwards, electric fence and all, like finding that there has been shock-started within them that awesomely fragile thing we know as a living heart?

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