

“He opened up to them everything in the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24, 27b):
How can we recover Christological and Ecclesial habits of Catholic Bible Reading?

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I propose to do two things with you this evening. The first is to read a passage of Scripture, in the rich sense of “offering a reading” of it. And the second, if time and your patience permits, is to draw out some of the consequences of the method which I shall have used in order to come up with this reading. I’m aiming at making a contribution to something which I intuit as being important for the future of our Catholic life: the recovery of the habits necessary for a reading of the Scriptures which is both Ecclesial and Eucharistic. The route to this recovery winds through the filling out of our sense of how it is that the Anointed One of God, the “Χριστός”, makes available for us a fulfilled reading of the texts which we have received.

I am going to begin with a text which is apparently rather un-promising for my purposes: one of the parables. Perhaps one of the two or three best known among them, the one which often gets called the parable of the Prodigal Son. My reason for saying that it is apparently rather un-promising for my purposes is that it is, at first blush, a parable without any Christological content. There are two brothers, one who is a spendthrift, and the other who is somewhat tediously righteous; there is a father and there are servants. It is not apparent that any of these characters is a “*figura Christi*”. Nevertheless, I am going to propose a Christological reading for you.

Normally, when Christological readings are in the air, it is because one or other of the New Testament authors refers some incident from the life of Jesus to a text in the Hebrew Scriptures. In some cases, we are talking about an understanding which quite clearly came way later than Jesus’ death and resurrection. For instance, Paul sees the Messiah, the Christ, as having been already present in the Rock which followed the Israelites in the desert (1 Cor 10, 1-4). On other occasions, we are dealing with a recognition that in the light of what the authors

understand now, they are able to point to an event at which they hadn't been present, and see in it something that one of the Prophets of old had been talking about. For example, Matthew states that Jeremiah's oracle about Rachel's weeping was fulfilled when Herod killed the innocents (Mat 2, 17; Jer 31, 15). On yet other occasions, there is indeed some possibility that the author is pointing to an interpretation which was contemporary with the event, at least in embryonic form. For instance, John affirms that a witness was present when Jesus' side was pierced through with a lance, and that this fulfilled what the Prophet Zechariah had foretold when he said "they will look upon the one who they have pierced" (Zech 12, 10, quoted at John 19, 37). There is no reason, in principle, why someone familiar with a well-known text of Zechariah should not have applied it to the sad spectacle of this public execution either immediately, or within a few days of the event. Perhaps the full density of what that witness was doing in applying a text which was so close to Jesus' teaching about his own destiny may only have dawned slowly. However, that doesn't remove the possibility that the application of the text was contemporary.

Another form of Christological reading is when we glimpse that Jesus himself is doing something deliberately so as to fulfil the Scriptures, as for example when he carries out the gesture of "cleansing" the Temple. This announces the arrival of "That Day" which is foretold by Zechariah (Zech 14, 21), and along with "That Day" the end of the Temple's usefulness. Or in a more wide-ranging form, when we read the whole journey which Jesus makes in Luke's Gospel, from the synagogue at Nazareth to the crucifixion in Jerusalem, as the deliberate trajectory of the One who is fulfilling the coming of the promised prophet, Melchisedek himself, the anointed priest who is to offer the definitive sacrifice for the redemption of Israel. During this journey, allusions are made, in section after section of the Gospel, to the passages and narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures whose fulfilment is being indicated.

A third form of Christological reading is when we find ourselves able to unravel something of Jesus' own teaching concerning himself, not only deducing this from the deeds which he carries out, but working through the texts which we have which give an account of his teaching. In other words, when we get a glimpse of what is proposed, in the passage from the road to Emmaus which gave me my title this evening (Luke 24, 13-35), as the normative ecclesial way of reading the Scriptures. Applying this, however, to the accounts which we have of Jesus teaching before his death. And here we are in a terrain which is at the same time very interesting indeed and somewhat difficult to traverse, since our texts are not, and do not pretend to be, cinematographic accounts of what went on. They are something both much richer and much more fun than that. Rather than

continuing to describe this form of reading from the “outside”, as it were, I would like to invite you to participate with me in having a go at it “from within”. That is to say, we are going to dare to look for a spark, a hint, of the Master’s own Christological teaching from the midst of the Gospel text.

First, let’s listen to the parable¹:

[Jesus] said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share (μέρος) of property (οὐσία) that falls to me.' And he divided his living (βίον) between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed (ἐπεθύμει χορτασθῆναι) on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise (ἀναστὰς) and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him (ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ καὶ κατεφίλησεν αὐτόν). And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants (δούλους); 'Bring quickly the best robe (στολήν τὴν πρώτην), and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it (θύσατε), and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again (ἀνέζησεν); he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry. "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come (ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἦκει), and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry (ὠργίσθη) and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command (οὐδέποτε ἐντολήν σου παρήλθον); yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours (ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος) came, who has devoured your living with harlots (ὁ καταφαγών σου τὸν βίον μετὰ πορνῶν), you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son (τέκνον), you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother (ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος) was dead, and is alive (ζήσεν); he was lost, and is found.'"

¹ Luke 15, 11-32 (RSV and Greek inserts from NA 27).

Now for a little bit of context. Please imagine that you are in a synagogue in first-century Palestine. Or perhaps better, just outside one, since on this occasion Jesus is teaching people who might find it painful to go inside a synagogue. Please also imagine that you are a Scribe or a Pharisee, removing from your imagination all the weight of the modern connotations of those words. That is to say, you don't consider yourself a hypocrite: rather you are observant, modest and sober, you have a genuine religious enthusiasm, a sure devotion to the way of the Torah, a good knowledge of all the narratives and incidents which are received as Holy Writ, and you are authentically curious about this Jesus who might perhaps be a prophet.

You are used to there being a lectionary reading cycle in the synagogue. For over a century before Christ the books of Moses had been divided into 150 chunks so that the Torah would be read in its entirety over a three-year cycle. They had been divided according to the convenience of the feasts and the passages were known as *sedarim*. Also, more recently, readings of chunks of the Prophets had been added, and these were known as *haftarot*. So, there are appointed readings for every Sabbath, and the person who was entrusted with the reading and the commentary didn't pick a text at random, but expounded the assigned readings. Unfortunately, we don't have much evidence for the exact distribution of the readings at the time of Jesus, rather in the same way as we don't have an exact knowledge of all the books which were considered holy by the diverse groups which made up the Hebrew people in the Palestine of the time. In both cases, our more exact knowledge begins somewhat after the period of the apostolic witnesses. Nevertheless, we do know that there was such a lectionary cycle and some elements of it can be glimpsed from the texts of the New Testament.

What would have been normal at the period would have been to take the appointed texts, and used them as a basis for constructing something for the edification of those present. And it is this that we see Jesus doing with the parable of the Prodigal Son. It looks as though we are faced with a teaching which has as its base the texts for the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple, where the appointed passages were Genesis 46, 28 – 47, 31 and Ezekiel 37, 15-28. Both texts refer to the difficult fraternal relationship between two tribes, Judah and Joseph, and to possible measures to overcome their differences and bring them together to form one single flock in celebration of God. At least, those were the texts for the feast in one of the three years of the cycle². There has also been detected beneath the texts of this central part of Luke's Gospel a commentary on

² According to the well-known work of A. Guilding *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (Oxford 1960).

several sections of the book of Deuteronomy³. The Torah passage in question on this occasion would have been Deuteronomy 21, 15-23, which instructs as to the distribution of an inheritance between an older and a younger brother, and then as to the appropriate treatment for a rebel son: that is to say, his being stoned to death. It ends with the indication that whoever is hanged from a tree dies under the curse of God. The passage from the Prophets would perhaps have been Malachi, either in its entirety (the book is not very long), or certain passages from it, since it begins with recalling an elder brother, whom God did not love, and a younger brother, whom God loved, and it ends with the promise of the return of the Prophet Elijah who will reconcile parents with their children and children with their parents⁴.

The context of the parable is not only given by the texts of the Feast, but also the Feast itself: that of the Dedication of the Temple, now called Hanukah, or the Festival of Lights. This feast points, in the first place, to the re-dedication of the Temple in the mid second-century before Christ, and secondly to the original Dedication of the First Temple carried out by Solomon in what was already at the time of Christ the remote past. Knowing something about this living context will allow us to get a little further “inside” what Jesus is doing in offering us the parable.

I would also like to comment on the fact that we are dealing with a parable. Please forget the familiarity with which we pronounce this word. We have grown used to listening to Jesus’ parables as if they were simple and brilliant teachings which Jesus plucked out of thin air to the delight of the simple faithful, and the confusion of the learned. We are so little familiar with the Hebraic resonances of Jesus’ world that we jump almost immediately to an allegorical reading of the parable, as if the final version of the story were all that there is to be understood, and as if there were a more or less obvious allegorical application of the text. For example, that the Father is God, the Prodigal Son is the Christians, or sinful and repentant Jews; and the Elder Brother is the Pharisees, or perhaps Old Israel, and thus the bad guy in the story.

³ C.F. Evans ‘Central Section of St Luke’s Gospel’ in *Studies in the Gospel: Essays in memory of R.H.Lightfoot* (Oxford 1957).

⁴ I owe my reading of these passages, and many of the intuitions I develop in this paper, to the works of J.D.M.Derrett *Law in the New Testament* (London: DLT 1970), especially Chapter 5, and *New Resolutions of Old Conundrums: a Fresh Insight into Luke’s Gospel* (Shipston-on-Stour: Drinkwater 1986) pp 105-107.

Well, I'd like to suggest that it wasn't like that originally. A Parable is a much more interesting teaching technique than this. It is rather like launching a toy into the middle of a group of children who, at first, don't understand what it is, nor what it does, since it confounds their expectations, and everything seems to be the wrong way round. So, bit by bit they take it apart so as then to be able to put the pieces together again as they begin to understand what it's about. It is in the act of piecing it together that they begin to "get it" and understand what it's for. This is what is important: with the parabolic method, if there is not first a moment of confusion, of having to pull the thing apart, then neither is there a process of learning and discovery.

Let me give you an example of this taken from our parable. When the prodigal son is homeward bound, the father espies him from a great distance and running towards him, falls on his neck and kisses him. This has served all of us as a beautiful reminder of how God is a Father who loves us and comes rushing towards us from long before we have reached him. And nothing in what I'm going to tell you should dim this memory. However, if we had heard the story in the context of the synagogue, our first confusion would have arisen because in Genesis, it is Joseph, the son and younger brother, who leaves his palace in Egypt, and goes out to meet his father, Jacob, who is arriving, along with his elder brother Judah, so as to receive him, from a great way off. When they meet, Joseph falls on his father's neck (Gen 46, 29). Earlier he has fallen on his brothers' necks and covered them with kisses – the phrase is the same (Gen 45, 14-15). So, the first reference point for the father in the parable is not God, but Joseph, the younger brother, and it is *towards* the far land that Jacob and the elder brothers are journeying for the festive re-encounter.

It is also possible that there is here a word game from which Jesus might have drawn fruit, for Joseph goes out to Goshen to receive Jacob and Judah, and might not someone have noticed that the name of Moses' firstborn son was Gershon? There is enough similarity among the consonants for such a word game. Gershon was born while Moses, himself a younger brother, was living exiled from Egypt, in the land of the Midianites, whose flocks he tended. He was married to a daughter of Midian, Zipporah, and their eldest son's name means "I am a stranger in a foreign land".

Well, I hope that you are suitably confused, and that a series of confusions is beginning to open up. The father can equally well be Joseph, or God, or even the Pharaoh from the Joseph story, since he gives the younger son a ring and places him over all that is his. So far, the place where they are living might equally be Israel or Egypt. The younger brother might equally well be Joseph, or Moses, or

Jacob (the younger brother of Esau) or even Abel (Cain's younger brother). He might also be the younger son who appears in the passage of Deuteronomy 21 about dividing a father's inheritance. This younger son receives only a third of the inheritance, since his elder brother receives two-thirds according to the Law. The younger son might also be the rebellious son who is to be taken outside the city to be killed according to the command of Deuteronomy, whether the killing be by stoning or by hanging him from a tree.

In the same vein, the elder brother could be the one from Deuteronomy who receives the two-thirds share of the inheritance; he might also be Aaron, Moses' elder brother, or Cain, or Ishmael, or Esau or Judah. Which is to say that there is a wide spectrum of possible occupants of each place in the parable, and we shouldn't dismiss the possibility that they are all there, in a sort of kaleidoscope: now one appears, now another, all in different configurations vis-à-vis each other.

In this kaleidoscopic vision, the elder brother who comes back from the fields and complains that his father hasn't even given him a kid so as to celebrate with his friends, might be Cain the horticulturalist coming back from the fields where he has just killed Abel the shepherd, so as to meet up with Joseph, who is Abel risen from the dead. He might equally be Esau, whose primogeniture had been stolen from him by Jacob through a piece of trickery involving the hide of a goat; and the father might be Isaac trying to help his elder son overcome his anger and his envy. Or indeed, the elder brother might represent Joseph's elder brothers who, after having sold Joseph, killed a goat so as to bloody Joseph's coat of many colours, thus convincing their father, Jacob, that Joseph was dead. And of course the punch line of the Joseph story, as of our parable, is the reversal of this when Jacob is able to say "Joseph my son is still alive" (Gen 45, 28; see also 45, 3).

I hope that you are beginning to suspect that the parable, rather than being a finished story is rather more like a collection of hooks from which hang many references, allusions, and lines of thought which a good storyteller might follow. Only if we grasp something of the richness of those allusions, and of the different ways in which they can be blended, do we have some sense of why they have been so well put together within the schema of the parable which Jesus is casting before his listeners.

Now, let us follow the story, noticing some curiosities as we move forward. First there is the distribution of the property. On asking for his inheritance, the younger brother receives a third part, which is what would correspond to him on the death of his father, since his elder brother, following Deuteronomy 21 would receive two thirds. As it happens, that "third part" turns up again in the Prophet

Zechariah, whom the New Testament, and apparently Jesus himself in his own teaching, follows very closely. For that “third part” is the portion of the flock which belongs to the Shepherd who is going to be wounded, and it will be saved, while the two thirds will perish. Might it not be the case that the parable is alerting us as to how strange it is that the Good Shepherd, the one who is to fulfil the Scriptures, is going to be like a younger son, whose own family, following both Deuteronomy and Zechariah⁵, treat him as a rebellious son and take him outside the city to kill him?

Interpreting Deuteronomy in the light of Zechariah wouldn't be at all impossible for a teacher and an audience accustomed to Midrash, the family of Jewish interpretative techniques. And let us remember that it is just at this point of Deuteronomy that there appears the famous phrase “the one who is hanged on a tree is under the curse of God” (Deut 21, 23) from which St Paul will derive such important conclusions (Gal 3, 13). Let us add to this the referential framework of the Joseph story, where it is the younger brother who is cast out and left to die, but who gets to be the one who forgives his brothers and receives them into the land of plenty, recognizing that that was what God had been planning for all of them all along (Gen 45, 7-8; 50, 19-21). It looks indeed as though this referential framework is at work here as a storyline which allows the rather cruel passage from Deuteronomy to be re-read against the human sacrifice which it apparently commands. It makes of it instead a prophecy of a reconciliation which is to be brought about by a sacrificed son, considered to be a rebel, and led to his death apparently under the curse of God. In modern terms, we would say that it is the text of the Joseph story which provides the hermeneutic which allows the texts of Deuteronomy to be read in an apparently inverted way. And we need have no doubt as to the presence in the parable of the capacity to make such an inversion: this is demonstrated by the change of roles which we have already observed between the the one who comes out to receive the other while the other is yet far off, falling on his neck and covering him with kisses.

Let's get back to the parable. The younger son goes off with his inheritance, and being in a far-off land, he fritters it away. So, he deserves nothing more. When a serious famine hits that country, the son goes to work for one of the locals, as Moses went to work for a Midianite. The son even longs to eat the food which is given to the pigs, a splendid element in the story, for it demonstrates to a Hebrew public the repugnant degree of sordidness to which the son has fallen. It also brings to mind the Maccabees, the heroes of the story of the Dedication of the Temple, who preferred to undergo death rather than eating pork, which is what

⁵ Zechariah 13,6 - the wounds come from the house of his friends.

the Greek king was trying to get them to do. And our younger son certainly feels the pangs of longing to eat the pigs' food – and the words “ἐπεθύμει χορτασθῆναι” “he desired to satisfy himself” may be an echo of the Israelites in the wilderness whose desire to return to Egypt and eat the food from there came to be a symbol of the very nature of distorted desire (1 Cor 10, 6).

However, that younger son “comes to himself”, and here we begin to get some very interesting words. He realises that he might be better off living somewhere else, in the house of his father, even if only as a servant. And he says, literally, “Arising, I will go”, but the Greek word is “ἀναστὰς” and it is also the technical term for what happened to the High Priest when he was ordained and prepared for the Angelic life: he was “raised” or “resurrected”⁶. The idea was that the High Priest already lived a life of angelic “resurrection” while communing with YHWH in the sanctuary, and representing YHWH before the people. So, a priestly element is entering the story. Solomon himself announces, at the beginning of his dedication of the Temple, that he has “arisen” or “ascended” to the dwelling of his father (2 Chronicles 6, 10). Any doubt about this disappears when we hear the younger son preparing himself for his return to his father's house, for he uses a set phrase which would have been well known: “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you”. This may well have been a liturgical phrase from the Atonement rite on Yom Kippur⁷, in rather the same way as we recite in the Mass the penitential formula “I confess before Almighty God and before you my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned...”. In other words, suddenly the younger son is the High Priest who is going to enter his Father's dwelling carrying out the rite of Atonement, a rite which was inaugurated by Solomon in his dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 6 and 7).

This leads us to some considerations about the presence of Moses in our story. For Moses was a younger brother, he lived in a foreign land, and he began, with the people of Israel, the return to the Promised Land, which was also the land of the Fathers, or Patriarchs. However, after the idolatry of the Israelites, that is, when they allowed themselves to be overcome by their desires, Moses offered to make atonement for his people (Exodus 32, 30-34). Nevertheless, God did not allow him to do this, telling him merely that he (God) would send an angel before him. It would not have been difficult for Jesus to link this angel, a priestly figure, to King Solomon who did manage to achieve an atonement which was accepted by God when the fire consumed his offerings in the Temple, and to the future

⁶ For more details see the works of Margaret Barker, especially *The Great High Priest* (London: T&T Clark 2003).

⁷ See J.D.M. Derrett *New Resolutions* pp 105-107.

prophet whom Moses promised the people of Israel in the book of Deuteronomy⁸, just before our passage about sons and inheritance. The link is made even stronger if the younger son is not only the shepherd who is to going to be wounded, but the priest-prophet who is going to carry out the definitive Atonement, and on his way to the sacrifice will be considered a rebel son to be killed, and his sacrifice reckoned a curse from God. That is to say, part of what is going on in the parable is the suggestion that “one greater than Moses is here, one greater than Solomon”, and an insinuation as to the manner by which the coming prophet will fulfil what was lived out and promised by Moses himself, and prefigured by Solomon. Thus it will be known that he is a true prophet⁹.

So, the son “rises” in a priestly manner towards the sanctuary of his Father. The Father shows himself viscerally moved – ἐσπλαγγνίσθη – which is rather specially the emotion of God, his “chesed”, by running towards him, falling on his neck and kissing him, just as Joseph, another younger brother, had done with his father and brothers. Please notice that the dynamic of the father who forgives is exactly the same dynamic as the brother, expelled and left for dead, who forgives his brothers. Divine paternity is cast in a recognisably fraternal form.

At this point, the High Priest pronounces the penitential formula, but the Father doesn’t even speak to him. In fact, once our younger brother has recited his penitential formula, he totally disappears as a protagonist. He neither says nor does anything else at all. In fact it is as though, once he has become a sacrifice of expiation, he no longer has a separate role to play. The Father speaks instead to the servants, and here we have another piece of word play. Because the priests were also known as “servants” while the High Priest, above all at the time of the Atonement Rite when he acted “in personam” YHWH, was known as “Son”. So the Father tells the servants to put on his son “στολήν τὴν πρώτην” which might be both “a very fine tunic” or indeed, the priestly robe with which the priests dressed the High Priest when he came out of the sanctuary for the sacrifice. He tells them to put a ring on his finger, in just the same way as Pharaoh had placed his ring on Joseph’s finger, signalling Joseph’s role as Viceroy, that is to say, the one who was to exercise the Pharaoh’s royalty before all (Genesis 41, 42-44). And he tells them to put sandals on his feet, for earlier Moses had had to take off his sandals before the Presence, but now, since the Atonement has been accomplished, the Prophet who fulfils what Moses began, the one who can indeed enter into the Presence, this one can put on sandals. In other words, the Son is being enthroned as Priest, King, and Prophet, all together.

⁸ Deuteronomy 18, 15-22, commented by Stephen in Acts 7, 37.

⁹ Deuteronomy – loc. cit.

Symbolizing and inaugurating the feast and the rejoicing, the fatted calf is sacrificed (and the word is θύσατε – the term for sacrificial slaughter) in the same way that Solomon ordered thousands of bulls to be killed, and the feasting begins. It would not be too much to remember that in the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 8, 12-14) it is the younger brother, Moses, who ordains his elder brother, Aaron, as High Priest. He anoints him with oil, dresses him in a tunic, and girds him around with a girdle. And then he sacrifices the calf as a sin offering, following the same order that we find in Luke. Once again the father figure and that of the younger brother flow into one single role in the rite of ordination. Now the father speaks in the same way as Jacob speaks of Joseph: that his son who he had long thought dead is in fact alive. But here he signals that he is also celebrating the fact that the Son (the High Priest) has “risen”, that is, has made his “ἀνάστασις”, and that everything which has been achieved by the rite of Atonement can now be celebrated with noisy jubilation.

Meanwhile the elder brother is in the field, but as he returns and draws near to the house (and “τῆ οἰκία” may always refer to the Temple also), he hears the sound of singing and dancing, and so calls one of the servants to find out what’s going on. The servant replies with a curious phrase, for he does not say “your brother has returned”. The word “return” would have penitential connotations, since the word “shuv” in Hebrew means “turn” or “repent”. Instead he says “your brother has come” or “is present”, “and your father has sacrificed the fatted calf on getting him back safe and sound”. Which is to say, the servant is giving the reason for the joy, and the festivities, of the Presence, which is what is maximally realised in the rite of Atonement.

At this the elder brother becomes enraged – ὠργίσθη – and refuses to go inside. And indeed, his wrath is not without interest, since at the great feast of the Presence which is fulfilled with the Atonement it was well understood that wrath – ὄργη - was in the air, and was in fact attributed to God. It was understood that in the composite person of the Priest and the Lamb, YHWH was offering himself as an expiation to protect his faithful ones. However, it was reckoned that the Wrath would fall upon those who were not covered over by the blood of the Lamb. The image was of the Wrath emanating from the Holy Place to avenge God’s enemies: from this, people needed protection. Here in the parable however, and in absolute coherence with all his teaching, Jesus inverts the expectation, showing that the only wrath which is present is purely human, purely anthropological. In the feast of the Presence, with Victim, Priest and King enthroned, there is no room for vengeance. The only wrath which is present, and

it is very powerful indeed, is the sort of envy which leads one brother to kill another.

Those who know the narrative of the Dedication of the Temple will remember at this moment that when Solomon had carried out the ceremony, the Glory of the Presence came down with such strength that the priests, sons of Aaron, couldn't enter into the Lord's House (2 Chronicles 5, 14; 7, 2). You will also remember how Moses was unable to enter into the tent of the Tabernacle when the Glory was dwelling in it (Exodus 40, 34-38). Yet here it is the elder brother himself who is keeping himself outside, out of envy of his brother, just like Cain, and Esau, and the brothers and father of Joseph, all of whom were full of envy. It is envy which makes it impossible to perceive the Presence, far less enter into it.

Now the father comes out in person in order to beseech him, with no hint of violence or vengeance – there is no Wrath coming out of the sanctuary. Rather the father speaks to him as it were from below, acting as the humble spokesman for the plenitude of that forgiving and non-vengeful Presence. Of course, the father has allowed himself to be defined by that Presence. He begs the elder brother to come in to the feast of the celebration of the Presence. The elder brother explains that he has been a servant. And indeed he has, he has been the servant to the priesthood, through the order of Levites. And he has never put aside one of the father's commandments – for the phrase in Greek hints at the commandments of the Law “οὐδέποτε ἐντολήν σου παρήλθον”. It would seem, in fact that he is representing an obedient order of Levites, whose ordination had occurred when Moses commanded them to kill their brethren among the people of Israel who had participated in the building of the Golden Calf¹⁰. The elder brother even says that his father never gave him a kid with which to celebrate with his friends. This may be a reference to the prohibition of the Levites from carrying out the tasks of the Priesthood in the matter of sacrificing live animals which appears in the book of Numbers (Numbers 18, 1-23). And naturally it will call to mind, as I have already mentioned, the fact that Cain, whose sacrifice was not acceptable, practiced horticulture, while Abel was a shepherd, and his sacrifice was acceptable. It will also summon up memories of the different pieces of sheep and goat-related skulduggery which pepper the Hebrew Scriptures¹¹. We might even imagine in the voice of the elder brother a tone of complaint that, unlike what happened with Abraham and Isaac, God had not provided for sacrifice (Genesis 22, 8. 13) with a substitute lamb which might teach him not to

¹⁰ Exodus 32, 26-30 – I'm not making this up, you know.

¹¹ See p. vii above, and other entertaining stories such as that at Genesis 30, 25-43.

sacrifice his brother. In his envy he is unable to recognise that the brother who is present is exactly that lamb who YHWH has provided, providing himself.

Next the elder brother himself refers to his brother as “this son of yours”, recognising in his envy that the one who he does not even deign to call “my brother” has been elevated to the rank of “Son”. And he criticizes his father, since he claims that this son “has devoured your living with harlots”, and even so, the father has sacrificed the fatted calf for him. The phrase is very interesting indeed. In Greek it reads as follows: “ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος ὁ καταφαγών σου τὸν βίον μετὰ πορνῶν”. Now if we read that sentence in priestly idiom, then this Son has not devoured the *living*, so much as eaten up the *life*, of the father. In the same way that the priest eats the body of the lamb which is YHWH once the sacrifice has been offered on the altar. And the High Priest has done this amongst an idolatrous people. In his envy, the Levite doesn’t realise what he himself is saying, for the High Priest is precisely the one who eats and distributes the very life of God, being his Son, as forgiveness in the midst of a people given to fornication, or idolatry – notions which are interchangeable in the prophetic texts. And the fact that the Son is now present, his priestly mission fulfilled, is very justly symbolized by the sacrifice of the fatted calf in the feast of the Presence. Between an accusation of immorality and a recognition of priestly presence, there lies only the blindness which is the fruit of envy, and the irony of the good storyteller.

As if this were not enough, the father who has listened to the bitterness of the elder brother now addresses him as τέκνον – which is to say “child”. It is in fact a tender word, but it is not the same as “son”, which is important since, as we have seen, both the father and the elder brother reserve the word ‘υἱός’, with all of its implications of high priesthood, for the younger brother. “Child” says the father “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours”. And here, just in case further detail were needed, we are once again plunged into a reference to the Levites, and indeed into the same central section of Deuteronomy which has lain beneath the surface of our parable. For there it says (Deuteronomy 18, 1-2; cf. also Numbers 3, 5-13):

The Levitical priests, that is, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel; they shall eat the offerings by fire to the LORD, and his rightful dues. They shall have no inheritance among their brethren; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them.

And so we are at the end, as we were at the beginning, faced with words about inheritance. But it now turns out that the elder brother also has as his inheritance the Lord, who is by definition inexhaustible. So the elder brother should have no envy as to how the Lord distributes what is his and brings it to a good ending. The one who is more than Moses, more than Solomon, younger brothers both, has arrived. The Dedication of the new Temple which is himself, more originary than even the temple of Solomon, is being carried out. In the parable we are given all the elements necessary for an extraordinary recapitulation of the entire story of Israel starting with Abel, passing through Moses and Solomon, and pointing towards the definitive sacrifice which will overcome all the ambiguities in the previous sacrificial regime. The insinuation is that this sacrifice is indeed about to take place. The parable leaves open the question, or throws down the challenge: will the elder brother overcome the envy which keeps him out of the house, of the Temple, of Paradise? Will he accept receiving his inheritance at the hands of his risen brother? Will he enter in to take part in the Feast of the Presence?

At the beginning I told you that I would try to offer a glimpse of how we might develop an ecclesial and Eucharistic reading of Scripture, and I promised to develop some consequences of this for you. Given the time, I can only offer you somewhat superficial theses. However, I would like to point up three more or less solid directions for your future consideration.

My first thesis is about the text. The Scriptures – and here I am talking about the Hebrew Scriptures, which we sometimes call the Old Testament, are not and never have been a book or a unitary text. They have always been a series of texts which rub against each other in a constant process of mutual elucidation. Thus was it before the time of Jesus, at the time of Jesus, and so it is now. Furthermore, the Scriptures were never designed to be a Final Version for a *reading* public. They were designed as a *base text* for public proclamation and commentary. That is: from the beginning, the liturgical function of explaining and narrating the “wherefore” of things, of events, of stories and of festivals preceded the production of texts. The texts are, as it were, manuals for preaching or exposition, helped along by their divergences, their internal references, their allusions, repetitions and contradictions. These allow the person doing the teaching to take advantage of the hooks, the hints and the bifurcations so as to get more juice from their possibilities, from the various “How would it be if...?” and so on. Which is to say that it is the *performance* which is important, because it is the performance which makes the story come alive and allows it to be applied to

the “today” which is always the moment of challenge in any good liturgy: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your presence...” (Luke 4, 21) Or “Today the Lord puts before you this choice...” (Deuteronomy 4,8; 11,26; 30, 15).

The second thesis flows from this: if the responsibility for the life which comes from the texts falls to the preacher, *now, today*, then what is central is not what the text says; rather it is the hermeneutical starting point of the one who is performing the reading. And this starting point must not only be intellectual, but to some degree self-implicatory. Those who make the text alive take on board a great responsibility and their truthfulness will be perceived in the way they are found to be involved in the narrative which they are expounding, and in the long term consequences of that involvement. Now it is just this which would seem to be what we have in the New Testament. All the gospel writers point towards a teacher who interpreted the texts by offering a very particular hermeneutical starting point and implicating himself very strongly in the interpretation. That the full consequences of this could not be grasped until after Jesus’ death take nothing away from, in fact they rather add to, the originality of Jesus’ own teaching. A teaching about a mysterious priestly function - “anointed” and “messianic” especially in the priestly sense - which only moved from promise, hint and intuition to reality and Presence after the sacrifice was carried out.

However, there is no *a priori* reason to think that the indications, suggestions, challenges and insinuations of an “anointed”, a “Christological”, fulfilment of the Scriptures could not have originated in Jesus’ own teaching. We would have someone who was interpreting the received texts with very great seriousness, and at the same time with a thoroughly disconcerting freedom, pointing to a “today” which was breaking in. And we would have in the persons of the Gospel writers people who were, themselves, producing preaching manuals, with their different versions and angles. These manuals would have been crafted to make available for Christian teachers the memory of what Jesus had done and said, organised by hooks so as to help them to relate what was done and said to the lectionary cycle in use at the time. Thus they would be able to expound how it was that Jesus was the Anointed One of God, the “Χριστός”, who had fulfilled the Scriptures, and what sort of “today” it was and is that, thanks to him, is being inaugurated.

My third thesis flows from all this. The principal context for the reading of Scripture is liturgical, and liturgical space is, at least in the Jewish, the Catholic and the Orthodox, traditions the space of the Presence. We understand that the Presence of God is enthroned on the praises of Israel. The Presence of God is eternal, and does not change, and in its light all our diverse “presents” are contemporary, synchronic. It is this Presence that Jesus is opening up for us by

his preaching of the Kingdom, his promise of being among us, and through his own role of being the living hermeneutical principle: the one who opens, and points towards, and is, himself, that Presence. This allows us to be found as contemporaries of all the stories of the Old Testament, including even Deuteronomy. A synchronic reading opens up for us because Jesus causes the internal tension within those texts to be laid bare when the role of the victim, in both the sociological and the liturgical senses of the word, and the role of the Priest comes together in his person. This coming together allows us to glimpse itself as *something which was always on the point of breaking through in the world of the texts*. Or in other words: the Son of Man *was always coming into the world*. And his coming always points towards an enriched density of the Presence. Once his coming has been achieved in history, the Presence, which is always contemporary, includes the sacrificed and forgiving victim, who is at the same time the protagonist who interprets the texts. It is exactly with *this* tension between interpretation and Presence that we have something very close to a proposal for how we might recover an Eucharistic reading of Scripture.

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