

Strong Protagonism and Weak Presence: The changes in tone of the voice of God

James Alison

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It’s the little words which always take you by surprise. For example, think of the word “so”. We are used to the Greek word “οὕτως” being translated “so” when it appears in the phrase “For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life”¹. The “so” sounds as if it is intensifying the desire, as if it were a psychological description of the depths to which the One who loves is moved. Rather as if I were to say: “I so, so wish that she would call me”, thus revealing my vulnerability in the face of the longed-for one’s caprice.

However, “οὕτως” can be translated another way, and despite my doubts about whether this translation will have the same public reception, it seems to me to be closer to the mark. This translation treats the word not as a way of making the love intense, but of demonstrating what it looks like: ‘For it was in *this* way, you see, that God loved the world: that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life’. We might even imagine the person pronouncing these words making a gesture which would give the sense of the colon and the “that”, which would also bring out the sense of the Greek word “ὥστε”.

With this translation we have no access to a psychological movement in God, seen as underlying the action of giving his only Son. Rather everything that act of love means is made visible in what follows. It is as if we were to paraphrase the verse as follows: “Do you want to know how it became manifest in the world that God loves it? Well, like this: in God’s giving of his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.”

¹ John 3,16: οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ’ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

My motive for beginning with a grammatical niggler is that it points towards something more properly theological. If we start with “For God so loved...”, then all our concentration and effort goes into imagining the emotional intensity which lies behind the manifest activity. What is really interesting is not so much what happened, about which we can satisfy ourselves with the briefest of enquiries, describing it in very spare terms. What would really be interesting is the degree in which the act was intended, the push behind it, the emotional force with which the principal agent of this activity carried it out.

If, on the other hand, we begin with “It was in *this* way that God loved”, then we have no prior access to some supposed interior life of God, modelled on our own. Instead it is that which is visible, that which is manifest in the activity itself, which becomes the lure for our fascination. And it is only in the degree in which we allow ourselves to be pulled inside that activity, and what we can discover starting from it, that we begin to get some notion of God’s love.

To my way of thinking, this second reading is preferable. And I have two motives for thinking like this. The first is having begun to notice the tendency in John’s text for things to be said with such blinding simplicity and obviousness that they pass us by completely, while we look for a more complicated meaning. In John, time and time again, I have the strange sensation that the very simplicity of what he sets out so clearly and straightforwardly overwhelms us because we are convinced that we are dealing with something mysterious. Returning to the simplicity of what is actually said is a work of years.

My second motive is more properly theological. In the first reading we don’t actually learn much about God, other than that God has emotions like ours; and that an example, perhaps an especially outstanding example, of God’s emotive quality would be this act of love. In the second reading, our whole understanding of God, which we have to prune of all our projections concerning God’s emotions or subjectivity, gets to be reconfigured starting only from what God has done. That is to say, it is what has been done which comes to be the criterion for who God is, causing us, bit by bit, completely to revise any other perception we might have of God. It is not a presupposition about God which gets to dictate how we are to understand what has happened.

My reason for starting with this is that it gives me a way in to what I would like to explore with you: some dimensions of the strange privilege which consists in being a Catholic theologian today. Dimensions which are not sufficiently tied together yet, but which have in common, I hope, the intuition that something very

interesting is being birthed in our midst, after somewhat of a glacial period for our discipline. A period in which our work tools were not up to the required theological task. Curiously, it seems to me that what some people call “late modernity” with its post-modern nihilism, its post-secular reason, combined, at least in the English-speaking world with the strident populist atheism of a Dawkins or a Hitchens, exactly because it obliges us to look for more adequate tools for our labour, at the same time sharpens our intelligence for tasks which are much more our own, and makes much more agile our ability to focus on our properly theological mission.

The first dimension I would like to explore with you might be described as an inversion of something we take for granted. Typically when we in the Church talk, or when Church officials pronounce, or when Evangelical or Muslim groups express positions in the public sphere, on the one hand we all give the impression that we are baying for a very strong presence of religion, of the divine, of what is sacred. On the other hand, it is as if we were constantly finding ourselves disappointed by a somewhat weak divine protagonism since, leaving aside the public religious noisiness of one camp or the other, God has a way of not showing up at rallies for his cause. And besides, those who talk about God with greatest insistence have a way of understanding God as a back up for notorious public positions which are perfectly comprehensibly described as springing from quite other motivations.

Now what I have begun to understand is that all this, the world of “strong presence and weak protagonism” is very exactly the reverse of a properly theological vision of reality. That’s because in the properly theological vision, divine protagonism is extremely strong, stronger it could not be, but the divine presence is exceedingly weak. And what is most curious is that this very weakness of presence is precisely what properly corresponds to the strength of the protagonism.

I’d like to explore this notion of “protagonism”, not necessarily a familiar word. The word is derived from the principal actor in the tragic or comic dramas of ancient Greece. The principal actor was the protagonist; the second was the deuter-agonist, and so on. Thus originally there was only one protagonist, in the same way as it would be curious in modern times to have an opera in which there was more than one “Prima Donna”, leaving on one side the “Prima-Donna” tendencies of almost all artists, to say nothing of theologians. However, in all our modern languages the word “protagonist” has ceased to have this strict usage, and we speak easily of the “protagonists” of a drama, or an event, understanding by this “those who have an active role in what goes on”.

Well, I'd like to make a tediously obvious point, one of those which often are too obvious, and so escape us. If we really are monotheists, then we are very seriously committed not only to the existence of one God alone, but to there being only one protagonism. The two notions go together inseparably. To make a parallel: It is very difficult for us to talk about the "existence" of God who is not an object in the universe. On account of this it is less inappropriate to say that "God isn't" than that "God is", since the verb "to be" inescapably has as its reference the universe of existing things amongst which we are, and which are at the same level as us. Well, in just the same way it is difficult for us to talk about the "protagonism" of One who is not at the same level of any of the created protagonisms, forces, actors, or powers which we know, which move us, and which move, *pace* Dante Alighieri, even "il sole e l'altre stelle".

However, in just the same way as our, very correct, negative theology of "being" sometimes leaves us without any sense that "behind" everything there is, yes indeed, an "existing", a splendour, a radiance, a power and a beauty which are so brilliant, real, and so on that in their light all the things which we know as existing, beautiful, powerful are only weak sparks reflected from a great distance; in just the same way our very proper recognition of the lack of similarity between our notions of protagonism and the protagonism that is God sometimes leaves us without any sense that "behind" all acting forces there is a protagonism, one which is much stronger, more powerful and more deliberate than anything we can imagine.

I want to emphasize this, because in general I hear it mentioned little. We are committed to the notion that there is, in truth a unique protagonism, by comparison with which all human acting out, and all the movements of the rest of everything that exists, completely real as they are on their own terms, are forms of deuteragonism. And that this unique protagonism is real, is powerful, and that we are capable of detecting its intimations.

I would like to suggest that when we talk about this protagonism of God we aren't only talking about some long-term project, some notion of "the history of salvation", but also of something that irrupts directly into our intimacy. If, when talking about that protagonism which is God I'm not talking about something that shakes up the stage on which I find myself, with my prima-Donna tendencies, alongside many other deuteragonists, then it is very greatly to be doubted that I am in fact talking about God. The fact that the protagonism which is God is at a totally different and incomparable level with all the forces that move me does not mean that it ceases to have a real incidence in my life. And if there are no signs,

along the course of my life, and perhaps more easily detectable by others than by me, that I am coming to enjoy playing a secondary role, although a curiously enriched one, in the wake of a protagonism which is not my own, then it is to be doubted that I have been a worshipper of God.

Well it is this intimation of the protagonism of God which I would like to explore with you. And of course, for it to even begin to make sense that we talk about this protagonism, I should say that I take it for granted that we are all “on the same page” at least in this much: that we are all within a process of becoming aware that *everything that is* is peripheral to a reality which is infinitely greater and more powerful; and that even within our relational lives we are all embarked on a process, one which is curiously enlivening of activity, even though it can only be described in the passive voice: a process of finding ourselves reconfigured, re-dimensioned and re-situated by that protagonism.

That is to say, I take it for granted that we are talking as people who recognise that we are far more profoundly recipients of something than we are protagonists, and that even our most active protagonism is something received by us in the very process of our activity.

If this is so, then it is rather an important part of our responsibility as theologians that we raise the question of the true nature of this protagonism. And this question is, at least as we start, the same as the question about the degree to which our projections onto God produce a real distortion in our capacity to receive that protagonism in our midst. And it is here that we touch on the matter to which I pointed in my subtitle: the changes in tone of the voice of God. I’d like to stress that I didn’t give that subtitle as a mere piece of wordplay, understanding that of course God has no tone of voice, and that it is we who have to undergo the purification of our capacity to listen, sullied as it is by tones of voice which are human, all too human, so as to free ourselves from so many distortions and allow ourselves to sink into silence. No, I wanted to say rather more than that! The fact of undergoing this process of loss of idols is of itself a sign of our coming to hear a tone of voice which is the protagonism which is God, even though this be for us such a demanding process of learning that in the light of where we stand now it is almost unimaginable for us that it be a tone or a voice.

Allow me then to problematize some of the words which we habitually use in order to refer to the incidence of that protagonism which is God upon ourselves: words like “will”, “desire” and “law”. Of God we say, for example, that God has a “will” which is directed towards us – for example when we pray “Thy will be

done”, or that God has a desire or a longing, as for example when we read “Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?” (Ezekiel 18, 23); or that God dictates a Law which reflects him, as when we sing “I delight in your will, my God, your law is within my heart” (Psalm 40, 8), or “Better for me is the law from your mouth than thousands of pieces of gold and silver” (Psalm 119, 72). Or what Paul says at the end of his homily to the Athenians gathered at the Areopagus “...Now God commands, παραγγέλλει all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17, 30b) – and there is no doubt there of the force of the word “commands”, nor of the protagonism which it expresses.

In all these spheres we are taking words that have their proper place within certain sorts of human protagonism. And in each case we are applying them to ourselves as being on the receiving end of these expressions of a divine protagonism. And along with each of these expressions of protagonism - will, desire, law – a whole series of associations come towards us. Associations, for example, from the field of ordering, of military commandments, of adults towards children, or of the strong towards the weak. We all inhabit, inevitably, a whole ecosphere of such associations and power relations, with diverse protagonisms. And it would be very extraordinary if alongside every use of these words which express a protagonism towards us we were not to do what we normally do when we hear a word: we provide, or we furnish, in an act of extraordinary mental agility - which is in fact how we human beings learn - the whole network of associations which comes along with the word in its supposed application to us and to our life.

This is to say that on no occasion, other than perhaps if we are learning a totally new language only from a book, do we come across a word by itself. Along with the word there comes inevitably a whole series of ‘voices’, detected by us and applied with subtlety and discernment, tones which insinuate, even verbal and auditory connections which have nothing to do with the word at hand, but have some similarity of sound. Or maybe an association is triggered by a word that we heard alongside the present word in a poem that “reached” us at a certain moment, so that when we hear the word now, it evokes those special circumstances. Put this another way: we don’t only hear the words in themselves, but we also introject the logic, the silent patterns of working, the force fields, we might say, within which the words come ready set. And the more “normal” is the way that setting reproduces itself in us, the less we notice it, since it seems to us that we are hearing the word, nothing else, and we give no mind to the network of protagonisms of which the word is a symptom.

Now I would like to suggest something: if the protagonism which is God reaches us through expressions which come from those worlds, then our whole imagination of what that protagonism might be will remain subordinate to what is dictated to us by those voices, with all their socio-cultural resonances. Unless part of what is produced by that protagonism which is God consists in a change in the tone of voice, changing the network of associations which those words bring along with them. However that very act of changing the network also works through a human mediation: it is human happenings which give the basis for the genuinely changing associations starting from within which we begin to be able to detect the meaning of the words.

It is here, it seems to me, that we have something very important, special and difficult to grasp in the centre of our faith. And that is the fact that the protagonism which is God made itself manifest through the genuinely human happening known as a failure. A failure which at the same time was nothing more than that, a failure, and yet at the same time brought along with it a whole series of connotations of an act of sacrificial self-giving proper to a world which was already considered archaic in the time of Jesus, that of the High Priest, the anointed Melchisedek. That is to say: on the one hand you have the violent death at the hands of the colonizing power instigated by the religious leadership and their acolytes, of a man held to be a seditious blasphemer. And on the other hand you have the deliberate path being trod of the fulfilling of texts and inspirations dating from a very remote past concerning a definitive atonement sacrifice to be carried out by the Priest who would be the Holy One of God, the Son of God, titles which were given to the High Priests of yesteryear.

It is very difficult to think of an appropriate way to hold these two descriptions together. There is the protagonism, freely undertaken and creative of meaning, of the One who understood what he was doing as the definitive priestly act. And there is a shameful putting to death, where the dead one is, by definition, an object, and not a subject. And being an object, is incapable of exercising protagonism. The description is made more dense, rather than more simple, by the fact that within a few days of this death having made it impossible that Jesus should exercise any protagonism that might be referred to God, God caused him to be seen by diverse witnesses from the group which had accompanied him. He caused him to be seen not only as dead, but along with being recognisably the same man as had died, the risen Lord was the subject of a demonstrable protagonism. And curiously his protagonism is not less, but much greater through the fact of his having died, since death could not contain him as merely an object.

The language of the apostolic witness concerning the Resurrection and Ascension

revolves around the patterns of the Temple, where the Holy One of God, now sacrificed, is seated at the right hand of God. Which is to say that the protagonism of the victim who gave himself is revealed as being the very protagonism of God. And the notions of God, of YHWH who makes appearances coming out from the Holy of Holies, find themselves fulfilled in this notion of the presence of the one who is, at the same time, a human victim who was submitted to an atrocious and shameful death. This is the greatest sign of weakness that we are capable of imagining, and it is at the same time the fulfilment of all the promises of God concerning being present in and with his people.

During the same period in which the apostolic witnesses are undergoing all this, the same Spirit which Jesus had exhaled on the Cross is breathed into them. And so there begins to become accessible to all humans that strong protagonism of weak presence which we call Holy Spirit. And along with this, the very protagonism that is God begins to be the moving dynamic in the life of a whole series of people. People begin to find themselves within that protagonism.

Describing it like this is insufficient, because it doesn't point towards what is strange about this dense presence in our midst. And let us remember that this presence, which is, when all is said and done, that which is transmitted to us in the species in every Eucharist, and is the fulfilment of God's promise to be with us, is what is absolutely central in every Catholic and Orthodox liturgy. What is strange about this presence is that it is the presence of a rejected victim who returns to be in the midst of his group to show them that, in fact, they have been forgiven, that he has nothing against them, and that if they accept him back, then they will find themselves becoming free and empowered for the building of new lives.

Please note the extreme weakness of this way of being present. Typically in the worlds we know, our victims lack voice. We can't hear them. The victim who can be heard is the one who comes back with a tone of triumph seeking vengeance. But that is not the case here. Here all the protagonism, all the creative power that is God, is present in *and as* that presence of the victim who returns and offers forgiveness. Please note here that it is not that God has different modulations in his voice – now strident, now majestic, and now merciful. No, something much more drastic is going on: the whole of that protagonism which is God is revealed to us in that presence of the forgiving victim. God has no voice apart from the one which emanates from the forgiving victim, the one which is the self-giving of the forgiving victim expressed towards us and on our behalf.

Well then, if that is so, then how do the faithful, and of course that sub-group of

the faithful constituted by those of us who are theologians, listen? Of course there is no way of coming to hear that voice which doesn't include going through the process of being forgiven. If God's whole way of being present in our world is precisely the strong protagonism of weak presence, then it reaches us as the process of our finding ourselves wrong, bound, and tied to other protagonisms and other dynamics in the degree to which we allow ourselves to be addressed by the strength of that generous weakness. And it is starting from our reception of that being forgiven, which takes the form of us finding ourselves being set free, loosened for freedom, that we enter into the process of noticing the changes in tone of the voice of God.

Let me give some examples, taking as a basis those Bible verses which I just quoted. Let us listen to Paul again when he says "...Now God commands, παραγγέλλει all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17, 30b). And let us not change a word. But yes indeed, let us change what I called the whole ecosphere of associations which come with the words. Let us first savour the phrase with the word "commands" ringing with a military tone, the words "all people everywhere" spoken imperiously, and the word "repent" charged with moralism or even emotional blackmail. And now let us listen to this phrase anew as flowing to its maximum extension from that weak presence which I have sought to describe. What is the tone of voice with which "commands" is pronounced if it emanates from that throne which is a gibbet, and whose triumph consists in having rendered contempt non-toxic? In another place Paul tells us that we are "ambassadors" of that protagonism, and it is perhaps easier to understand the supplicant tone when it is explicitly *begging* "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5,20). Then again, how different does the word "everyone" sound if it comes not with an imperious tone, but with affection, an equality of heart, a desire to embrace and enfold, since the one who is longing has always been beneath everyone, when not actually being trodden underfoot? And, how does the word "change your hearts" sound if it reaches us as the personal dimension of an offer, made from below, to enter into a new "we" made possible by the one whose similarity with me I didn't want to see, afraid as I was of losing everything?

Well, these are some examples. You can do exactly the same thing with all those words like "desire", "will", "law" and so on. Just think how different it sounds to say "I delight in your will, my God, your law is within my heart" if the will and the law in question are those which become manifest starting from that weak presence which alone points up the strong protagonism! If the "will" has expressed itself to the maximum in that presence of a forgiving victim, and the law consists in reproducing that presence for others, then breezes of delight, of security and of freedom are already to be detected as we find ourselves sailing off

the coast of this banquet, beginning to perceive the immensity that is being offered for our exploration.

I would like to note another dimension of the density of this weak presence of a strong protagonism, an element that is very difficult to explain, one which seems to be an element of absence, and is difficult to understand as a mode of presence, which is what it is. This is the sense, which is pointed to in differing ways in the Gospels, that Jesus is going before his own. In Mark the angel at the tomb says to the two Marys and to Salome:

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you. (Mark 16,7)

In Acts, this sense comes with the Ascension, and in John it comes, among other places, with Jesus' invitation to Thomas to place his finger in the wounds. There are enough verbal equivalences between the Greek of John 20, 25-7 and the Septuagint version of the instructions for placing the carrying rods or staves in the rings (lit: "finger holes") so as to transport the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus 27,7 for it to be apparent that the risen Christ is in person the new Ark of the new Covenant, who will be borne before his people. This is rather confirmed by Jesus' remark to Thomas that it will be even better for those who believe without having seen (John 20, 29). In fact, bearing the Ark of the Presence is going to be less burdensome and easier for those who haven't seen Jesus in person.

Of all these ways of pointing towards this dimension, personally I find the formula "he is going before you" easiest to digest. It suggests a presence which is *en route*. Only by its being present "beyond" us, outside our reach, are we being driven towards entering into new dimensions. That is to say, part of that strong protagonism with a weak presence is exactly this element of opening up virgin territory, which still seems impossible to us. And it is always by virtue of its being a forgiving victim that we are being encouraged to tread on surfaces whose solidity we could never have dared to imagine, terrains which seem terrifying to us, but turn out to be much more spacious and liveable-in than we had imagined.

Well then, I hope that with this, something of the force of that phrase of John's Gospel with which we began can be felt. When all's said and done, what I wanted to do was to do a bit of "filling in" of what might be meant by "he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life". I wanted to point up the way in which this phrase opens up the possibility of a presence which creates criteria, offers a new network, or ecosphere, of associations starting from which the phrase "God loves the world" can come to

be heard in a quite fresh new way. And it is towards that novelty, that freshness, that the word οὐτως with which we started, points. As I said, it is the little words which always surprise.

Having then, spent so much time sketching out some elements of the grammar we need to be able to identify what is proper to the Presence from which we are working, I've left myself little time to explore the task before us in this colloquium. Since you have privileged me by giving me the opportunity of beginning our conversation, I'm going to set out some of the directions in which I personally would like to see our conversation develop.

If I may say so, I've just offered you a sketch, doubtless fairly primitive, of what I consider to be central to our faith. That is to say, I've proposed a way of drawing close to a real, dense, presence, which brings along with it real human associations, and which is, in as far as it is possible for us to speak like this, the way in which the Triune God manifests in our midst. This seems to me to be something absolutely unique. That is to say, this network of associations through which God has projected his self-manifestation in our midst, exercising his strong protagonism in this weak presence, giving himself to be known by means of a completely new criterion, has no parallel, that I know or have ever heard of, in any other part of human knowledge, culture, philosophy or narrative.

The first question which this raises for me is as follows: How should we speak about this quality of absolute "uniqueness" without that uniqueness being a form, however well-disguised, of human "exclusivism"? And my first intuition about this, and it is no more than that, is that we have to stop being concerned about being considered exclusivist, as if that which is unique were in some way our property. Instead we have to refine our understanding of the protagonism of that which is unique and rediscover our relationality with others as part of what is received from and through that unique protagonism.

The second question, which is the same as the first, but from a different angle, is as follows. This dense presence is not only unique, but also different from all other ways in which religions and forms of worship understand God. And that difference is not something about which we have any reason to be ashamed, quite the reverse. However, and this is important, since in our world, in the world of our protagonisms, every "difference" is made by contrast with some "other", sooner or later the fact of making a contrast vitiates the goodness of what we are affirming in the same degree as it has to leave some "other" in the shade. How,

then, can we speak of this criterion-giving presence without falling into the vicious denigration of other religious and cultural realities? And here it is my intuition that it is the notion of gratuity which we have to continue to refine, along with the sensation of “he goes before you” which I indicated as a dimension of the Presence.

The third and last question that I would like to raise with you is ecclesial. If, as I understand it, that which is central and indispensable to Catholic Faith is this strong protagonism of a weak presence, it is evident that everything else, everything ecclesial, and by obvious extension, everything ecclesiastical, revolves around this reality, and is penetrable by and accountable to it. It couldn't be otherwise since ecclesial reality, with all its different dimensions of Sacred Texts, Communities, Sacramental Worship, and Office holders only comes to be a sign of this protagonism as it passes through a constant process of losing idols, ceasing to grasp onto securities. And this means for us, theologians, who form part of this reality, who are, as it were, nudged along by the same cattle prod, that it is becoming clearer and clearer in the modern world how much more flexible and fluid from within is that which from the outside seems pretty sclerotic. For example, not many years ago it was common to hear conservative types affirm that “The Church is not a democracy”, and, as I see it, they are quite right. The problem is that neither is it a monarchy, nor an oligarchy, as they seem to suppose, but a Pneumarchy, and the Pnuma seems to be totally re-structuring the internal life of the Church by fomenting a growing facility in talking about all possible themes and a growing sense of freedom in belonging, a growing sense of the voluntary nature of Church life. And these are tendencies which completely undermine the pretensions of authority of a certain hierarchical style. My question is: how can we contribute to making it possible for these dimensions of voluntary belonging, freedom in speaking, and the necessarily hierarchical elements which are there for our protection against ourselves, to be brought together in such a way that the Sign becomes resplendent?

Many thanks for your patience with me.

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