

Wrath and the gay question: on not being afraid, and its ecclesial shape

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I'd like to start by comparing two stories. The second, just to show catholicity of taste, and in case there are any adults present, will be Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*; but the first is DreamWorks 2005 film *Shark Tale*. Lenny is a Great White Shark who happens to be a vegetarian. His brother Frankie is a perfectly normal meat-eating shark. Their father Lino is the mob boss of the sharks who prowl around the reef for food. Having a vegetarian son would be a very serious blow to Lino's mob boss prowess and family values, and his vegetarian son is understandably not keen to "come out" to him. Alas Frankie, the red-blooded meat-eating brother, is killed when an anchor, casually dropped from above by a ship, hits him on the head. Now Lenny has to live up to all his father's expectations, which he can't do since he is a vegetarian and wants to dress up as a dolphin. So Lenny escapes to the reef, whose inhabitants are initially terrified of him, as they are of all sharks. However he is eventually befriended by the fish he is supposed to eat, and together they concoct a plan to ward off Lenny's marauding relatives. You'll be glad to hear that all ends happily: Boss Lino is eventually brought to a place where he can accept his son as a vegetarian, tells him that he loves him however he is, and Lenny is able to get a job at the swim-by Whale wash, along with all the non-carnivorous fish, turtles, and the like. Perks of this job include both being able to dress up as a dolphin and to wear what looked to this viewer suspiciously like a "Village People" uniform to hold his barnacle-scrubbing gear.

I must say, I was pretty stunned, when I saw this film, at how brazen it is. For a gay man, it all seemed astoundingly obvious. I mean, "puhleeze", a vegetarian shark, as vivid an illustration of "*contra natura*" as you can get; the fear of "coming out"; a moronically macho father who wouldn't accept him; the son wanting to act like a Dolphin, dressing up like the Village People; and the overall message "it's OK to be different, and your

daddy will eventually get round to liking you”. All this seemed to be a classic example of modern American preachy advocacy. We all know that Tinky Winky from the Teletubbies, and SpongeBob SquarePants’ friend Patrick the Starfish, have been denounced by the usual suspects as subversive crypto-gay characters, further assaults on the psyche of America’s children. What amazed me was not that *Shark Tale* suffered the same fate, which eventually it did. But that its detractors took so long to point out something which was so blatantly obvious. The overall story line seemed to me to be “it’s OK to be different, and being a vegetarian shark, or for that matter, a gay son, is just a form of being different, and you too can be a hero and end up being accepted by your family”.

So far, so good. It sounds as though the film has the right sort of storyline to fit in with a group of people who are facing issues of “Living with difference” or “Tolerance and diversity”. But now I would like to turn to my other story, *The Merchant of Venice*, and although there is in *Shark Tale* an elderly Jewish shark¹, called Don Feinberg, whose voice-over is done by Peter Falk of “Columbo” fame, he is not, as it happens, the link around which my comparison works.

Let us turn to Shylock’s famous speech from Act III scene 1:

*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs
dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means
warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer
as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us,
do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.*

In a romantic presentation of Shakespeare, we could imagine this as another moment of preachy advocacy, as the moment when Shylock gets to stand up in front of the Doge and say “Yes, I am a vegetarian Shark, and you know, that’s a tough thing to be, we have a tough time too, our own form of heroism, and why can’t you learn to accept us and live with difference?”. But of course, Shakespeare is not a romantic², and although

¹ I guess this figure was included so that DreamWorks couldn’t be accused of Italian Mafia stereotypes.

² My reading of *The Merchant of Venice* is entirely dependent on that of René Girard in “To entrap the wisest” which can be found in Ch 28 of *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: OUP, 1991).

our romantic expectations can deceive us into not noticing what Shylock does say, he does in fact say exactly the opposite of this. What he says, and repeats, and repeats is, in effect “I am the same as you, exactly the same as you”. And of course, he is roundly ignored by all the other characters for whom his “difference” is very important.

Shakespeare, however, agrees with Shylock, even to the point where Portia has to have Shylock identify himself, for to the untrained eye he looks just like any other Venetian³. Shakespeare underlines, and repeats and repeats that all the people in the play are obsessed with money, all their values are entirely materialistic. Their every prospect of happiness or sadness, even their understanding of marriage and of having children, is dependent on their relation to capital, theirs or their patrons’, to whether their ships come in, or are wrecked by storms, to what we would call the vagaries of the market. Every single feature which they, and the mediaeval stereotype into which they buy so mercilessly, attribute to the figure of the Jew, is a dominant feature of their own lives. If there is any distinction at all between Shylock and the other characters, it is that Shylock is almost autistically honest and straightforward in calling a spade a spade, and is too little sophisticated to be able to cope with the elegant guile and hypocrisy of the other Venetians who run rings round him.

I would like to suggest in fact that Shakespeare’s emphasis on sameness, rather than DreamWorks’ emphasis on difference, is the more profitable route for us to pursue in looking at the gay question in our Church and our society now. For what Shakespeare suggests is that the insistence on difference is a way of blinding those who insist on it to what is really going on. Think of it this way, if the Venetians didn’t have someone like Shylock, onto whose tiny difference from themselves they could project all the things that were most awful about their society, they might have to think about who *they* were, what really ran them, what “being Christian” really meant (as opposed to merely “not Jewish”), what “the quality of mercy” really meant (rather than a feat of cruel forensic presdigation conducted in drag), how their lives had become the symptom of an economic system characterized by the ever present threat of a wrath which they could only temporarily escape by playfully, and hurtfully, coming up with someone whose difference they could hate.

In other words, the emphasis on “difference” is part of a conjuring trick, the keeping alive of a delusion, under cover of which, forces that are as

³ “Which is the merchant here, and which is the Jew?” IV,I,174.

destructive of Christians as of Jews work out their ways. This I think is part of the sadness which underlies the play, a sadness announced by Antonio from the first line of Act 1⁴. It would have been comparatively easy for Shakespeare to play to the mediaeval caricature of the Jew. Another possibility would have been for him to turn the caricature on its head, making Shylock a romantic hero, as DreamWorks did with Lenny. Instead Shakespeare does something altogether less visible, less entertaining, and more suggestive of truthfulness. He shows how a mechanism of projection works in creating a scapegoat, choosing someone who is no better, but no worse, than the other characters in the play, and that the only result of this, apart from making life miserable for poor Shylock, is to blind everyone to their similarity with him, with the result that the apparent contentment of their happy ending, is merely a cosmetic putting-off of dealing with what is really running, and ruining, them all, a guarantee against them ever growing up and becoming responsible.

What I would like to do now is to explore the workings of whatever it is that is going on in the background, whatever it is that is swirling around in the Venetian society of the play, and in our own society, and which tempts us to come up with “differences” so as to create temporary shelters of identity, violence and “playfulness” by contrast with them. In other words, I want to explore with you what I call the workings of “wrath”. In doing this, I want to bring into polite adult discussion something which is not normally allowed there, but is relegated to the backroom of fundamentalist discourse, where its misuse is a mirror image of its exclusion from enlightened discourse.

In enlightened discourse, there is of course, no “wrath” in any theological or anthropological sense. There is progress, and development, and of course, on the way there is conflict. Conflict is shown as something painful, but necessary, steps on the way towards the next phase. No omelettes without breaking eggs, and similar sentiments. In fundamentalist discourse, that conflict and those “steps on the way to the next phase” are personally and cosmically significant, and victory and defeat in them are part of the mysterious workings of a divinity, certainly something far greater and more important than anything the “wise” and “enlightened” of this generation could know about. Part of the attraction of fundamentalist discourse, and this fundamentalism can be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Marxist, or secularist, is the way it allows partially self-selecting “outsiders” from mainstream culture (and we’re all

⁴ “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad...” I.I.1.

such partially self-selecting “outsiders” now) to see themselves as secret “insiders” with a direct line in to What’s Really Going On.

For the Enlightened, it is perfectly obvious that there is no violence in God, if there is a God at all; while for the fundamentalist, the violence is always associated with God, directly, or through those charged with interpreting “His” (and it usually is *His*) message. In fact, without the violence there would be no sign of God’s activity in the world, which effectively means, there would be no God. What I would like to do is rescue the notion of wrath by attempting to show how there is indeed no violence in God, but that the phenomenon which religious language has described as “wrath” is very real, and worth taking seriously. Not only that, but it is rather important for our contemporary ability to live the Gospel that we overcome the schism between the enlightened and the fundamentalist, two positions which are, in my view, very much enemy twins, by recovering a sense of the anthropological effect in our midst of the covenant of peace to which the Scriptures refer (Isaiah 54, 10; Ezekiel 34, 25 & 37, 26). By recovering, if you like, the ecclesial shape of Christ making his covenant for us and enabling us not to be afraid.

There seems to be something odd going on when the same person, Jesus, both promises his followers:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. (John 14, 27)

And yet says:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household.
(Mt 10, 34-36; cf. Luke 12, 51)

These latter verses would have made great sense to Shylock, one would have thought, when his daughter ran off with a Christian, taking with her a good deal of her father’s money. Or consider these verses from the book of Revelation:

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the

mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?” (Rev 6, 15-17)

I would like to trace with you the way in which there is both no violence in Christ, and yet the result of his coming includes violence. To trace the process by which “the wrath of God”, something literally attributed to the divinity in parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, becomes the anthropological reality known to Paul as “wrath”, and can even be referred to as “the wrath of the Lamb”.

Let me give you some background: in a classic lynch murder, such as that described in Joshua 7, where “All Israel” gathers against Achan and “stones him with stones”, the wrath of God is simply, and straightforwardly associated with the group’s loss of morale, and the subsequent build up to anger which turns them into a lynch mob. First the anger of God is detected in the collapse of morale, the melting hearts, of the sons of Israel who have just undergone a minor military defeat. So God provides Joshua with a lottery to determine at whose door responsibility for the defeat should be laid. When the lottery achieves its purpose of finding a suitable culprit, all Israel discharges stones, murdering Achan. In their very act of ganging up together, unanimously, against poor Achan, of whose guilt they convince themselves through the liturgical mechanism of the lottery, they create peace among themselves. And in that very moment when their stones are all discharged, then “the Lord turned from his burning anger” (Joshua 7, 26). Of course he did: the shifting patterns of fear and mutual recrimination which had riven the people have been overcome by their triumphant and enthusiastic unanimity. From their perspective it feels as though “peace has been given them”. This is, in fact, peace, in the way the world gives it, the peace which comes from unanimity in righteous hatred of an evildoer. But it is misperceived by the participants as peace flowing from the divinity thanks to the right sacrifice having been offered.

The power of this experience is very real, and can still be detected when human lynching has found its substitute in animal sacrifice. It appears that the role of the priest in early forms of atonement sacrifice was to cover the participants with the blood of the animal so as to protect people from the wrath. It was as though the blood sprinkled over them wove a huge protective covering against wrath. The Hebrew letters כפר from which we get “Yom Kippur” and our word “atonement” designate a form of covering. It does not take a huge stretch of the imagination to see that

the freedom from wrath which came with the successful production of unanimity in the murdering of a victim, and which probably involved the participants being splattered with blood, could then be reproduced liturgically. The priest slaughters the animal, sacrificing it to the divinity, and then sprinkles the blood over the people, unanimously gathered to receive the fruits of the sacrifice. In the liturgical unanimity that occurs under the cover of the blood, the assuaging of the wrath is remembered and made newly present.

Interestingly, Israel does not seem to have stuck only with this model of sacrifice, but also had the very special Day of Atonement sacrifice where it was YHWH himself, through the High Priest, acting “in personam Yahveh”, who offered his own blood, symbolized by a lamb, for the people, who were then covered with it, this blood being taken to restore creation from the various forms of ensnarlements with which humans had distorted it. Here we begin to glimpse the notion of the victim performing the sacrifice for the people which will be brought to fulfilment in the New Testament.

When we get to the New Testament we see that the question of wrath is very much on people’s minds. John the Baptist assumes that the coming of Jesus is to produce wrath, since he tells the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to be baptised:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Mt 3, 7)

He then goes on to compare what he is doing with what he imagines Jesus is going to do, which will be a Baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Mt 3, 12)

And yet curiously, when Jesus does come, he doesn’t seem to act in the way that John thinks he’s going to. In fact he’s so little wrathful in his appearance that John, from prison, sends to ask:

Art thou he that is to come, or wait we for another? (Mt 11, 3)

Yet in fact Jesus *does* warn that the effect of his mission *is* going to be to produce wrath, in the passage I have already quoted to you. And in fact, he then gives himself to the sacrificial mechanism in a way which the

Gospel writers point to as being the way proper to the great High Priest, and he becomes the lamb of sacrifice. In fact, he reverses the normal human sacrificial system which started with human sacrifice and then is later modified to work with animal substitutes. Jesus, by contrast, substitutes himself for the lamb, portions of whose body were handed out to the priests; and thus by putting a human back at the centre of the sacrificial system, he reveals it for what it is: a murder.

Now here is the curious thing. It looks for all the world as though Jesus is simply fitting into the ancient world's views about sacrifice and wrath. But in fact, he is doing exactly the reverse. Because he is giving himself to this being murdered, and he has done nothing wrong, he brings about an entirely new way to be free from wrath. This is not the way we saw with Achan, where the temporary freedom from wrath comes with the outbreak of unanimous violence which creates singleness of heart among the group. What Jesus has done by substituting himself for the victim at the centre of the lynch sacrifice is to make it possible for those who perceive his innocence, to realise what it is in which they have been involved (and agreeing to drink his blood presupposes a recognition of this complicity). These then begin to have their identity given them not by the group over against the victim, but by the self-giving victim who is undoing the unanimity of the group. This means that from then on they never again have to be involved in sacrifices, sacrificial mechanisms and all the games of "wrath" which every culture throws up. They will be learning to walk away from all that, undergoing being given the peace that the world does not give.

So, there is no wrath at all in what Jesus is doing. He understands perfectly well that there is no wrath in the Father, and yet that "wrath" is a very real anthropological reality, whose cup he will drink to its dregs. His Passion consists, in fact, of his moving slowly, obediently, and deliberately into the place of shame, the place of wrath, and doing so freely and without provoking it. However, from the perspective of the wrathful, that is, of all of us run by the mechanisms of identity building, peace building, unanimity building "over against" another, Jesus has done something terrible. Exactly as he warned. He has plunged us into irresolvable wrath. Because he has made it impossible for us ever really to believe in what we are doing when we sacrifice, when we shore up our social belonging against some other. All our desperate attempts to continue doing that are revealed to be what they are: just so much angry frustration, going nowhere at all, spinning the wheels of futility.

The reason is this: the moment we perceive that the one occupying the central space in our system of creating and shoring up meaning is actually innocent, actually gave himself to be in that space, then all our sacred mechanisms for shoring up law and order, sacred differences and so forth, are revealed to be the fruits of an enormous self-deception. The whole world of the sacred totters, tumbles, and falls if we see that this human being is just like us. He came to occupy the place of the sacrificial victim entirely freely, voluntarily, and without any taint of being “run” by, or beholden to, the sacrificial system. That is, he is one who was without sin. This human being was doing something for us *even while we were so locked into a sacrificial way of thinking and behaviour that we couldn't possibly have understood what he was doing for us, let alone asked him to do it*. The world of the sacred totters and falls because when we see someone who is like us doing that for us, and realise what has been done, the shape that our realisation takes is our moving away from ever being involved in such things again.

Now what is terrible about this is that it makes it impossible for us really to bring about *with a good conscience* any of the sacred resolutions, the sacrificial decisions which brought us, and bring all societies, comparative peace and order. The game is up. And so human desire, rivalry, competition, which had previously been kept in some sort of check by a system of prohibitions, rituals, sacrifices and myths, lest human groups collapse in perpetual and irresolvable mutual vengeance, can no longer be controlled in this way. This is the sense in which Jesus' coming brings not peace to the earth, but a sword and division. All the sacred structures which hold groups together start to collapse, because desire has been unleashed. So the sacred bonds within families are weakened, different generations will be run by different worlds, give their loyalty to different and incompatible causes, the pattern of desire constantly shifting. All in fact will be afloat on a sea of wrath, because the traditional means to curb wrath, the creation by sacrifice of spaces of temporary peace within the group, has been undone forever. The only alternative is to undergo the forgiveness which comes from the lamb, and start to find oneself recreated from within by a peace which is not from this world, and involves learning how to resist the evil *one* by not resisting evil. This means: you effectively resist, have no part in, the structures and flows of desire which are synonymous with the prince of this world, that is to say with the world of wrath, only by refusing to acquire an identity over against evil-done-to you.

I hope you can see now why I love the image of the “wrath of the lamb”. There is the lamb, permanently and forever standing alive, as one slain,

on the altar in heaven, his blood given to us as we accept this purely peaceful self-giving and allow ourselves to be moved out of the whole “old creation” dominated by wrath. But the fact that this peaceful, life-giving lamb is standing there, slain, has effectively pulled the plug on the whole system of social order. It offers people a choice, one which most of us don't want to make: follow the lamb, and so become liable to be treated as the lamb was treated. Or, resist what the lamb has revealed and so be involved in ever increasing wrath without the means of handling it. But from then on, everything would be in flux, no order would hold, until the end of time. And the new Jerusalem coming down is coming down from heaven, without a Temple, with nothing of the old sacred in it, because the light of the lamb, standing in the place of, and rendering pointless, all sacrifice, is everywhere. This new Jerusalem is coming down in the midst of the overthrow, collapse, and vanity of all kingdoms, empires, powers and rule.

So, to recapitulate: Jesus reveals that there is no wrath in God, but the effect and the shape of his coming opens up the possibilities of wrath for those who don't receive him in ways which could not be imagined. The workings of “wrath” become a measurable, detectable anthropological reality as the innocent lamb exposes to us our own responsibility for what we, deceived by the hallucinations of our own mob behaviour, thought of as the anger of a divinity.

Paul, of course, takes this even further. He comes to the question of wrath from a very particular perspective. He had been an agent of wrath in the way he belonged to the party of the Pharisees. He knew the way in which zeal for the Law had made of him an enemy of God, because God had revealed himself to him as the One who he was persecuting. So it is not surprising that he, in his treatment of the Law is eager to point out the anthropology of wrath. The way wrath works is to get people to set themselves up with an airtight system of goodness. In a system of goodness, the Law (whatever form it takes) becomes a way of creating difference. It enables you to know how to be “in” by comparing yourself with those who are “out”. The more zealous you are, the clearer will be your sense of the boundaries of your group, and of course, the narrower and more incorrigible your righteousness will become.

Jesus notoriously had refused these boundaries of in and out. He had in fact faced down the party within Hebrew religion that was tending towards the creation of an ever more zealous and textual religion based on purity and difference; instead he recovered many of the traditions of more Ancient Hebrew voices which had fought against that. Finally he had

substituted his body for the Temple, thus fulfilling the Law and making it moot for ever. For anyone at all with any sense of the need to maintain a system of goodness, this is a disaster. It brought down any system of goodness forever. It would make of goodness something given by the Holy Spirit without any of the comforting crutches of sacred separations. And Saul had to stop it.

One of the amazing insights which he learned as a result of his conversion from “fiercely loyal bulwark of the system of goodness and differences” to “apostle of the new creation emerging in the midst of the collapse of all differences” – and that is what “apostle to the Gentiles” effectively means – was the way in which belonging to a system of goodness destroys you. It tells you to love your neighbour as yourself, but then it creates a whole class of neighbours who aren’t really neighbours: people who are cursed through not obeying the law, and thus become irredeemably different. This means that with the best will in the world, you find yourself caught in a double bind – you must love, but you must hate in order to love. Because of this you are divided against yourself and find yourself unable to do the good you know that you should do, but find yourself instead doing evil things that you should not do, but which the system of goodness actually drives you to do. In other words, rather than your being a free adherent of a system of goodness, the system of goodness runs you to produce wrath.

You can imagine then the passion of this former righteously innocent perpetrator of wrath as he tries to persuade those who might be tempted to go down the route of reinforcing the system of goodness: the game’s over! And you can imagine why when they will not accept that Christ has become the curse of the law, and thus that the game which ran the system of goodness has been shown up, that he regards them as retrenching into a system of goodness, and thus becoming ever more fully denizens of wrath. But please, this is not Paul the convert becoming anti-semitic, or even anti-nomian. It is the person who realizes that systems of goodness are all the fruit of, and agents of, wrath, and that only the Crucified One can get us out of wrath, and only the Spirit which he gave can take us into the New Creation.

Well I hope it is perfectly obvious that we are acquiring again in our modern world a sense of what “wrath” is about. And it also needs very few reminders in this company that one of the symptoms of “wrath” in our world, and it is indeed only one of the symptoms, and a comparatively unimportant one at that, is the emergence in the midst of all of our societies, whether we like it or not, of the gay question.

It is also obvious that one of the ways of dealing with this is to attempt to come up with some such formula as “look, we’re discovering that people we used to regard as weird and even evil are just different. But since they are functional to the way modern society works, just as we are, let us learn to live with our difference”. The key phrase here is “they are functional to the way modern society works, just as we are”. And this means that it is modern society, its structures of desire and survival, which get to run the show, because it is modern social structures, and their financial and corporate systems which get to determine what “likeness” is. And this means the “living with difference” isn’t really living with difference at all. It is really living with a sameness which is dictated by certain patterns of desire. And part of the way we protect ourselves against having to take seriously whether these patterns of desire really come from God, or are the pomps and splendours of this world, is by having decorative “difference” in the midst of all this sameness, and feeling proud of ourselves for being so broad-minded.

Well, I want to say: No! I am not at all interested in being given a post-modern identity which is in fact merely functional to the particular shape of wrath in our time. I am interested in becoming a son and heir to the whole of creation through the arduous discovery of my likeness with my sisters and brothers. I understand how it is one of the delusions of wrath that it is able to point to the growing visibility and public and legal acceptability of gay people and their lives and relationships and see this as an attack on the “family” and the “divinely given order of society”. But it *is* a delusion of wrath, like that of the Venetians against Shylock, because all it does is disguise from all of us quite how much the unleashing of desire which continues apace in our world, our capitalist, globalizing, technological world, does in fact subvert from within and change every form of relationship, including family relationships. It disguises from us how much we are all already run by these things, and how arduous it is for any of us to receive holiness of life, of desire, and of relationships in the midst of all this. And it sets things up for us to fight about this, rather than to help each other out of the hole.

So here rather than defend anything, I would like to be tentatively vulnerable about my pursuit of becoming a son and heir in the midst of all this wrath. And I want to do this by indicating that there is still something, it seems to me, which eludes us in all our discussions about the gay question. It is what I call the shape of Christian story as discovered from within by lesbian and gay people, and as able to be

shared and recognised to be a pattern of story that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let me try and explain what I mean. Over the last century or so in English speaking countries gay men and lesbian women have started to find a voice. I don't mean only a political voice, I mean a story-telling voice. And by a story-telling voice I mean one which other people have been able to vibrate with from within, even when they haven't had the same experiences or got the words for it. Not for nothing did Lord Alfred Douglas' phrase "The love that dares not speak its name" travel so well. Something like this, it seems to me, was at work in the public reception of the film *Brokeback Mountain*. Daniel Mendelsohn rightly insisted in the New York Review of Books against mainstream media attempts to "de-gay" the film⁵, that this is first and foremost a specifically "gay" film, since the overarching reality of it was the closet which destroyed the lives of all it touched. Yet, having conceded that, there were elements of the film with which anyone could vibrate: I think specifically of the tragedy of Ennis DelMar's paralyzed inability to dare to act on his love in any meaningful way, and therefore his inability to dare to live, whatever the consequences. This sort of paralysis is surely not gay-specific, even if the setting which made it available in the film was entirely so.

The real challenge, it seems to me is not for gay people to learn to tell a different story, but to find ourselves able to tell the same story, the Christian story which is the deepest and most extraordinary narrative available to us in any culture, and which is the story of living trapped by desire in an illusion, finding oneself torn through the consequences of that illusion, and being brought to a place of peace and new life through that. It is the story of Don Quijote, of *A Winter's Tale*, of Raskolnikov, of Alyosha Karamazov.

For far too long, and it is not in any way surprising, gay and lesbian people have had to scabble about for elements of story floating around, since the one story that was not available and open to us was the Christian one. The Christian story was specifically presented to us as one which we could only inscribe ourselves within by agreeing to mutilate our souls. I think of how sad so many gay literary stories seem, apparently wedded to the morbid, the dark, the faux heroism of a romanticized classical past, the dignity and love brought out in the shadow of death in many AIDS novels so often refusing interruption by grace. The quirkiness of desire,

⁵ "An Affair to Remember", *New York Review of Books*, 23 Feb 2006 (www.nybooks.com/articles/18712).

its double-binds and contradictions are well brought out, but how little is there of a story telling which lifts the soul on wings.

This is scarcely surprising. Famously, black people are born into and brought up by families composed of black people, Muslims into families composed of Muslims, Tagalog speakers into families comprised of people who speak Tagalog. So, whether those groups are majority groups or minority groups in any particular situation, their common stories are usually grown into as a normal part of infancy and childhood. Gay people are one of the very few minorities to be born into and brought up by families who can offer them no tribal song which makes any sense to them. So, while being gay does not appear to be learned behaviour, receiving the beginnings of an identity, becoming a viable and a truthful storyteller, being socialized into a capacity for relationships, these indeed have to be learned from other sources, often sources which include elements of exile, shame and having to learn to imagine the possible where all the voices you most respect are insisting that what you are looking for is something impossible, that what you are is something that is not. Harry Potter had the comfort of discovering that the Muggles who were bringing him up and forcing him to live in a closet under the stairs were simply an inferior race, not available to magic and enchantment. Many gay kids must have identified with the imagery in the film. But the magic and enchantment we must learn in our gay Hogwarts is only good magic if it helps us return to our own mugglehood as a contribution to the enchantment of all muggledom.

So I am aware that what I am saying in lamenting that we haven't yet come up with an ability to inscribe ourselves within the Christian story sounds awfully like a stern demand to a people inhabiting an exile: "Sing to us, they said, one of Sion's songs". But sing it with the constant background presence of emissaries from Sion insisting that any song you could possibly sing couldn't really be a song of Sion.

Well, I am not a novelist, and lack both the bravery and the talent to be able to pursue this discovery of story in a way that any reader would be able to say: "Yes, you know, there is in this story that quality of sameness, even though told by someone who is not me, that I can find that his story illuminates with sympathy elements of my own. I can receive what he tells me as a gift which helps me discover my own vocation more fully". That, I think is what I am looking for in gay writing and which I have not yet wholly found.

However, instead of being a novelist, my vocation seems to be that of a priest and a theologian, and as such I do try to explore elements of the grammar which might one day make such stories strong. There are two particular elements of grammar in this area which I have pursued. One is the coming down of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and the Gentiles after Peter has spoken to them, and before they are baptised in Acts 10. Indeed what I have been talking about when I talk about gay people learning to tell a story is precisely raising the question of what is the shape of the Holy Spirit coming down upon a group of people who it has long been assumed have been outside the bounds of holiness. And my concern is far more with attempting to develop that new shape of holiness, including the new possibilities of life-giving and life-sharing narrative which will flow from that, than with convincing Peter of the need to baptise us. When Peter sees that our stories are in fact filled out by the Holy Spirit, he will in fact recognise our likeness, and that the Holy Spirit has already been given us.

What seems to me to be important is not to be so concerned about getting Peter's approval that it becomes a substitute for the hard work of finding ourselves on the inside of God's story. And that means the hard work of discovering ourselves loved, being able to face up to the terror, the sense of annihilation, the fear of loss, the powerlessness and frivolity, and the continuous sense of shame which have been our lot. And this is where I have begun to find a second element of grammar, also related to the Holy Spirit. In the Christological accounts of the giving of the Holy Spirit, it is something which Jesus does which makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to be given. The Holy Spirit cannot be given without Jesus doing this something, and it is in his doing it, something that he alone could do, that we see the shape of the Holy Spirit which will then be breathed on us all.

This "thing" which Jesus does is to go to his death, or go to his Father, and in the long Johannine description of this, these terms apply to the same reality. But what Jesus is doing is very especially occupying the place of shame, and of wrath. And he is doing so in such a way as to detoxify it for ever. When he pronounces himself the Gate of the Sheep, he is referring to the gate by which sheep were led into the temple for slaughter. He indicates that the Good Shepherd does what the shepherds of Israel never did: he goes in as a sheep with the sheep into the sacrificial space. They are not frightened of him since they recognise that he is the same as them. The Shepherd is thus able to lead the sheep in and out to find pasture, something previously impossible. No one ever led sheep *out* from the Temple abattoir. It was as one-way a track as the railway line to Treblinka. Only one who was not affected by death could lead sheep in

and out of the place of shame, wrath and sacrifice, so as to find pasture. So by himself becoming the abattoir door, the Shepherd makes the sacrificial space no longer a dead end, no longer a trap. He even points out how different this is from the thieves and hirelings, easily recognisable ways of referring to the religious and political leaders who ran the Temple and the system of goodness. Such leaders never went into the Temple through the abattoir door, but rather through another way, and then from above, they took the sheep for sacrificial slaughter (qush|, John 10, 10). But when there was any real religious crisis, whenever wrath threatened, or the wolf came, they could be guaranteed not to stand up for their sheep, not to dare to go through the same door as they insisted the sheep go, but rather to flee and leave the sheep to be scattered and the prey of every wild beast. And this of course is true of any system of goodness to this day, such as the ones which give sustenance to those of us who are “religious professionals”.

Well it seems to me that what Jesus is doing in “going to his Father”, “going to Death”, “occupying the space of shame and of wrath”, being both Shepherd and Abattoir door, is making the place of shame, of wrath, and of sacrifice into a pasture. And that means a place where we can be nourished, find wholeness, health and story to live by. The giving to us of the Holy Spirit is then the giving to us of the whole dynamic, the whole power, by which Jesus was able to occupy this place of annihilation, shame and wrath without being run by it. And this does seem to me something very powerful for gay and lesbian people. I wonder whether our ability to be able to sing one of Zion’s songs, to find that in our hearts are the highways to Zion (Psalm 84, 5) does not at the moment pass through our ability to be able to occupy the place of shame without being run by it.

This is a difficult notion, since shame produces flight. To be able to live in the midst of shame, by which I mean of course the space of shame which has for so long been so toxic, without being run by it may turn out to be a hugely positive feat. This is the space where, because one no longer has anything to lose, is no longer frightened, knows that the only thing left that they can take away is your life, and that is already in the hands of Another, because of all this, one can develop a tender regard for those who are like one, and a tender regard leads to a creative imagination, and a playful generosity of heart.

This is where I suspect that the Holy Spirit may be beginning to produce gay and lesbian stories which will turn out to be irrefutably Christian. Where Jesus has made us not ashamed and not frightened of occupying

the space of shame. Where he has enabled us no longer to be run by the wrath which has so defined us in past generations, there we will be able to discover our likeness with those others who have needed us to occupy that position because it is the only way they think they can keep wrath at bay.

You see, I'm not sure that anything, any power at all can resist shame held delicately in tenderness. And I'm not sure that anyone can predict what creativity, gifts and life will emerge from such a peaceful place.

Rather than seek to convince you of anything, to plead with you as a Vegetarian Shark seeking the tolerance of difference, or to belabour you with sameness like some poor Shylock furious that you cannot see the obvious, I have chosen to try something a little different: to share with you a space of shame, of incompleteness, of story not-yet-forged, a sense of being in a pit and not yet knowing a way out of it, in the hopes that as you reach to help me, you will discover that my pit is the same as yours, and that as we realise this, we may find ourselves turning this valley of weeping into a place of springs (Psalm 84, 6).

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