Blindsided by God: reconciliation from the underside

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One of the greatest moments that I know in all cinema is the ballet set to the music of Ponchielli’s “Dance of the Hours” in Walt Disney’s 1940 film “Fantasia”. I ask you to remember the scene. Ostriches wake up and stretch, they dance about, and after a bit, and shortly before being blown away, they start to circle towards a divan in the centre of a classical garden. On this divan there reclines a simply delicious hippopotamus, complete with pink tutu, which she modestly brushes into place whenever her abundant curves dislodge it. She too awakens, and begins to dance. But before long there is a change of tone: raffishly sinister crocodiles emerge from behind various columns, and the dance acquires a darker hue. The movements begin to suggest the feel of a hunt, and a tragic dénouement is hinted at. Before long, and to no apparent purpose, elephants have joined in, and the animators, whose feat in suggesting at the same time both the immense weight and the balletic lightness and gracefulness of their heroine is surely one of the pinnacles of their art, have the hippo rushing from one side of the gardens to the other, with enemies on all sides.

It is in the midst of this desperate flight that the great moment of glory occurs: as she hurtles tragically between opposing enemies, our two-ton sylph suddenly breaks into a skip, turns to the camera and gives a little wink; but not for long. Soon she is back to her heavy duty “let me out of here” routine, and eventually the music leads to its proper conclusion, and a return to sleep. But, Oh! That moment of glory! It is as if Maria Callas, about to be put on the pyre at the end of Norma, had suddenly sung a few notes from “Hello Dolly” before returning to Bellini’s master-score, or a child performing in the Oresteia had lifted up her mask and given a stage whisper to her Mum to let her know that it was all OK really, and she shouldn’t worry.

Well, I hope you will forgive me such campery, or perhaps I had better say: enjoy the campery while you can, for you are listening to what may turn out, if the raffish crocodiles of my Church get their way with their pink tutu-ed brethren, to be a member of the last ever generation of gay Catholic priests (Fat chance)! But this is the easiest way-in I could find to point to where I want to take you. Faced with the various extremely painful and distressing circumstances in our lives and our world where reconciliation is needed, we run, I think, the great danger of falling into the trap of seriousness, and even worse, into talking morals. I would like at least to begin by hinting at a path to which I may very well not be able to keep: the delicate tightrope walk of the debonair, devil-may-care quality whose presence can aerate suffering and allow heartfelt concern to become both richer and more bearable. On one side of this tightrope there lurks the mire of seriousness, and on the other the froth of a frivolity which is only a mask for despair.

So, I would like to see if I can do something to undercut the apparent heaviness of reconciliation. You see, my fear is that the necessary seriousness of our ethical and
political searches may lead us to miss out on the extraordinary sensation of being in luck, of having fallen, despite ourselves, on our feet in the midst of a piece of ridiculously good fortune. In other words, I want to suggest that every attempt to search for reconciliation starting from philosophical and political strategies will fall short of the mark if not undertaken from within that sensation of sheer luck, of having been found, of enjoying an adventure where you are safe and swimming spaciously, a sensation of which we experience glimmers every now and then, and to which we rightly apply words like “gratuitous”, for this is what it is like to undergo grace.

So I would like to start by inviting you to dwell with me in a couple of scenes by which I hope to make clear what I mean by this sense of spaciousness and good luck. The first scene is the Presentation in the Temple which we celebrate liturgically on February 2nd, and of which we have an account in St Luke’s Gospel\textsuperscript{1}. I invite you to join me in the Temple. Let us imagine that we are there\textsuperscript{2}, ordinary inhabitants of Jerusalem, hanging around for evening prayer, or to meet friends, or whatever. It is just an ordinary day, not a major feast. The Temple is a big and imposing building with its series of courts; there are a variety of sacrifices going on at altars up in front of us, priests doing their stuff with impressive seriousness, other priest-like figures scurrying hither and thither looking as though they know what they are doing, temple guards standing on quite relaxed duty at the various entrances and exits. There are money-changing tables, booths for selling the various animals for sacrifice, and inevitably, a fair smattering of adolescent boys running here and there as messengers, carriers, pick-pockets and so forth.

There is smoke, there is incense, and there are the smells and the background sounds of cattle, sheep and caged birds. In different places, there are people involved in prayer, by themselves, or in groups, some attending the sacrifices, others apparently making deals with the Almighty with much bobbing and bowing. Over all this, there presides the Holy of Holies. The veil is in place, and all that is going on is going on with some, but not too much, reference to the apparently indifferent gaze of the One who dwells there.

Someone tugs your sleeve, and points to a small gathering which is happening just out of the corner of your eye. Nothing special. A couple with a baby come in for the rite of Purification. And who’s that coming up now? Oh, that’s old man Simeon – older than Methuselah! He looks so old that he might very well be the High Priest Simeon himself from three hundred years ago – one of the last decent High Priests in Jerusalem. In fact he probably is a real descendant of his. Funny to think that someone like him would be High Priest today if it hadn’t been for the various bits of skulduggery by which the current bunch had co-opted, bought and stolen their hold on office. Anyhow, the couple have got someone proper to do their rite for them. Old Simeon will take the thing seriously.

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  \item \textsuperscript{1} Luke 2:22-40.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} I have found the writings of Margaret Barker, and especially her \textit{Temple Theology: an introduction} (London SPCK 2004) and \textit{The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy} (London: Continuum/T&T Clark 2003) to be especially helpful in allowing me to imagine that I am there.
\end{itemize}
Now watch out, crazy Anna has spotted them and is rushing up! Didn’t anyone warn them? She’s older than God and has been around the Temple since before time began. Actually, she’s a survivor from one of those tribes which went into the desert generations ago and didn’t go along with the whole return from Babylon and second Temple project; She thinks that if she stays here day and night, fasting and praying, then God will bring the first Temple back, Ark, Mercy Seat, Fire, Wisdom and all. She makes it clear that she considers the current priestly families to be little more than pretenders, – well she isn’t unique in thinking that, but she has the courage of her convictions, since she actually stays in the Temple to try to make it holy. Good luck to her, and to all whom she pesters!

Ah, now the Evening Sacrifice is about to start up, let’s turn towards the Holy Place, the dwelling of the Most High, and get on with it. Curious though that as the couple are leaving with their child, both Simeon and Anna, normally a mixture of the cranky, the zealous and the infuriating, look suddenly peaceful, as though something had happened to them. Oh well, funny things go on in the Temple! Maybe they got given a bigger than usual tip for their services. Let’s press forward and join in the chanting which is starting up: “I will gaze on the Lord in the Sanctuary to see His strength and his glory”.

Well, of course this is not the version of the story we hear in St Luke’s Gospel, and celebrate on 2 February. My version is the majority report – what a normal passer-by would have noticed that day. We celebrate the minority report: for Luke, anything else that was going on in the Temple on that date was quite irrelevant. We get no mention of it, so we have to supply with our imagination. What we remember is that on that day, Malachi 3:1-4 was fulfilled. God suddenly came into his Temple. But he came in almost offstage, along with the Ark and the Seat of Wisdom who had borne him, and was noticed only by a couple of eccentrics who had been hoping for him in quite specific ways as fitting in with their expectations for how God would show himself to his people, to Jerusalem and to the Temple; expectations which were regarded as indecent pieces of folk-culture by the people who ran the show in the Temple. In other words, the shape of the arrival of God on the scene, the God to whose worship the Temple was dedicated, was that of a tiny offstage interruption, scarcely to be noticed. Not even enough for us to talk about the Temple authorities having been blindsided by God, since they remained unaware of what had happened. Only much later would it become clear how completely blindsided they had been.

Now let us shift our scene completely, though you will notice that its structure remains intact. Now we are in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, at a ball given in a magnificent colonial house. There is a splendid orchestra, highly dignified dancing going on, and all the chatter and gossip proper to such a party. All heads turn as new guests arrive. Who is talking to whom? Who is dancing with whom? Who is on whose dance card? What deals will be quietly sorted out in background chats between cigars? Whose future will be decided, whose fall decreed? Liveried retainers stand on a more or less decorative guard at various places. Children play chaotically in their own world, blissfully unconscious of consequence in the midst of all this activity. There are servants everywhere, carrying trays, opening and closing doors, refilling and collecting glasses. A torrent of gossip also flows between servants and kitchen. Gossip about the hosts and guests, and gossip about the other servants. All
have their affairs, their quarrels, their hopes, their ambitions, their jockeying for place, their resentments and their loves.

As you are caught up in all this, you notice a little scene developing near one of the splendid French windows which lead to the lawn outside. There is a small group gathered around someone who is wearing a livery similar to that of those who are on duty, and who seems to have burst through the windows into the ballroom. The orchestra tails off as attention turns to this interruption. Some of the other retainers seem to be undecided as to whether they shouldn’t be escorting their apparent colleague firmly outside, and some of the other guests seem to be half listening to what the intruder is trying to say. They look a little puzzled. But what catches the attention, at least for a moment, is the range of expressions on the face of the intruder. He seems to be undergoing a series of very strong, and apparently contradictory emotions almost simultaneously. He looks shocked, as though he’s coming in bearing news of some terrible happening which has just occurred, or is on its way. He also looks strangely elated, as though whatever has happened might also have been curiously good. There is something pleading, beseeching about his eyes as though he wants not only to warn people of what is coming, but inviting them to come and see for themselves. And yet there is something oddly peaceful about him, even in the midst of all this exaltation, as though whatever has happened has left him with a sense that he isn’t part of the group that is gathering around him, some pulling him, some trying to work out what he’s saying. It’s as though part of him is already somewhere else.

After a bit, order seems to reassert itself, and as the intruder is led away – still gesticulating and explaining something – those who had been closest to the scene drift away, some shrugging their shoulders and obviously keen to get on with the party, others talking among themselves with quizzical looks. The orchestra starts up again, before long the ball is back in full swing, and the incident has scarcely registered. A far greater commotion occurs as the city’s leading diva finally appears at the head of the principal staircase, the details of her gown for tonight having been the great secret of the season.

Well, once again, I am giving you the majority report, but only so as to help create the proper context for the minority report as it begins to become available from the few who interacted with the man who was escorted out, and who remained quizzical after listening to him. The man was of course, St Paul, and I’m going to try to recreate with you some sense of what he was attempting to communicate as he stood by the French windows. Mostly I’ll be attempting to reconstruct what he was on about from what he says in 2 Corinthians 5, since it is there that he talks most frequently about reconciliation, but I’ll bring in material from elsewhere in his writings as well.

First of all Paul is trying to get across that Something Has Happened. Something huge. So much so that he’s in what is most comparable to a state of shock. A good illustration of this is Steve Martin in the film “Leap of Faith”. Martin plays a touring charlatan preacher who is a consummate master of working his audience, raking in cash from people of simple faith, and producing well-staged fake miracles. Then

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3 See Appendix.
suddenly, out of nowhere, in the middle of one of the staged revival meetings, a genuinely crippled boy genuinely begins to walk. In other words, in the midst of all the fakery, and able to be recognised only by those like the preacher, who knew that the show was all fake, suddenly the Real Thing happens. The film ends as a shocked Steve Martin hitches a lift on a truck and gets out of town, presumably on his way to a complete rethink of his life.

Well, something like this is behind all of Paul’s preaching. It’s not that he’d been a charlatan before. But he had been the machine man, the system man, the man who knew how it all had to be, how to make it perfect. This involved living with an attitude of perpetual war against those who threatened the system of goodness – what we call “zeal for the Law”. And in the midst of this there suddenly happened the Real Thing. That is to say that the Rock, Yahweh, about whom he had talked, whose Law he had obeyed, to whom he had prayed and for whom he had preached, organised and persecuted, was suddenly present to him in a way which completely inverted everything he had known. As for most of us, God was for him an “it”, a “he” about whom he knew, an object within our human way of knowing things. But suddenly, God was an “it” or a “he” no longer, but was “I am” coming towards him out of nowhere.

This “I am” coming towards him out of nowhere is the classic shape of the self-revelation of Yahweh. In other words Paul was undergoing a theophany of the sort that experts in the sacred texts, such as he was, could recognise as being that of the Lord. One of the features of such theophanies was that they could not be conjured by anyone, but happened to whom they would happen. And when they happened, they changed everything, and yet left everything unchanged. Because unlike the gods, Yahweh was not in rivalry with anything at all. Yahweh was involved in the creation of all things, and was thus not on the same level as them in any way at all. One of the tell-tale signs of Yahweh was that part of the experience of undergoing “I am” coming towards a human is that thereafter the human becomes aware of the universe tilted on a new axis. Hence the strange term “Rock”. The centre of stability, of gravity shifts from the world formed by the desires and struggles of humans, which is only an apparent centre of stability and gravity, and rests on something entirely outside the human world of perception and desire. What appears to be the most ethereal and least solid part of the universe comes to be the real centre of solidity and rooted-ness in being. Part of the authentic nature of the experience of undergoing Yahweh is this Copernican revolution out of human and cultural foundations and security into receiving a centre and a non-grasped-after solidity that was entirely outside of human control and from which all comes to be.

However, in Paul’s case there is more to it than this; for “I am” did not just appear to him as “I am” but appeared with more specific historical content than that. “I am”

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4 The Rock of Israel, present in Genesis 49:24 and a multitude of Psalms, had “happened” to Paul in such a way that he was able to say (1 Cor 10:1-4)

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.
came to him as “Jesus, whom you are persecuting”. This was Paul’s Steve Martin moment. The Real Thing, with a concrete historical name and narrative presence, happened “at” him, waylaid him out of nowhere and interrupted him as he persecuted those who followed this man’s way. Later on Paul would talk about how he used to regard Christ from a human point of view but did so no longer. He means something rather more than “I used to think about him as just another human, but now I see him as a great spiritual leader touched by God”. He means “I used to see him as a failed false messiah who had led people astray, and then Yahweh revealed himself to me as Jesus, the rock of ages present in this dead man who is not dead. In other words, Jesus wasn’t simply one of us, a religious searcher of sorts from this side of the veil; Jesus is Yahweh, coming through the veil, where he is anchored in the real permanence in whose gaze we are all peripheral and passing”.

So, Paul has been shocked by the Real Thing having happened to him, this Yahwistic self-disclosure, but he knows that this is no merely individual experience. In fact, he had never known Jesus during Jesus’ life and ministry. Paul had to go off and spend time learning what had in fact happened, not merely to himself, but publicly, long before he had even got to hear about it. What had happened in fact between the time of the couple leaving the Temple in my first scene, and Paul irrupting into the Aristocratic Ball in the second. And what he learned was that something like an extraordinary invasion and successful conquest of the world had taken place. And that this had a quite specific shape and contours.

Yahweh had come among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He had gone about doing signs and wonders, and had eventually been put to death by the leaders of the people. But his being put to death was not merely the usual scenario of a “necessary” piece of capital punishment. Nor even the usual lynch mob death of questionable legality. It looked like that; it could be described like that; but very shortly after his being put to death a group of disciples started showing signs of themselves having undergone a Yahwistic theophany in which the dead man Jesus had shown himself to them as alive in a way which made him no less the dead man they had known – the classic “everything is changed yet nothing is changed”. They quickly began to be able to piece together what he had really been about, up to and including his death. He had in fact been fulfilling all the prophecies of old about Yahweh coming to be with his people by coming among them as the great High Priest who performed the definitive sacrifice, coming out of the Holy Place as the self-giving lamb whose blood was shed for them. Only he had done all this not in the Temple itself, using animal substitutes, but had come through the Veil as he revealed himself in his dying on the Cross, such that his tomb, with the stone rolled away, where there was no body, was the now frontier-less Holy of Holies, because the Creator had come out into the world so as to reconcile it with himself, make it forever a sharer in the Creator’s inner life.

Paul’s shock is not merely that of stunned recognition, as a new narrative sense is made of all the scriptures which he knew backward. His shock is the growing sense that what this does is reveal Yahweh as having done something not merely Jewish – though the Jewish tradition had given all the details that made the story begin to be imaginable in human terms – but human. This human being has given himself up to be

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2 Cor 5:16.
killed by us, finding himself in a role in a typical scenario of the very worst kind of
our human behaviour, where we most violently and stupidly blind ourselves to who
we are and what we are doing; but he has entered in not as a puppet master, but as the
victim, one who understood in advance what was to happen, and explained it to his
disciples. They, of course, when push came to shove, had fled and undergone the
contagion of the crowd like everyone else except a few women.

What Paul has fixed on – some would say fixated – is what this concrete human acting
out by this human being delates, gives away, reveals, about the power which made the
acting out possible. To be killed takes no power at all – in fact it is the very symbol
and meaning of powerlessness. However, to be able to occupy the place of
powerlessness, shame and death publicly, within a given developing human narrative
tradition, but taking, and living out, that narrative tradition in a direction it had never
fully imagined; and to do so deliberately, and as a creative act, this takes more power
than any that a human can imagine. And this is because it is a power that works at the
human level, and yet is not in rivalry with, and not run by, death.

Furthermore, this power is not impersonal, mechanical, but personal. Anyone who has
ever taken part, however minimally, in a lynch mob, or a culture which depends on
such mechanisms of unanimity against a victim to keep itself going – which is to say,
everyone – now has access to our victim coming towards us in the midst of our
violence enabling us to see what we have done to him or her. What the victim is
saying is “Yes, yes, I know that you thought that you had to do this sort of thing to me
in order to get ahead, to survive, to be someone; and guess what, because I knew that
these are the only rules of the game you know how to play, I occupied the place of
shame for you so as to show you that even where you are at your worst and most
fearful, I like you and I want to play with you a different game. Now where shall we
take it?” In short, there is no ambivalence, no caprice and no “out-to-get-you” in the
power that enabled Jesus to live into his death in the way he did. It is pure, un-
ambivalent “I am for you starting where you are”.

Those who have begun to glimpse what has happened in the death of Jesus thus start
to be able to undergo, as a normal part of their life, the Yahweh experience, the
Presence, but a newly content-filled Yahweh experience coming towards them, honed
to remove any possible question as to the sheer unadulterated loving kindness for
them and gentleness towards them of the power which moves the sun and stars. As
they begin to grasp that what they had thought of as the normal rules of the game of
human survival and togetherness, are in fact something peripheral to reality in which
they had got bogged down out of fear and failed imagination; and as they begin to
grasp that the one who stepped into their periphery did so not so as to punish them,
but out of an astonishing gentleness and love for them, so they begin to have their
lives re-centred on an “elsewhere” not run by anything in this world. They begin to
find that the rock to which they are anchored is before them and mysteriously guiding
them into a far, far bigger space than they had been able to imagine previously. In
short, in Paul’s language, they have started to become a new creation.

Now this stunning shock has consequences. It completely relativizes all
anthropological structures and ways of being together which depend on identity
derived over against each other, on comparison, on rivalry, and ultimately on death.
That is to say, it completely relativizes all our squabbles, fights, triumphs, glories, and empires, revealing them as so much vanity, so much froth. This is because it reveals not only that all those things are founded on lies and murder, which they are, but also that there is a huge new empire being slowly, quietly and gently brought into being, unnoticed by all who are engaged in the squabbles of comparative meaning and death-bound glory. This empire is real, definitive, and is being established whether we like it or not, whether we notice it or not.

The sign of it being established is what Paul refers to as Christ’s victory procession\(^6\). He uses the image of a Roman military “triumph”, where the victor would lead a procession of captives into the city after a great victory. However Paul fuses this with the image of the offering up of a sacrifice of sweet aroma to God, so that Christ, the one and only true sacrifice, having occupied the place of shame and thus de-toxified it, is able to lead us, his captives, as so many other sweet-smelling sacrifices. We living sacrifices are able peacefully to occupy the same space of shame and death spacious because we are already beginning to participate in a creation not run by the same parameters at all. For those who are part of the world of death, this looks like so many losers on their way out of existence, but for those who are being taken into the new creation, this is the fragrance of life opening out into new flourishing.

Now begin to imagine Paul breaking through the French windows of the colonial house where the ball is being held, he who had once been a liveried retainer in the world of order and meaning which helps keep societies going, and you may start to get a sense of why he has the stunned, shocked look on his face. He has seen the equivalent of a tsunami which has in fact already surrounded the house and, unbeknownst to those within it, is carrying it away; and he’s rushing in to try and get across to those who are at the ball that they’ve got to get real – the real thing has happened, it’s big, it’s here, and it’s won. For God sake, make your peace with it, or you’ll be swept away by so much power and energy, not because anyone wants to sweep you away, but merely because what is real is being brought into being, and the only way to be is allow yourself to become part of it.

And of course, Paul is aware that once your true centre of meaning, life, desire and heart is in this new creation, then it possesses you so that you become its ambassador, a representative of its power, in the midst of this failing world. But finding yourself the ambassador of this huge power which has made itself known in a human victim, the only way to represent that power is to beseech others to be reconciled, while yourself living the sort of life of one who is being carried off – hence the plaintive sound of God, the Creator of all things, interrupting our social scene in the voice and garb of someone easily to be dismissed. And being drowned out by the orchestra and the party, but still refusing to play the part of the hostess or the dressed-up diva, or someone who might be noticed. But constantly coming and beseeching us to get with the programme, to actually allow ourselves to be created, to be reconciled to God.

So, at last we have come to the place of reconciliation in all this. I hope you can see why I took the scenic route rather than plunging straight in. I wanted to make it clear that for us the first and root meaning of reconciliation is not an ethical demand. In the

\(^6\) 2 Cor 2:14-16
understanding of the Christian faith, it is first of all something which has triumphantly
happened in a sphere more real than ours, and which is tilting our universe on a new
axis, whether or not we understand it. This means that what we think of as real, as
stable and as ordered is not so, and what is real and true and ordered and stable is not
what is behind us, but what we can become as we learn to undergo being set free from
our imprisonment in what we might call “social order lived defensively”.

The traditional way in which Christian theology has talked about this has been by
means of the doctrine of Original Sin. This doctrine is a way of describing reality such
that we become aware that our starting place is not in fact what we really are, but an
enclosure into a defensive social order centred on death so that we are all marked by
an aversion to being called into being. We are formed in a serious futility and vanity
such that we seek protection, identity and life in things that are not safe, and do not do
us any good. What Paul was belly-aching about was that the real, Creation, the life of
God, is much, much bigger, more spacious, safer, freer and more delightful than
anything we could imagine; and he begs us to leave our self-fulfilling enclosure, our
self-enclosing fulfilment, and come and take part in the power that brings into being,
causes to be, and knows no vanity, no futility, no violence, no deception. The only
way into this is to allow ourselves to be recognised by the victim who we have killed;
and begin to see how much love and desperation to get through to us was made
present in allowing himself to be killed so that we could get the message that yes, we
are like that, and it is this bunch of murderers, persecutors, traitors, cowards, liars and
thieves that we are, who are being welcomed into the new creation and given a heart
to match.

If you like, we are being shown that we start off from a skewed reality, that what we
call normality is in fact out of kilter, and true reality is much more alive than anything
we know; so much so that we need training and new hearts and new eyes to be able to
glimpse it along with that gift of being able to relax into spaciousness and being held
by a power greater and more trustable than our own, which we call the gift of faith.

Well, this I hope gives us a slightly different perspective on how we might come to be
involved in and practice reconciliation. Because it means that our starting place is not,
in the case of any of us, that of good people who are going to do something good. Our
starting place is that of people who are undergoing being forgiven, undergoing being
seduced out of an aristocratic ball, often enough kicking and screaming, only half
wanting to leave, knowing that the reality we are leaving is futile, but not yet gifted
with the heart and eyes of the diamond-bright aliveness that is coming to be.

And this means that there is no beginning of reconciliation amongst us that is not the
first inklings of a learning of an entirely new way of being together, by people who are
accomplices in war and who are undergoing being forgiven as their necessary
induction into the real. Forgiveness is not something which is in the first instance a
moral imperative. Forgiveness is the shape of being inducted into the real in the case
of all of us human creatures who, basically good, find ourselves inextricably caught up
in an addiction to being less than ourselves.

Let me give a counter example to make what I’m aiming at clearer.
There’s an obvious sense in which, in the world we call normal, to get committed to reconciliation is a waste of time, an absurdity. Because what we all normally want is to win. What is typical in our world is that reconciliation does indeed have a certain role, the role of Plan B. Plan A is simple: crush the bastards and get what we want, wiping the board if possible. The only place which others have in this vision is the place of the defeated, gazing up at us with envy and hatred. And those gazes will be radiant jewels set into our crowns of victory. However, should it be the case that for some reason or other there is not such an imbalance of forces that we can win straight off, perhaps it might be better for us to compromise and to look, for now, for a convenient reconciliation with some of the forces in play, forging an alliance with them, and suspending some elements of what we want, understanding that the ally will do the same, so that together we can attack and triumph over the others. This is plan B, considered better than plan C, which is simply to be defeated, and we don’t even contemplate going there.

However, those of us who take part in plan B know very well that the temporary ally is just that – temporary. We know full well that our allies have their own interests and their aims, and that they haven’t changed them, merely contracted them, as a tiger does its claws, and that the moment that there is a shift in the balance of powers, everything will have to be renegotiated. And we, and they, also suspect that the target of our joint attack is not necessarily the preferred target of either of us, but merely the most convenient one. But better them than us.

So it seems as though, in the normal world, reconciliation is the losers’ game, and you only go there if you have to. I think it very important that we don’t lose sight of the fact that the first emotion, the first desire which we typically have in this field is wanting to win. And winning typically means that there will be losers, and the whole terminology of reconciliation typically starts from losers, because if they could win, they wouldn’t be looking for reconciliation. The reason why I’m so keen on not losing this from sight is that if we insist on reconciliation without having worked through its connotations of being the loser’s gambit, with all that that means for our desire and our self-esteem, then it is quite possible that we will end up falling into the sanctimonious hypocrisy of wanting to paint with gold leaf something made of clay or some even baser material. Even worse, we will compensate for that sensation of castrated insufficiency with a huge energy of moral seriousness. As if that could satisfy us anywhere near as well as a beautiful and resounding victory.

Now, what I’d like to explore is the abyss between this normal sense of the word reconciliation, with all its connotation of second best and making a virtue out of a necessity, and the sense which I began to try and sketch out for you earlier, the one coming from the shocked intruder beseeching the guests at the ball. For the key to all this is how we traverse the route between the normal sense and the Pauline sense. In other words: What does it look like, what shape does it have in our lives, that we, aristocrats, servants, musicians and hangers-on in general at the Colonial Ball find ourselves invited to be on the inside of something much, much bigger, but only if we are able to begin to understand the invitation which is being made to us, and which comes from someone whose status is not so much in doubt, as downright contemptible.
And here I think we have begun to understand something absolutely essential in St Paul’s understanding of the Holy Spirit, the power which comes from the One who was able peacefully to occupy the place of shame, of annihilation and of death as if they were things of little import. One who, being the rock, was not beguiled by the spirits, the winds of meaning and of desire, of imitation and of approval which make us all avoid that place like the plague. That is to say, the Holy Spirit is the power which is capable of moving us from within, without displacing us as people – so that everything changes and nothing has changed – keeping us in being and in existence without depending in any way on the world of significance and meaning which comes from our typical social movement.

And this Holy Spirit, being the shared-out unflappable “rockitude” of the heart and mind of God, is characterized by making available an extraordinary spaciousness in the midst of turbulence. This is because it comes neither from fear, nor from necessity, nor from togetherness, nor from contagion, nor from hate, nor from vengeance, nor from survival, nor from any other of the structuring forces of our society. And so it enables the person who is moved by it and recreated by it to begin to swim spaciously in the midst of violence without that violence infecting them.

A good example would be the martyrdom of Maximilian Kolbe. He went to his death in a concentration camp, offering to die in place of a father with children. For fifteen days he occupied the space of death with such panache that once he had died there was, according to the survivors, a noticeable change in the ambience of the camp. The permanence and stability of a power far greater than that which the guards wielded day and night against their prisoners had given itself away. The hippo had winked. In the face of that power, the guards were simply impotent, its having “happened” making it impossible for them to dominate and subjugate effectively the hearts and imaginations of their prisoners.

Now, no one reaches such spaciousness in a day. Certainly Maximilian Kolbe was not born with this capacity to be an ambassador of this other power, a bridgehead of a different and indestructible Reich. What I find interesting, and I hope you do too, is the process by which someone with a strong investment in the world of meaning, of approval, of being honoured by a system which depends on winning comes to be an ambassador from another world. That is to say, the process of conversion understood as a process of the restructuring from within of desire.

I wonder whether I am the only one for whom this process is something rather like finding yourself dragged through a bush backwards while you try desperately to run in the other direction. There is a fatal moment in this process which is the moment when one is half on one side of the bush and half on the other. Certain that the Victory is that of the coming kingdom, but also aware that many, if not all, my desires and values, are formed by what this kingdom offers, its meaning, approval and glories. And with this there comes something like a gnawing depression, a half-heartedness which says “fatally the coming kingdom is going to win, it’s not worth fighting against it, but my heart isn’t really in its victory, so I’d better try to make a virtue out of a necessity”.
The problem is that this attitude of the divided heart, which seeks to make a virtue out of a necessity, is just another disguise donned by the resentment which Nietzsche so justly criticized, and it will tend to propagate a version of reconciliation as something to be resented, as the loser’s option. What interests me is discovering how the Holy Spirit which makes it possible to occupy the place of shame also makes it possible to discover the delight of being undeceived, the amazing good fortune of finding oneself caught up in the flow of the real, the unmerited luck of finding oneself on the inside of a huge project whose final parameters are way out of sight.

Here I think we are getting close to what is central: if reconciliation is a matter of morals, to achieve which I just have got to be damn heroic, and which is going to be bloody painful, it doesn’t much matter if my heart is set on the outcome: the important thing is to be heroic. But then I’m always going to be left with the sensation of second best, of the silver medal, of the lump of clay decked out with gold leaf. What I want to suggest is something different. The Holy Spirit is not, in the first place, a force driving us towards an ethic of “going against the grain”. It is the Creator Spirit. And Jesus’ occupation of the place of shame, of loss, of death and of annihilation wasn’t, in the first place, to offer us an example of how to behave heroically. Rather it was the Creator-of-all-things’ way of opening up for us the possibility of entering into the full meaning, weight, and flow of Creation.

That is to say, and this is what is curious: that spaciousness owes its grandeur not to its being an extra cushion of resources so that we can carry out and achieve something heroic here. Rather it is luring and carrying us towards something much richer and more fun, which isn’t here yet, and in whose light the fights and definitions and approvals of here are only pieces of small-mindedness from which it is greatly to our advantage that we become unbound so as more richly to be able to enjoy what is coming upon us.

With this, the search for reconciliation becomes something enflamed by other fires. Something rather like a deep unconcern about myself is born, and a desire to be reconciled with the other because I know that both he and I will be much more, and will be able to enjoy ourselves much more if we are reconciled. That is to say, triumph for me passes through his being made whole and not his diminishment. Along with this there goes the sensation of how undeserved it is that we are even beginning to want to participate in this triumph, of how extraordinarily lucky I am to have found myself caught up in this adventure, and because of that, of how lightweight, and almost frivolous it is.

Now, to reach this point we are invited to undergo a rather strange shift of perspective, becoming aware of a generosity which wants to distract me from my self-absorption in too small an identity, always defended over against some other person or group; a generosity which lures me into receiving an identity which cannot be mine except in as far as it is the other who gives it to me. In other words, I start to discover that the other is not the obstacle in the way of my coming to be, but is what makes that coming-to-be possible. And because of this, reconciliation isn’t a second prize, once I’ve accepted that I’m not going to be what I wanted. Rather it is the only way of coming to be, and even of wanting to become, something much greater than I could imagine.
This generosity, the same generosity which occupied the place of shame so that we should learn not to flee that place, begins to incite in us the strange sensation that a victory of mine over someone would be, in fact, a defeat for me. Because I wouldn’t have achieved or savoured all the possibilities which would be opened out for me by the flourishing of the other, and which would take me to a much richer flourishing myself. That is to say, I would be discovering for myself that “reconciliation” rather than being a merely moral imperative is instead the way in which being created happens in us, taking for granted our sad starting condition of selling ourselves short and remaining stuck with identities forged over against each other, and for that reason fated to a short circuit of mutual reduction to negativity.

This is what is surprising: that we have no access to being created which doesn’t pass through our allowing ourselves to be reconciled. And being created is adventure, delight, and irresponsibility, since we aren’t in charge; it is lightness of spirit, undeserved security, luck and fortune. And along with this, as we allow ourselves to be stretched into this spaciousness, there comes a greatness of heart, a magnanimity that is playful, because trusting, since we have discovered, rather despite ourselves, that there is no greater victory than the mutual enrichment of those who are not frightened of losing themselves in the other, but who know that on the flourishing of the other depends their own capacity to be and to enjoy what they really are on their way to being, with all their heart.

I ask you, in the deliberations which we are beginning, and which will lead you into places of much greater bravery, drama and dignity than anything which I can plausibly represent to you, not to forget completely the graced spaciousness of tumbling into the luck of finding ourselves secure on the inside of the vertiginous adventure of creation, and discovering that our reception of an enflamed heart passes unashamedly through the quest for reconciliation.

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Appendix

2 Corinthians 5, 1-21. 1 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, 3 so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. 4 For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. 6 So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body. 11 Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; but what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. 12 We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to be proud of us, so that you may be able to answer those who pride themselves on a man's position and not on his heart. 13 For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. 16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.