

The Priestly pattern of Creation and a fraudulent reading of St Paul: A Catholic reads some Pauline texts in the light of Mimetic Theory

James Alison

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It is one of the best known of René Girard's principles for reading certain texts – those of myths, those of Scripture and some early modern texts – that he asks how the text in question relates to an incident of persecution. Girard posits a real incident of persecution, a murder, a lynching, a mass expulsion of some sort which has structured the context within which the texts have come to be written. He then asks what the relationship between the real incident and the text is. His claim is that the relationship is of one of two kinds. In the vast majority of cases the texts are structured by the scapegoat mechanism, which is to say that the ganging-up of all against one is either completely hidden in the text or is presented in such a justified way as to make it impossible to imagine that the “one ganged-up against” could conceivably have been anything other than guilty of terrible misdeeds. So, for instance, in the myth of Oedipus, the king agrees with the crowd that he is guilty of the crimes which have produced a significant social disturbance in Thebes and is expelled from the city. This is tributary of the same mechanism whereby an anti-semitic mediaeval French poet could blame an epidemic (in fact the Black Death) on Jews secretly poisoning the wells, thus justifying their murder.

The whole point of such texts is that they do *not* highlight the scapegoat mechanism. In fact, they are unaware of it and it runs them successfully. This is because they genuinely take it that they have got it right: the accused really was guilty, and they are right to go along with the unanimous account which saw the balance of nature, or the Universe, restored when the evil one was done away with. The notion that the one they hold to be the guilty party is a *scapegoat*, that strange and complex modern term meaning “someone who is not guilty of whatever they are being blamed for, but *we can clearly see* as being made to carry the blame in the interests of the cohesiveness of the group as defined by those who have the power to do so”; that notion is unavailable to them. They are

blind to that possibility. The story that they are telling is a certain sort of hiding, a certain sort of lie. In fact, a quite regular sort of lie, since, as Girard points out exhaustively¹, there is a regular menu of ingredients which go into the structuring of such texts: stereotypical accusations and depictions of various forms of monstrosity attached to the one who is soon to be thrown out.

Then there are the other sort of texts, which are much rarer. Isolated examples can be found in ancient and classical texts, but the only place where there is a regular stream of these texts is in the Hebrew Scriptures, culminating in the texts of the Apostolic Witness, known as the New Testament. These were seen by the authors and compilers of the Witness as pointing up what had been achieved by the One who had always been coming into existence through the Hebrew Scriptures, and had at last given to their generation the key to those Scriptures.

These other and rarer kinds of texts are structurally no different from the texts we saw previously: there are significant and real incidents of persecution in their hinterground. The difference lies in that these texts appear to know something which the others do not. These texts know that the one-ganged-up-on was either innocent, or no more guilty than anybody else, and that they who have lived to tell the story do so from the position of people who are being uncovered in a lie. In other words, these texts are not tributary of the scapegoat mechanism, but are able to reveal it. Their knowledge is uncomfortable, destabilizing, not very flattering, and the result is texts which look much more violent than those where the unknowingly guilty victor is able to tidy away the violence. These unflattering texts know something real in knowing that the victim is innocent, and their knowledge is sure, and has real consequences for human living.

I hope that those of you who are familiar with René Girard's writing will recognise my brief summary as being accurate, and that you will allow me to develop something from it with relation to St Paul, in whose honour we are meeting together these days. For St Paul provides, as was pointed out by Robert Hamerton-Kelly as long ago as a pioneering article in *Semeia* from 1985, a particularly good test case for Girard's thought. Paul combines a strong awareness that his world was turned upside down through his having learned from God what he had really been doing as a persecutor, with an equally strong awareness of the way mimetic desire structures the reality of our living together.

I would like to follow the logic of Girard's thought a little further and explore two questions with you. The first is this. Girard teaches us to detect certain

¹ Especially in *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P. 1989)

stereotypical accusations embedded in texts written from the perspective of persecutors. The “lie”, as he points out, has quite a regular, recurring pattern. My question is: can we find a regularly occurring structure to the reverse of this pattern, to the exposing of the lie? Are there regularly detectable features of the emergence of the truth in our midst, of the way God communicates himself to us, such that in their presence we know we are in the presence of the Real Thing? Can St Paul help us in this? I hope at least to get a hint of a certain “regularity” in the Real Thing by striving for a glimpse of the significance of the identification between YHWH and Jesus in Paul’s writing.

The second question is this. It is easy enough to stand outside texts and make judgements concerning who wrote them, when, with what in mind, against whom, and so on. We are applying our criteria, our judgment to them. The spirit with which we are reading them is our own, and we project, as we cannot fail to do, our sense of “goodies and baddies” into the texts, and convince ourselves that Paul is on our side, or that, had we been there, we would have been on his side. However, if Girard is right about certain texts bearing witness to the scapegoat mechanism, that is to say being written by people who are undergoing a certain sort of “being undone” by the knowledge that comes from an innocent victim who is not themselves, then the logical conclusion is that they can only really be read by people who are themselves undergoing that discovery of their own involvement in the lie. That is to say that they can only really be understood by people who *find themselves being “read”* by the text in question.

This for me is, if you like, at the heart of how we engage in a Catholic, ecclesial, reading of the texts of St Paul. The question of how we may pick up “the Real Thing” which is at the centre of Paul’s witness is absolutely interwoven with the question of the degree to which we are willing to allow ourselves to be uncovered as frauds. So what I am proposing, is, if you will excuse the term, a relaxed, fraudulent reading of St Paul. A reading which presupposes that I, and other readers of St Paul, are frauds, that being a fraud and being “the real thing” look very similar under a certain light, and wildly different under another light, and that the Real Thing, as it shows itself to us, will take us in our fraudulence and turn us somewhat uncomfortably into something else. It will do so regularly, generously, inexorably, but also precariously, dangerously, in a way fraught with fragility.

For this purpose, the purpose of keeping alive my own fraudulence while reading St Paul, and doing so ecclesially, I am going to do something rather risky. Which is to read the text alongside, and in the company of, a brother priest of mine, now dead, who, it has now been widely and definitively recognised, was a fraud. You

see, I don't want the word "fraudulent reading" to become a fashionable post-modern label. I want us to remember what a terrible, terrible thing it is to be a fraud. What damage it causes, and quite how gratuitous it is that we fellow frauds can sometimes be sucked up into something bigger and more real than ourselves.

I hope the Catholics present will not mind if I explain to the non-Catholics who are among us how over the last sixty years or so a person who passed himself off as a holy man, founding a hugely rich religious congregation, publishing interminable tracts of righteousness, fitting in in every perfect way with my Church authorities' understanding of what goodness is all about, turned out to have been a serial paedophile, to have had at least one child by a woman to whom he was not married, and to have been financially devious. Yet throughout he presented himself as a model of sanctity to his many followers, convincing them that accusations levelled against him were so many persecutions which he was bearing in a Christ-like manner. In pursuing the perfection of his deception, he was, in fact, a masterly quoter of St Paul.

To be honest, this, the case of the late Fr Marcial Maciel Degollado, is far, far worse than the typical Televangelist-caught-with-hooker scenario to which we have become accustomed, and for reasons which cannot be laid squarely at the door of the poor, tortured soul at its centre. For the affair brings to light something upon which we Catholics scarcely dare to comment: the major failure of discernment, judgment of character, and ability to tell "the Real Thing" from a fraud, of at least one Pope, John Paul II, and of a large number of very high-ranking Cardinals – "pillars of the Church" in New Testament language – who were either knowingly or unknowingly duped, or in some cases effectively suborned, by Fr Maciel². Thank Heavens (and this is no mere rhetorical aside), Jozef Ratzinger, first as Cardinal, and then as Pope seems, however slowly and timidly³, to have smelt what the threat of an unfortunate alliteration obliges me to refer to as "a small toothy rodent" and pushed for a serious investigation. Even though this has meant facing down the ire, and the inertia of Maciel's very highly-placed enablers and boosters within the Roman Curia.

One advantage of reading St Paul alongside Fr Maciel is that any tendency to an anti-semitic reading is immediately relativised by the evidence that the counter-

² "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me continuously over sixty years, shame on me!"

³ There is a famous documentary film shot of him as Cardinal irritatedly slapping the wrist of an insistent reporter who was asking him about some of the Maciel allegations, and saying "not yet". This at least shows he was aware that the problem was real, and was going to be difficult to deal with.

examples Paul talks about while bearing witness to the Real Thing are perfectly able to be actualized by apparent insiders of one's own religious group, and thus perhaps even by oneself, with only minimal reference to our varying current reconstructions of the schism within the Hebrew world from which Christianity and Rabbinical Judaism emerged.

Indeed Fr Maciel sounds like just the sort of "super-apostle" who Paul refers to in his Corinthian correspondence⁴, one who turned out to be one of the

...false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds⁵.

In other words, whoever Paul meant by the sort of apostles who were in rivalry with him, or who were "preaching another Gospel", the matter suddenly becomes rather contemporary when we consider that it is at least conceivable that the same people who went along with fr Maciel's fraud, convinced that he was the "real deal", might have been just the sort of people who would have found it difficult or impossible to discern that Paul *was* the Real Deal, someone who genuinely *was* undergoing the Real Thing⁶. The past reaction of Maciel's boosters and followers to those whistleblowers who turned out to be truth-tellers (which included stonewalling, persecuting, suing, and defaming them) suggests exactly this.

Thus, by standing alongside Fr Maciel (for he sorely needs our prayer, and we sorely need not to judge our fellow-fraud), and by standing in the company of the thoroughly contemporary brothers and sisters, both highly-placed and much less highly-placed, for whom the revealing of Maciel's fraudulence is also the revelation of their poverty of judgment, I hope that we will get a somewhat fuller sense of the dangerous earthquake which the Real Thing provokes in the midst of all our perceptions of goodness.

In order to get a sense of the Real Thing, I propose trying to hold together two elements of Paul's witness: what I would call a "foreground" element –

⁴ 2 Cor 11, 5 and 12, 11

⁵ 2 Cor 11, 13b-15

⁶ In the interests of transparency, I should say that I never met Fr Maciel in person, and have no reason at all to think that, had I met him, I would have been immune to the charisma which he evidently possessed.

something that he tells us about, where he is excitable and pointing something out; and what I would call a “background” element, where he appears to be quite serenely taking something for granted as part of whatever he’s talking about. The “background” element is in a sense more difficult to bring into evidence, because it is not immediately obvious what in the background “is just there”, and what, if interrogated intelligently, is pointing towards the foreground. At a crime scene, the victim’s body, the blood spatter and the bullet marks are very much in the foreground. While the question of the temperature of the room, whether the window was open, whether the chairs are arranged in a particular way, whether the famous dog in the Sherlock Holmes story barked in the night, are all “background” questions. They may be things that “just were that way”. Or, if properly interpreted they may give a quite different reading of “what went down” in the foreground than the one which appears obvious at first sight.

So I’ve chosen to take two passages from the same text – in this case, the Epistle to the Philippians, to see if by aligning something that Paul is bearing witness to in an explicit, foreground way, with something that is closer to being taken for granted by him, we can get a better sense of the shape of the happening which had come upon him, and which he was both relating, bearing witness to, and allowing to be seen merely by being who he was, when he was. The two passages in question are, for an example of excited, foreground Paul, Philippians 3,1-11, and for an example of serene, something-apparently-taken-for-granted Paul, the text often referred to as the pre-Pauline hymn, Philippians 2, 5-11. In the former, with that awareness of the dangerousness of what he is doing that is his hallmark, Paul is using his own case to point out the depth of the upset to anyone’s former belonging which is caused by Jesus. In the latter, he is using something he had received from others who shared, at least in part, and maybe to a very great extent, elements of his former belonging. This seemed to him to be such a paradigmatically good way of describing what Jesus had been about that he is able to use it wholeheartedly as shared background to a particular understanding of what living together in the midst of conflict might look like.

Let me start with the background material, and in particular with the pre-Pauline hymn, to see if we can get from it a sense of the shape of the happening which then aligns with the excited Paul of Chapter 3. So verse 5:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

Paul is urging something on his listeners that depends on their recognising and accepting as valid something which he shares with them, to wit: a particular account of who Christ Jesus was.

...(W)ho, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father⁷.

Here we are plunged straight into background elements from the “crime scene” which might benefit from a certain sort of reconstruction, one I will attempt to provide by reference to the ancient rite of the Atonement whose structure seems to be at work in this hymn.

Let me attempt to provide a “working model” of this ancient priestly rite, whose presence is available, but downplayed, in the Scriptures⁸. The rite depended on there being both an absolute unity, and yet a distinction between El Elyon, or El, the Almighty, the Invisible, the One God of whom no image could be made, and YHWH, referred to as the Lord. YHWH did have a form, could turn up in the Garden of Eden, or appear as three angels to Abraham, or in a multiplicity of shapes, genders, and forms in Ezekiel. Central to the annual rite of Atonement was the notion that when, after the appropriate sacrifices of purification, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, all clad in white, he would become one with the visible form of YHWH. Then he would come out through the veil to offer the sacrifice. In the symbolism of the Temple the Holy of Holies represented where God dwelt, outside all material things. Moving outwards from this centre, then, the veil of the Temple was the beginning of created matter, whose different elements were symbolized outside the veil. So the High Priest coming out through the veil was the sign that the Creator of all things was coming into Creation to bless and renew it and atone for the sins of the people. This “coming into creation” was symbolized by the High Priest being immediately clothed by the other priests in a robe made of the same material as the Temple Veil when he

⁷ Phil 2, 5-11

⁸ Here and over the next pages I am greatly indebted to Margaret Barker, and particularly her books *The Great High Priest* (London 2003) and *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London 2007) pp 136-7, 150-2 .

came out of the Holy of Holies through the veil into the sanctuary. The point was that the in-principle Immaterial and Invisible One had become visible and material and was making the whole of creation glorious from within, as it were.

The High Priest would then go up to the Altar of Sacrifice where the portions of the lamb which had been slaughtered as YHWH and whose blood had been sprinkled on the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies, had been divided. The other priests would solemnly gnaw the entrails, “the Lord’s portion”, sprinkled with vinegar. They would also sprinkle further blood over the Temple and possibly the people. At some stage another, identical, goat or lamb (this is the animal which since Tyndale’s translation of the Bible the English language has referred to as the Scapegoat, the one that got to play the role of Azazel) would have the transgressions of the people laid on it by the High Priest, and it would be driven outside the city. At the conclusion of the rite, the High Priest, resplendent in the Tiara bearing The Name, his white tunic (indicating the angelic status of one who had become a localized instantiation of YHWH) covered by the Priestly robe (indicating YHWH’s emergence into Creation), would pronounce or ululate The Name as a blessing over the people. He was the only person who could pronounce The Name, on this one occasion in the year, while the people bowed down and worshipped the Name who was temporarily im-personated in their midst by the High Priest.

Apart from very many usually rather subtle references to this rite in the Gospels, there are two quite striking New Testament passages which show how central this rite was to understanding what Jesus was really all about. One is the passage at which we are looking, the pre-Pauline hymn found in Philippians, and the other, which has the advantage for us of also not being by St Paul, is to be found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, 5, 5-10. I have put the passages together, side by side on the same sheet as an appendix⁹ so that you can see for yourselves how similar their structure is.

In both cases, first there is the non-appropriative nature of what Christ was about in his relationship with God; then there is the human life story of how he acted that out – in other words, how God’s project became a historical achievement in his person; then there is the result for all of us of this historical acting out. Whereas at first glance the Philippians passage seems to have no priestly language, the Hebrews passage provides the priestly elements which makes the flow of the story comprehensible, and enables us to supply the allusions in the Philippians passage with more confidence. So now I would like to turn to a

⁹ cf. Appendix 1

detailed reading of Philippians 2, 5-11. This is my “background passage”, and my examination of it is the forensic equivalent of asking: are certain features of a crime scene – muddy shoes, a closed window – just things that happen to be there, and of no real significance? Or are they things whose “being taken for granted” points us towards a richer sense of what is going on in the “foreground passage”, Philippians 3, 1-17, where Paul puts himself into evidence?

Let us start with the strange word “form” which seems to be significant, since it is repeated. But let us be aware that our English translation misleads, for we get “form of God” “form of a slave” “human likeness” and “human form”, where the Greek only has the same word for the first two, and a significantly different word for the fourth. I wonder whether these words concerning “form” might not have had fairly technical meanings.

How about if the first word “form” corresponds to the Hebrew word תְּמוּנָה, - temunah - a rather rare and contested word when it came to God? For there were some parts of the Scriptures which attest to God having a תְּמוּנָה, while others insist that God does not. To make a long story short, the Deuteronomistic tradition is keen to emphasize that God could only be heard on Sinai, no form could be perceived, where other traditions in the Scriptures have no problem referring to God as having a form that can be perceived. Within this contested world, Christianity makes a quite specific option: God has a temunah, and the temunah can in principle be seen, and the historical person Jesus of Nazareth was that temunah¹⁰. This is why, in St Luke’s Gospel, at the scene of the Transfiguration¹¹, the text tells us that Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep, “and when they wakened they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him”. St Luke is alluding to Psalm 17,15 which says “In righteousness I will behold your visage and when I awake I will behold the vision of your glory”, where the Hebrew word here translated as “vision of your glory” is תְּמוּנַתְּךָ. This is Luke’s way of indicating that it was YHWH that the disciples were seeing alongside Moses and Elijah.

So El is invisible but YHWH is the “form” of El, and YHWH does not grasp on to the fact that YHWH is equal to El, but empties himself into the form of a servant. “Servant” was an often used-term to refer to a Priest, or High Priest, a reading which is legitimized by the way in which the parallel Hebrews passage makes this quite explicit: it names Melchizedek, the definitive High Priest. For “form” of a servant my guess is that the underlying Hebrew would have been דְּמוּת - demut (the modern Hebrew New Testament translates it as such, both here and,

¹⁰ cf John 1, 14

¹¹ Luke 9, 32

alas, in the previous instance, where I have posited *temunah*). *Demut* means “form” understood in the dynamic sense of the “plan of action”, the “reality that “in-forms” something that is going to be unfolded”.

This priestly-servantlike plan of action began to enter the material realm by Jesus being born in “human likeness”. Here my guess at the underlying Hebrew is that it would have been מְרֵאָה - *mareh* – likeness, appearance, but not in the way we often take appearance as meaning some sort of disguise or deception: “The Comtesse de Folleville attended the Ball in the likeness of the Marquise de Maintenant, fooling all present, but of course the real Marquise was in Nevers, robbing the safe of the Duc d’Ailleurs”. No, here the word likeness means something much closer to “real instantiation of a project”.

The next phrase, which once again is monotonously rendered in English as “form” is the much more beautiful word σχήματι in Greek. That this word means “outward appearance” and its allusion is to being decked out in clothes appears much better in the Latin Vulgate, where St Jerome translates “habitu inventus ut homo”. The word “habitu” gives us our English word “habit” meaning “religious form of clothing”. The underlying allusion seems to be to the moment that the High Priest came through the veil from the Holy of Holies into the material world, and was decked out in the “glorious robe of superb perfection¹²”, so that from then on it would be YHWH, in the person of the High Priest, made visible in materiality, who would go up to the Altar of Sacrifice to make the offering of the lamb before pronouncing the Name.

The hymn in Philippians, is of course relating all of this to Jesus’ life: especially his road from the Mount of Transfiguration to the Garden of Gethsemani and then to Calvary. Thus the death on the Cross is seen as being in reality that for which the Temple Rite had been a mere dress rehearsal. And, entirely in line with this imagery, Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension, his “anastasis” is read in this hymn as the successful conclusion of the rite, where, in the setting of the Temple Court, the High Priest “became” the Name, and was worshipped as such by all present. Only here, it is not a rite, but the real thing, and the power of the allusion is that God, El Elyon, is giving to Jesus the Name that is above every other name – in other words YHWH. So from now on the artist formerly known as YHWH is to be known by the name Jesus. Because Jesus has successfully and completely instantiated YHWH in materiality and history, such that Creation has now been definitively altered from within. The result is that, whereas in the rite of Atonement every knee would bow down in worship at the pronouncing of the

¹² See the account of this in Sirach 50

Name, and whereas in the Prophet Isaiah it is to YHWH that every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear¹³, it is now established that Jesus the Anointed One is YHWH to the glory of El Elyon, or “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” as our accustomed translation reads.

It appears, then, that Paul is urging the recipients of his letter, who find themselves in conflict with those who frighten them, those who do not accept that Jesus is the Christ, that in the midst of the conflict they are to act out the same priestly pattern which we have just seen illustrated, and with which they would have been familiar, giving themselves without fear or self-aggrandizement towards the altar of sacrifice just as Jesus did on his way to being given the Name.

That this is a fair reading is suggested by the verse following this hymn in which Paul draws the conclusion he wants to bring out of it¹⁴:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

In other words, he is *not* asking them to obey *him*. He is urging them to continue in that kind of arduous listening to the Father which characterized Jesus’ path to Jerusalem, since that is what the Spirit produces in them, regardless of who is around to tell them what to do.

When he urges them to work out their salvation “with fear and trembling”, I wonder whether this isn’t a reference to Psalm 2, 11 which was clearly of enormous importance to the early Christians, since in it “The Lord and his Anointed” appear. The Lord sets his king on Zion his holy hill, and the decree of the Lord is announced “You are my son, today I have begotten you”, exactly the quote we saw in the Hebrews passage concerning Melchisedek which I hope to have shown to be parallel to our hymn. When the kingdom of this son has been established, the kings and rulers of the earth are urged to “*serve the Lord with fear and trembling*” lest they be destroyed. Paul has just explained to his listeners that those who are ranged against them will be destroyed, so it is natural that he points to his listeners as being those who job it is to serve the Lord with fear and trembling. In other words, he is taking for granted that Jesus fulfilled this psalm,

¹³ Isaiah 45, 23

¹⁴ Phil 2, 12

and therefore that this psalm is useful evidence for the consequences of what Jesus' fulfilment meant.

This priestly language continues when Paul urges his listeners to be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish”¹⁵, where the words involved often had a liturgical sense, especially the word ἄμωμα which referred to the sort of animals proper to sacrifice, and how the priests should be in order to be fit for sacrifice. The irony is that these words, laden with considerable cultic weight, are henceforth going to be bereft of cultic meaning, since the real sacrifice by the real High Priest turned out to have taken place firmly outside cultic bounds, and the Real Temple turns out to be one made out of living human bodies which are learning to relate together and be mutually sustaining in an entirely new way.

Just in case further evidence is needed that this priestly, liturgical thinking underlies what Paul is talking about here, then note how he ends this phase of his letter with a reference to his own circumstance, running the risk of execution, and the tribulations of his listeners, in the following phrase¹⁶:

But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.

There is something quite casual about this way in which he refers to his possible execution as just one of the liturgical elements of the “rite” which consists in the celebratory self-giving kenotic priestly living out of faith in the midst of conflict which is how he sees the Philippians as being called to live.

Well, I ask you now to stand back a little from this. What I have offered is a hypothetical reconstruction of why the apparently ordinary furniture in the room of the crime scene might matter more than it seems. Whether the window was open or closed – or what is going on with the word “form” - does make a difference to how we perceive the body and the bullets. And the muddy shoes, or the fact that “being decked out” and “receiving the Name” have quite technical resonances, may give us a better picture of what St Paul is bearing witness to as the Real Thing. My suggestion is that Paul takes for granted, and peppers his writing with allusions to, a fairly specific understanding of how Jesus was YHWH, an understanding which presupposed a rigorous, and no doubt a contested, reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, one he expected his listeners to have

¹⁵ Phil 2, 15

¹⁶ Phil 2, 17

heard before and to have accepted in broad outline. My further suggestion is that if we don't take on board this background element in which Jesus *fulfilled* something, we are not going to get an accurate picture of the foreground in which Jesus upsets, or *disturbs* something.

So to the foreground, and Chapter 3¹⁷:

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!

Paul begins by urging his audience to rejoice – to continue this celebratory living out of their sacrificial role. He then tells them that, for the sake of their safety he is going to repeat something that he's told them before, and gives them a triple warning: watch out for the dogs, the workers of evil, and the mutilators. In other words, Paul is well aware of the dangerous, contested nature of goodness and he takes very seriously his task of allowing his listeners to be established in something trustworthy.

Now, and here is where I would ask us to remember that we are frauds listening to the Real Thing, who are these dogs, workers of evil, and mutilators? The mutilators are comparatively easy to identify, since Paul then talks about “the true circumcision” which needs no fleshly mark. So the “mutilators” probably do not include all those who perform some cutting operation on someone's body – for instance, a surgeon amputating a gangrenous limb. Rather they are those who insist that goodness needs the particular fleshly mark “circumcision” to make one an insider. But who are the dogs? Clearly a literalist reading is wrong: it can scarcely be the four-legged, tail-wagging *canis lupus familiaris* that Paul is warning against. So we are left with some sort of slang, one with which Paul's first listeners would be familiar, for he is repeating something they have heard from him before. And the problem with any sort of slang is that it is very difficult to translate, very context-dependent, and has very slippery resonances. Think of how many meanings the modern word “bitch” has, and what sort of sensitivity you need to work out the resonances of what is being said by whom about whom. Might these “dogs” be “male temple prostitutes”, which would pick up the slang term used in Deuteronomy 23, 18 for that profession? If so, it would be odd, since why, in the conflict in which the Philippians found themselves would they need a repeated warning against such an obvious and easily identifiable “they”?

¹⁷ Phil 3, 1-2

Might the term, thinking laterally, refer to gay priests like myself, whose way of being could be seen to be making a mockery of any sort of goodness we might teach? I would certainly be failing to stand in the presence of the Real Thing with fear and trembling if I were not to allow myself to be interrogated by a possibility that has recently been emphasized by some of the “pillars” of my Church. I am, after all, standing alongside Fr Maciel as part of the “we” who are being warned about something.

Might these “dogs” refer to something that Paul has already taught the Philippians about, conceivably those who have become the contemporary moral equivalent of temple prostitutes, people who make a living from religious exchange, or are the “kept boys” of the religious establishment, keeping alive a fake goodness and receiving well for it? In other words, is his warning not about something “obviously bad” but about a false sort of goodness? And how are “we” implicated in that? How is the warning to be heard by us contemporary frauds? The same question arises with his phrase “workers of evil”. Does this mean literally, and quite simply, those who do evil things, another rather contentless, scattershot “they”? In which case, again, why alone should this phrase be literal, when the first one can’t be, and the third clearly has a particular association? Might “workers of evil” not be an “insider’s” allusion to a Pauline teaching about those whose insistent good works mask a rapacious pattern of desire, a denigration of others and a flattering self-regard. In other words, a different sort of “false goodness”.

However we read “workers of evil”, the warning about “mutilators” is clearly one about false goodness, since Paul goes on to say

For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh¹⁸

In other words: there is a real form of goodness to which this circumcision business pointed. This goodness is found in a new sort of worship of God which is given to flow in people by the Spirit, which glories in “The Name” – Anointed Priestly Jesus – and which is utterly aware that once you have perceived the love which is shown by YHWH’s presence as forgiving victim (Anointed Priestly Jesus as Crucified) in our midst, it is your growing confidence in that love for you, and not in anything you do, or have been, or have belonged to, which is what matters.

¹⁸ Phil 3, 3

...even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless¹⁹.

So here is what Paul is pointing towards as the Real Thing: one of the signs of the Real Thing being present is that *none* of the usual forms of religious or moral safety apply. He, Paul had every reason to think that he was safely involved in the worship of the Real Thing – he was a circumcised Hebrew with a genuine lineage, a devout practitioner of Torah according to one of the highly regarded schools, blameless in his observance of the mitzvot, and fully involved from his heart in the struggle against those who were misleading his people.

Yet, when YHWH who he thought he had been worshipping revealed himself to him as “YHWH Jesus whom you are persecuting²⁰” he came to see that in the eyes of the Anointed One, all of these safe forms of goodness had actually been a hindrance to him. In the light of the discovery that his system of goodness had killed Jesus, counting God as a transgressor, he came to see that his wholehearted complicity in the system of goodness was something much more like being a fraud than it was like being a good person, and that in order to receive the goodness to which the system pointed, he had to let go of the system completely.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.²¹

Paul does not say that he was a fraud like Fr Maciel was a fraud – someone who engaged in a form of deception for so long that it is quite possible that by the end he no longer knew that he was being deceptive. Paul’s false goodness was in a sense even more dangerous through being completely whole-hearted, hence the

¹⁹ Phil 3, 4-6

²⁰ Acts 9, 5

²¹ Phil 3, 7-9

depth and drama of the drastic nature of the change-around which the Real Thing produced in him.

He had to lose “goodness”, belonging, worth, reputation, everything which was something he had held; in order, as he says in the next verses, to find himself *being held* by someone: trusting someone else to do something that includes you, taking you somewhere else. Identity, belonging, goodness, safety, are not things we can hold onto from our past. They are all things that come down to us and draw us on from a future which has already started to manifest in us – it is already something we have attained through our being held, but attained as something towards which we are marching in our creative living out:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.²²

Our human lives in history are becoming the priestly robe of flesh that Jesus is putting on as he fulfils Creation.

This involves sharing Jesus’ kenotic living out, being prepared for a death like his, so as to share its result. So Paul goes back over the same material for his listeners as he had set out in the hymn, but in a dangerous first person narrative. And here I would like to hypothesize something which seems to me to be central to its dangerous, precarious contingent nature, which I can mention here, but will have to develop at greater length elsewhere. That is the extent to which the dangerous, precarious, contingent nature of what Paul is pointing to is related to the Creator. He had discovered not merely that his co-religionists had contributed to the execution of an innocent man, not merely that he had now discovered that this innocent man had had a higher teaching whose disciple he had now become. But that this falsely executed innocent man with a higher teaching had in fact been the culmination of YHWH’s self-instantiation in our midst, making of a human lynch death the ultimate priestly sacrifice of God towards us, by which

²² Phil 3, 10-16

Creation could be opened up for ever, no longer bowed down to vanity and futility.

This for me is part of the excitement of re-discovering Paul in a Catholic, ecclesial reading. The word “God” for too long has been a cold word describing a powerful object. “Creation” has for too long been a serious, stable, safe background on which a heavy human morality can be erected, and against which self-regarding approval can be granted. What Jesus did has for too long been described in emotionally blackmailing terms, pushing people into contorted forms of asceticism and fake goodness. But now we can begin to get a sense, absolutely in line with the most authentic Hebrew excitement about God, that it is about the Creator, and the joy of the worship of the Creator that we are talking. And that when Paul talks about what Jesus did, he is talking about the impact of the Creator coming into creation and opening it up definitively.

The dangerousness, the precariousness and the contingency are the signs of the ultimate safety – the Creator bringing people out of fraudulent attachment to fake and vain being, and into a sure and imperishable goodness. When in first Corinthians²³ Paul refers to the Crucified Anointed one as “the Power of God and the Wisdom of God” he is not in the first place engaging in irony or paradox. He is referring quite literally to the power of the Creator and to the Creator’s deliberate way of orchestrating creation into being. It is from that fulfilment, that stability and that security that all forms of goodness, wisdom, and belonging appear ironic. Anything less adventurous than the contingency and precariousness of Creation is a fake form of goodness, a trying to close things down, an involvement in futility and vanity. I wonder whether what we now call “apocalyptic” isn’t the tribute paid by wrath to the emergence amidst us frightened frauds of the safety and solidity of the “Τετέλεσται²⁴” of Creation.

So, how do we recidivist dogs, evil doers, and mutilators plan to hear Paul’s warning words? By making ourselves judges over others we consider more fraudulent than ourselves, or by sitting alongside our brother frauds and working out with their help, and with fear and trembling, what it looks like to be hoiked off into the new Creation?

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²³ 1 Cor 1, 24

²⁴ John 19, 30

Appendix I

Hebrews 5,5-11 NRSV

5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; 6 as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;

9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Philippians 2, 5b-11 NRSV

...Christ Jesus 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2, 5-11 NA27 Greek Text

⁵ τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

⁶ ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ,

⁷ ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος·

καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

⁸ ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπῆκοος μέγρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.

⁹ διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα,

¹⁰ ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ πᾶν γόνυ κάμψη ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων

¹¹ καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς.