

*Traversing hostility:
The sine qua non of any Christian talk about Atonement*

(Presentation for the Colloquium '**For Us and for Our Salvation: René Girard and the Doctrine of Atonement**', held at Heythrop College, London 7-8th November 2014)

1. Recovering Our Lord's account of His Atonement

In each of the three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus teaches the parable which we know as that of the "Wicked Tenants" or the "Murderous Vinedressers". The place in which the parable is given, the Temple, is the same in each version. As is the timing. It follows Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, to the accompaniment of Davidic acclamations, his prophetic acting out of judgment on the Temple and his announcement of its caducity, by means of the overturning of the tables and the blighting of the fig tree. The parable then precedes Jesus' prophecy of the physical destruction of the Temple and his remarks concerning the unimportance of that event, his eschatological teaching, and his closing the parentheses of all this teaching with the final example of the fig tree. In all three cases the parable is delivered to the Chief Priests, Scribes and Elders (Mk, Mt) or in their presence (Lk), and is part of Jesus' response to their question concerning his authority for performing the signs he had just performed.

There are differences between the three versions of the parable. The Marcan and Lucan versions reveal greater hints of the day-to-day agricultural concerns and property law, which the first listeners would have understood as appropriate to a rental arrangement of the sort described, while the Matthaean version is more schematic. And for anyone interested in following up on those matters, I cannot recommend highly enough the late Duncan Derrett's masterly discussion¹. It is not, however, those differences that interest me here, but rather the way that Matthew resolves the flow of the story by comparison with Mark and Luke.

In Mark's version (Mk 12, 1-12) the parable is a monologue, with Jesus telling the story of the tenants, asking what the owner will do, and himself giving the answer to the effect that the owner will destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Then he quotes

¹ J. Duncan M. Derrett: *Law in the New Testament* London: DLT 1970 Ch 13, pp 286-312

Psalm 118 concerning the stone that the builders rejected, and at some point his listeners pick up that he has told the parable *against* them. In Luke's version, Jesus tells the story, asks what the owner will do, and himself gives the answer concerning destroying the tenants and giving the vineyard to others. At this point his listeners interject: "Heaven forbid!" whereupon Jesus looks at them and asks them what the quote from Psalm 118 means, adding some thoughts concerning falling and being crushed. These seem to be an interpretation of Isaiah 28, 16 and Isaiah 8, 14-15, appropriately enough for a parable whose most obvious Scriptural allusion is to the vineyard of the Lord's beloved in Isaiah (5, 1-2). Again the Scribes and Chief Priests, who are among the listeners, pick up that he has told the story *against* them, and are only restrained by fear of the crowd from arresting him on the spot

In Matthew's version, Jesus is talking to the Chief Priests and elders, and tells the story of the tenants rather succinctly. However when he asks what the owner will do when he comes, this is not a rhetorical question, and the Chief Priests and elders supply a vehement answer: the owner will put those bastards to a bastardly death and lease the vineyard to others who will produce its fruit in due season. Reacting to this, Jesus quotes Psalm 118 at them, in wonderment that they seem to have no understanding of it. He then implies that it is *because of that lack of understanding* that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from them, his listeners, (whom he here addresses directly as "you"), and given to others who will produce its fruit. He then adds, at least in some ancient authorities, the verse about falling on the stone and being crushed. The Chief Priests and the Pharisees (whose first appearance this is in this chapter – earlier it had been the scribes or the elders who had accompanied the Chief Priests) realize that the *parables* (i.e. not this one alone) were *about* them (not against them as in Mk and Lk), and want to arrest him, but fear the crowds.

I take for granted that each of the three versions is a different way, presupposing a different audience, of enabling a Christian preacher, teacher or expositor to make available from highly compacted material something that Jesus really did teach in just the circumstances described, and which was sufficiently dense, complex and surprising that those who first heard it did not grasp it immediately, but gradually. And what the authorities who were listening, and who were by no means stupid, did eventually understand, *or thought they understood*, was sufficiently shocking

that they then contemplated the comparative danger to public order of doing something about it as opposed to doing nothing, neither being a good option. However, whatever it was that Jesus was teaching was not so obviously and straightforwardly blasphemous, seditious, or partisan, that only particularly stupid stage baddies could have missed out on its point until it was too late, when they are left to grind their teeth in a vaudeville of villainous vexation.

I would like to concentrate on Matthew's account here, since there is something about the pauses, gaps, changes of voice and of emphasis in his version which seem to me especially useful if we are to focus on a particularly Jewish sense of the difference between what is of God and how we humans think. I consider this to be of the essence in bringing out the dimension of *awe* to which I fear that I, at least, have often failed to bear witness when discussing the Atonement.

First, let us remember that Matthew's account, like all the others, is Jesus' partial answer to the question put to him by the Chief Priests and those with them as to "*by what authority he did these things*". The things in question being his prophetic acting out of the arrival into Jerusalem of the promised Davidic heir, and the symbolic and enacted declarations of the Temple's usefulness and time having come to an end. So no account of the parable that does not offer some hint of an answer to that question can be said to be entirely plausible.

As most commentators observe, Matthew doesn't follow the legal niceties present in Luke and Mark, where the owner first sends servants before any fruits could possibly be claimed, servants who must return bloodied as part of showing that they had at least staked their master's claim. Nor does he seem particularly interested in following the Tenants' progress towards establishing ownership by the law of "adverse possession"². Rather, in Matthew's account, the sendings of the servants seem already to be those of the prophets, divided into two series: those from before the Babylonian exile and those after. And so we come to the arrival of the final emissary, the son, whom the tenants refer to as the κληρονόμος, which is usually translated as the heir, though it might also mean the usurper, or the one who has come to lay rightful claim to the property.

² This is a legal term for a method of gaining legal title to land by the actual, open, hostile, and continuous possession of it to the exclusion of its true owner for the period prescribed by the law of the relevant jurisdiction.

I guess most of us assume that the word “heir” refers to someone who expects in due time to become the owner of the property, rather than someone who, following the demise of the landowner in whose will they are named, is in fact already the new owner. But there is in the word itself no indication as to which of the two is the case. And this raises the question of whether or not the tenants in the story thought they were killing their future, or their current landlord. If they thought they were killing their future landlord while their current landlord, although distant, was very much alive, they would have been doing something rather stupid. Since of course the current landlord, on hearing the news, could be expected to engage in reprisals to re-establish his authority.

However if they thought that the arrival of the κληρονόμος was a sign that the old man had died, and that they were dealing with the current owner, who had, furthermore, arrived without any back-up, then killing him was not a bad idea at all. Especially if they did it outside the vineyard, so that the circumstances could be murky, and they could prevent his spilled blood from soiling productive ground. Such soiling would, for generations, have rendered the vineyard’s produce impure, and thus much less valuable. Under these circumstances, however immoral it may seem to us, killing him, and doing so off the premises, may well have seemed quite savvy, since there would henceforth be no one to contest their title, no one to witness against them or to vindicate the original owner’s authority.

I hope that you can see that, given the ambiguity concerning the status of the κληρονόμος, how Jesus poses the next question to his listeners, and what he means by it, is crucial. He asks them “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”. Up until this point in the story, it has not been clear *to the tenants* that the first owner, the father of the son who has just been killed, was still alive. They may well have thought that there was no owner to come, since they had killed the one they imagined to be the current owner. But for those outside the story, like Jesus’ listeners, it has been obvious all along that the original owner is still alive. So they answer in the obvious way: the original owner will establish his authority over the vineyard, his ownership of it, in a violently retributive way, doing unto the criminals, who thought they had got away with a successful takeover scheme, what they had done to his son.

And here's the rub: in answering him in the obvious way, Jesus' listeners remain outside the capacity to imagine the parable as a response to their own question: "*by whose authority*"? For that question concerns the signs they had witnessed, and which were perfectly comprehensible to them, by which Jesus is establishing that he is the Priestly King of Davidic line, promised from of old, turning up to visit the vineyard, and of course its Watchtower, the Temple. It would have been perfectly obvious to them all that King David was long since dead, and not capable of turning up with an army to punish anybody. But if Jesus is the long-awaited anointed Son of David, then in fact he is not representing the owner: *he is the owner*.

It is at this point that Jesus shifts register by expressing amazement that they haven't understood the verse from Psalm 118 (with which they were certainly familiar, and so had "read" in the obvious sense) concerning the stone that the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone. By asking them "Have you never read...?" he is pointing out to them that they have, by their answer, chosen to remain outside the story, rather than answering him concerning the owner as if they were the tenants from within the story. If they had thought of themselves as the tenants from within the story, and could recognise their own murderousness, then they had in Psalm 118 a rather good defence of what the tenants had done: their putting the one they had thought to be the owner to death was part of a providential plan and the Lord would vindicate his own authority, outside any retributory logic, by making this to be for the best of all of them: "This was the Lord's doing, and it is wonderful in our eyes".

However, his listeners are either incapable of accepting, or unwilling to accept the implicit challenge, by entering inside the story and seeing themselves as the murderous tenants. Rather they remain outside it and beholden to an entirely retributory logic of righteous innocence: "We would never do anything like that, and anyone who does something like that should have meted out to them the same violence they had themselves meted out". *It is this retributory logic*, preventing them from reading the murder in a providential way, *rather than the murder itself*, which is the cause of the Kingdom of God being taken away from them and given to a people producing its fruits. It is not the fact of the murder, but whether that murder functions for its accomplices as a source of accusation or of forgiveness that is going to be key. The retributory logic within which Jesus' listeners choose to remain will henceforth be perpetually

scandalized. They will be outmanoeuvred by the logic of the providential vindication of the Lord's authority in instantiating and making visible, through his death and resurrection, the mechanism of the aleatory victim. The mechanism was accurately prophesied by David in his psalm, and the consequences of its instantiation clearly understood by Isaiah. For the verses quoted from Isaiah concerning falling on a stone and being crushed point out how exactly the same mechanism that brings salvation to some ties others into scandal.

Please notice the rather subtle distinction I'm attempting to bring out: in Jesus' telling and reaction it is *not at all* the fact that the tenants have killed the son that is the problem. In fact, Jesus in telling the parable seems cheerfully unconcerned, indeed almost indulgent, about the murder. The murder is the baseline, differing reactions to which will determine future tenancy, and it is those differing reactions that bear the weight of the story. Where the parable "catches" its listener is that it requires a movement from outside the story to inside the story if it is to answer the question that the Chief Priests and elders had put to Jesus concerning "*by what authority do you do these things*". But the moment its listeners take that step inside the story, then they accept complicity, identifying with murderers whose murder is going to be turned to their advantage.

For Jesus is effectively saying to them: "The Lord, through David his beloved, planted this vineyard long ago. I, deliberately acting out the coming into the vineyard of David's son and heir, Am the one whom I am enacting. Hence my entry into Jerusalem, my curing of blind and lame people in the Temple who have not been allowed onto the Temple mound since David's time³, even before Solomon built the Temple; Hence my refusal to silence the children who are announcing the return of the Davidic heir. I am bringing to an end the tenancy, with the need to pay me first fruits, which is represented by the Temple. Indeed, I have not found any fruit there, merely a lot of cosmetic foliage, as I demonstrated with the fig tree. Henceforth I intend to be present myself in those working the vineyard. My Davidic authority, which is a first person authority, will be demonstrated, after you have killed me, in exactly the way David himself prophesied through Psalm 118. The coming of the owner, the posthumous vindication of the son, and the bringing to an end of the Temple regime of sacrifice, *will turn out to be the same thing*. And it is

³ cf Mt 21: 14; 2 Sam 5, 8-9 LXX

only in the light of David's own words that you could conceivably interpret any question of Davidic authority. From now on, those who are scandalized by their own involvement in the murder that is to happen and by this teaching about it, will remain scandalized by it; while those who recognise their complicity with the perpetrators of what has gone on and allow themselves to be forgiven will find themselves producing the desired fruit of the vineyard."

I hope now that it is clearer why Matthew says that the Priests and Pharisees perceived that he was speaking "about" them rather than "against" them: they are being challenged to consider their place in all this. The answer to the question of "by whose authority you do this" is only available when they step inside the story. Yet the moment they do step inside the story, then they are faced with the fact that they are going to have to assess for themselves the first person authority of the one coming towards them. There's no other way to be sure whether they are dealing with the current or the future owner and therefore, what the owner's exercise of authority might look like. And they will only understand any answer given to the question of "by whose authority you do this" in the degree to which they accurately assess the one with whom they're dealing. Furthermore they are being invited to consider that the owner may have a more indulgent understanding of the tenants' own murderousness than they themselves, an indulgence that shades into a benevolence which they can access precisely in their recognising that murderousness: "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes⁴".

I hope it is clear that contemplating this leaves them stuck, both inside and outside the story, as people who are in fact thinking about doing to Jesus just what is described, but have no wish for any divine elements to accrue to that. These are not scenarios that are quickly thought through without scandal.

2. Taking incomprehension seriously

Please excuse the very long introduction to what are going to be some shorter observations. My purpose here is not to remain focused on textual detail, but to enter into the underlying hints of theological

⁴ Psalm 118, 23

vision. I suspect that we have in this parable the nearest thing to Our Lord's own narrative account of the atonement, a fuller acting out of which he is shortly to perform for his disciples in the Last Supper. In John's Gospel, the two valencies of the reading of the murder, from outside and from inside the story, are brought out in Caiaphas' remark about one man dying for the nation, and in the Evangelist's own gloss on this: that Caiaphas had been telling the truth despite himself, being the mouthpiece of a High Priestly prophecy that was in fact being fulfilled, and of whose fulfilment its utterer had no understanding at all⁵. Piercing knowledge and extreme ignorance are here formally identical. In the first letter of Peter (1Pt 2, 4-8) exactly the same two valencies are set forth, using exactly the same quotes from Isaiah and Psalm 118 as we saw in the parable, and there also the two valencies of the same murder are treated as being the entire difference between being and not being a believer.

What I think is special about the Parable of the Vinedressers, and particularly Matthew's version of it, is not that it is saying anything formally different from either John or 1 Peter. I think it is revealing the same thing as they. No, that which is special is that in the Johannine or Petrine version we can get away with treating the insight as though it were an intellectual matter, something about a "him" or a "them" that can be schematized. Whereas in the Matthaean version we are given a scarcely-veiled first person account: "What I am doing", put forward by someone who simultaneously knows how extremely difficult it is for any listener of his to understand what he is doing, and yet, amazingly, wants to make it easier for them to find a way in, so that they will not be trapped in the result of their own malice.

Saying this in another way: it is easy, rather too easy, for us to discuss the two valencies of sacrifice present in the atonement as though they were *ideas*. It is an altogether different matter to find ourselves on the inside of someone else's narrative in which that someone else is trying, in as firm but as amicable as possible a way, to talk us beyond our own hostility to the one talking to us. It is here that I begin to get some glimpse of what I have so often failed to bring to our discussions of Atonement: a sense of *awe* at the hugeness and

⁵ John 11, 49-52 'But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.' (RSV)

difference of a deliberate, intelligent and even indulgent, love for us that is only available to us *as it traverses our hostility*.

For what we have in the parable is Our Lord traversing our hostility in two senses. In the first sense, he is describing what he is in fact doing in the first person, answering what it looks like for “I AM” to come to his vineyard and take charge of it so that it produces fruit, making quite clear that he expects to be murdered and furthermore that this is not a problem for him. It is, rather, the previously considered and generously assumed cost of business in a project of love. So the whole movement of love towards us takes for granted and is not fazed by the fact that “I AM” is loving us, who are, unbeknownst to us, his enemies. Our enmity does not prevent his love for us. It does not even limit it in any way. Our enmity does blind us to that love, as it blinds us to who we really are, and yet it also provides the murderous circumstances in which it is possible for that love to be shown to us.

The second sense then, in which Our Lord traverses our hostility, is in trying to make it possible for us, his enemies, to understand what he is doing for us. His movement into the Vineyard, by fulfilling the Davidic prophecies and carrying out the signs, is pointing to something quite objective that he is doing, whether we get what it is or not. But in addition, he actually teaches what he is doing: “I AM giving I AM’s account of what I AM doing”. And this can only be done by sign and parable *because part of our being enemies is that we cannot understand someone doing something for us in any straightforward and direct way*. It is not that we are decent people who just happen to be hostile to this or that manoeuvre of someone who may or may not like us. Rather, we come pre-formed in hostility to our own best interests. Only the indirection of the parabolic method could possibly get us to take the time to be quizzical concerning who we are, and just possibly self-critical concerning our place in what is unfolding.

However, the ability of the parable to do that is not a foregone conclusion: it may turn out only to blind further into outraged righteousness those to whom it was seeking to offer a way in to understanding someone doing something loving and friendly towards, and for them. And this of course is very exactly how Jesus had described the function of the parables:

“This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which says: ‘You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.’ All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”⁶”

So the fact of what is being done, the Atonement, is something that traverses our hostility. And it cannot be the case that the teaching about it comes to us via some other, clearer, more linear route. *It is only as enemies who are being let off our enmity that we could conceivably have any idea of what is being done for us.* But this means that any theological reception of the Atonement, any genuinely theological attempt to teach and pass on the doctrine of the Atonement fails seriously if it is not marked by an awareness of the hostility to what is proposed, on the part of those even now receiving it; and an awe on the part of those receiving it, in the face of an almost impossible-to-discern generosity and love. This generosity and love is not a response to our hostility, is not circumscribed by it in any way at all, and yet makes use of that hostility to turn us into something much beyond ourselves. To put this in other, more Tridentine terms: Atonement is performed in the face of fallen humans who are averse to perceiving that this is something that does them good; and *even afterwards*, as our scandal at ourselves unravels, the understanding by the baptised of Atonement, of what has been done for us, is as marked by concupiscence, the remnant in our redeemed lives of the failed mind and distorted desire of the Old Adam, as every other dimension of our post-baptismal lives.

3. Liturgical Presence and awe

It is for this reason that I think it particularly important that we have received from the Apostles not a theory of the atonement. Rather we have been given the knowledge that the Atonement has happened,

⁶ Mt 13: 13-15, 34-35;

and a liturgical way of being able to find ourselves inside what it was that happened, and how that reaches us. I'd like to illustrate this with reference to the martyrdom of Stephen⁷, since there all the elements of presence, hostility and scandal, at which we have been looking, are very clearly illustrated.

Stephen gives an extended account of the history of the people to whom he is talking, starting with Abraham. The thrust of his narrative is to indicate that the default reaction to any prophetic voice coming from God has been one of incredulity and rejection, and that exactly this default reaction has been how they acted towards the Righteous One. In other words, he is indicating to them that hostility to God is our default, and that we hate to detect our solidarity in hostility. Pointing this out to any of us can have one of two results: the result which Peter's preaching had had in Acts 2: some of his listeners were *cut to the heart*, asked what they should do, and were told to repent and be Baptised; or the result which it has here: the listeners become enraged and grind their teeth.

At this moment, Stephen sees "the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" and says: "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God". This is very exact: Stephen is describing undergoing the Throne Vision, which had been described by Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. This is the vision of the Lord, previously seen in the Holy of Holies, with strong anthropomorphic elements which had come into closer and closer focus until finally Stephen announces to them that the mysterious "one like a son of man" whom the prophets had seen being taken up into the very identity of the Lord was in fact *this man, Jesus* whom they had considered to be a seditious blasphemer and punished as such. The one they considered to be a severely irritating contaminant to anything to do with God's holiness had turned out to be, in fact, the source of all holiness.

That they understood very well what was being said is shown by their extreme hostility to it. And please notice, this is not because they were particularly hostile or evil people. On the contrary, it is because they were particularly attuned to the good, particularly well-educated with relation to the things of God, and particularly sensitive to that which is holy. The movement they undergo is as if it were an

⁷ Acts 6,8 -8,1

allergic reaction to an abomination, the bringing together of two things that, for good and holy people, could not, ever, possibly, conceivably, be brought together: *that* cursed and sinful dead man, and the holiness of God.

Nevertheless, it is exactly *that* man whom Stephen sees, who has in fact brought into clear focus the holiness of the Most High. Stephen's vision happens independently of the Temple, and reveals that the Presence of the Most High is now, unalterably, and forever, inseparable from the Son of Man. Even here on earth, as it was previously only in Heaven. And that there is no other form of Real Presence of the Most High than this form. This Real Presence is one of deliberate love in the midst of violent and allergic hostility, and empowers Stephen to recreate and bear witness to that love very exactly in the manner of his dying.

So when we celebrate Mass, the Real Presence to which we are being given access is not some blander version of God, with the love that traverses hostility being kept under wraps only for some special occasions lest it frighten us too much. That would indeed be a taming of God to be "good" for those who are "good". No, the appropriate awe is due because there is indeed something terrible about a love which traverses our hostility. And does so in such a way that it is very easy for us to be tipped over into righteous rejection of it. The awe does not attribute any violence to God. It begins, however, in awareness that it is indeed a violent and frightening thing to undergo being unhooked from our own, easily knee-jerked, allergic constructions of fake righteousness. It is an awe made available to us over time as a narrative of amazement that "I have been found by the love of one who I treated as my enemy". And it means that there is no genuine teaching about, or reception of, the Atonement that does not include a rigorous approach to human scandal at what is being proposed and our finding ourselves set free from that scandal.

4. Forgiveness prior to being

A final very quick point, which I would love to develop more, and hope to have the opportunity to in future. One of the things that has emerged for me as I have meditated on Girard's insights, and allowed my reading of the New Testament to be permeated by them, is how much clearer it becomes that the Gospels do allow us to detect a very clear, firm, and rich human intention in Jesus, doing what he did, and

teaching what he did, on his way to a death he knew he was going to. This by contrast with an exegetical fashion of a few decades ago where interpretations of Jesus' death were assumed to be post-resurrection creations. Or at the very least developments of something of which Jesus himself knew little, with scriptural florilegia added after the event. It seems to me much clearer now than it did when I coined the phrase "the intelligence of the victim"⁸ how much the active, generous and even indulgent intelligence which made available and led to the Atonement, was in fact Jesus' intelligence, nourished by prophetic insights he knew himself to be fulfilling, on his way to the events concerned.

Furthermore, this, the priority of Jesus' intelligence to the events in question, seems to me of huge theological significance. For what was known by Jesus, within history, of what he was intending, desiring and doing bespeaks a divine knowledge, intention and plan that "pre"-cedes, is anterior to, or outside of, history and creation. If the murder was taken for granted beforehand, and Jesus was disposed to give himself up for it; and if, furthermore, Jesus taught those in whose midst he was doing this, how it was for their advantage; then it does mean something fundamental about what being human is. It means that rather than our being the sort of beings who occasionally get things wrong and need someone to forgive us for that, in our case *forgiveness is prior to being*. The intention to forgive, the deliberateness of making forgiveness possible, and the prior recognition by the One forgiving of our scandalized nature go together such that we are not first created and then forgiven, but rather it is through forgiveness that we enter the possibility of being created. I rather suspect that this, the priority of forgiveness to creation, the notion of "the lamb slain from the foundation of the world" is what is pointed to by the doctrine of "Original Sin", and is why that teaching, hard to tie down as it is, is an essential corollary to teaching concerning the Atonement.

A final (for this paper) consequence of this understanding, and one which has raised its head again as the twin Synods on the Family have got under way, might be as follows. Some have talked about mercy as though it is something ancillary to the Gospel and the life of the Church – so the Church needs to be "merciful" to this or that group of people so that they can fit in to what everyone knows to be

⁸ in *Knowing Jesus* London: SPCK 1993

good and proper, and failure to comply with which needs to be forgiven. However, if Our Lord's Atonement is deliberate from before any of us could have realised we needed it, and thus active and creative rather than reactive, then forgiveness is not an afterthought to a stable and ordered reality. Rather there is an epistemic dimension to our undergoing forgiveness: it is only as we find ourselves being forgiven that we learn what really is, on our way into becoming fully aligned with what really is.

What appears to us as an interruption of a stable given reality is in fact the prior intention of creation emerging in the midst of something not yet fully created. It is not only our disorder, but also our order, our stability *as well as* our instability, that are revealed to be much less good, much more dangerous, than we had thought. And forgiveness is the condition of possibility of even, and perhaps especially, the "good" finding themselves on the inside of being created. Every human institution is permeable by this emergence, without exception. The Holy Father had it exactly right in offering, at the conclusion of the Synod on the Family, an analysis of the twin temptations we face⁹: on the one hand the hostile rigidity that regards the good as given and is thus incapable of learning what really is; and on the other the cowardly "goodness" of those who want to be merciful, but as though mercy were a kindly add-on to a stable set of definitions whose fixity they dare not challenge. Neither of these plumb the consequences for us of sitting under the love that has traversed, and continues to traverse, our hostility. Both of them shut off the possibility of our discovering ourselves simultaneously redeemed and entering consciously and rigorously into a New Creation. Getting beyond those temptations is indeed our challenge.

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⁹ " - One, a temptation to hostile inflexibility, that is, wanting to close oneself within the written word, (the letter) and not allowing oneself to be surprised by God, by the God of surprises, (the spirit); within the law, within the certitude of what we know and not of what we still need to learn and to achieve. From the time of Christ, it is the temptation of the zealous, of the scrupulous, of the solicitous and of the so-called - today - "traditionalists" and also of the intellectuals.

- The temptation to a destructive tendency to goodness [in Italian: "buonismo"], that in the name of a deceptive mercy binds the wounds without first curing them and treating them; that treats the symptoms and not the causes and the roots. It is the temptation of the "do-gooders," of the fearful, and also of the so-called "progressives and liberals."

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141018_conclusione-sinodo-dei-vescovi.html