

The Portal and the Half-Way House: Spacious imagination and aristocratic belonging

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This is session 10, of the twelve session *Forgiving Victim* Course, which will be released in its entirety in both text and video in 2012.

Introduction

If you're anything like me, you have been wondering, as we have advanced in our sessions, how what we've been looking at bears any relation at all to "life in the Church" as we know it. The forms of institutional life called "Church" with which we are familiar either from personal experience or by hearsay seem far removed from what I have been trying to open up for you: how the crucified and risen Jesus interacts with his disciples in such a way as to induct us into a new people no longer run by fear of death. I know it's a tall order, but here I'm going to try and see if we can navigate our way into glimpsing these apparently removed realities as having something to do with each other after all.

A little note of disclosure: when I talk about Church, my first point of reference is the Church of which I am a member, the Catholic Church, that grouping of baptised Christians whose communion with each other includes, and is in some sense guaranteed by, the successor of Peter. However, by no means does the word "Church" have the same resonances for all of you. So for those of you for whom the word has different associations, please see whether you can find useful analogies between what I say here and your own experience of being able, or unable, to participate in some form of Christian group belonging.

You will probably have heard many different ways of talking about what "the Church" is, many of them quite frightening (in just the same way that many ways of talking about the Bible are frightening). You get the impression that you are hearing a discourse about power, or a discourse emerging from ownership of "position", or a justification and defense of traditional and historical prerogatives.

It is not necessarily the clerical caste in the Church who talk in these ways, though we are particularly susceptible to it. Often enough lay people, politicians and others, will also wield “The Church” as a weapon in cultural wars in much the same way as others wield “The Bible”. Indeed typically, while the default Protestant error is “Bibliolatry” – making an idol of the Bible, – the default Catholic error is “Ecclesiolatry” – making an idol of the Church. The idol worship to which each of our groups is prone is slightly culturally different, even if the underlying pattern is the same.

When we worship an idol, our love, which is in principle a good thing, is trapped into grasping onto something made in our own image. This “something”, which we of course do not perceive as an idol, then becomes the repository for all the security and certainty which we idolaters need in order to survive in the world. We are unaware that the tighter we grasp it, the more insecure and uncertain we in fact become, and the more we empty the object which we idolize of any potential for truth and meaning. And of course because love is in principle a good thing, for us to get untangled from its distorted form is very painful. Nevertheless, against any tendency we might have to blame the idol for being an idol, it is really the pattern of desire in us, the grasping, that is the problem, not the object. For just as the Bible is not an act of communication that we can lay hold of, but the written monuments to an act of communication that takes hold of us, so the Church is not an object that we can grasp, but a sign of our being grasped and held; not something that any of us owns, but the first hints, difficult to perceive, of Another’s ownership of us.

In this session, then, rather than attempting to paint you a picture of the Church as an object, I am going to try something rather more difficult, which is to speak tentatively from within a process of letting go of idolatry. Starting not with some fantasy Church that exists only in textbooks, but assuming that you stand, as I do, within range of the ordinary, humdrum reality of local parishes, sacraments, catechists, liturgies, families, prayers, youth groups, school finance discussions, Bishops, Papal trips, hospitals, architecture, discussions about the admission and formation of clergy, or about the presence or absence of clergy in your local community.

In addition to these realities, which can vary from the banal to the occasionally heroic, we have experience of a far more dire set of resonances of “Church”. The ones most obvious to us currently are those deriving from the great clerical sex-abuse cover-up. But each generation in each part of the world may have some comparable memories: of Vichy Bishops giving Hitler salutes, of Argentine Bishops backing up torturers, of a Venezuelan hierarch claiming that a series of devastating floods was God’s punishment on the people for voting in a way of which he disapproved, of a Romanian Patriarch blessing Communist guns, of silver-tongued pastors demonising oponents and rolling in cash while living double lives, of closeted gay clergy, many with mitres, emotionally blackmailing each other into supporting mendacious attacks on the civil rights of their openly gay brothers and sisters, of rank institutional misogyny and the cheap political use of threatened excommunication.

This is, sadly, by no means an exhaustive list. Nevertheless I take it that these are the kind of things which colour our experience of Church. However, I’m not going to be talking directly about them but instead will be seeking to take further the shifts in relationship, in imagination, in wanting, and in belonging that I’ve been introducing to you so far in these sessions. I’m very keen *not* to be trying to tell you to what institutions you must belong in order to be “good”. Nor even to try to tell you how I think the visible institutions which we already have should be run or structured, or to offer a critique of them. I take their presence, and their need to be seriously reformed, for granted, but think that what is really important is not what *they* do or say, but how *we* learn to get unhooked, in their midst, and even occasionally with their help, from being run by the “social other” and are empowered instead to be run by the “Other other”. In other words, I want to offer you, by means of some images, a way in to a non-idolatrous living of Church, one characterized by a spacious imagination and a complete lack of rivalry in the belonging.

1. The restaurant

No images are entirely reliable as guides to a reality, but I hope you will allow yourself to inhabit each of the images I’m going to propose to you for long enough to see where it might be useful. The first image I’m going to ask you to

dwell on, or in, is that of a Really Classy Restaurant. And you are a Really Aristocratic Guest at this Restaurant. You've been invited to it for a magnificent meal, one for which the taste buds even of a Real Aristo like yourself aren't fully prepared, so that the evening will be a learning experience as well as a tasting one.

You have heard of the chef, though no one has seen him since shortly after the inauguration of the restaurant. It may even be the case, as was suggested by the brilliant detectives from Pixar in their 2007 exposé *Ratatouille*, that the Master Chef is in fact a rat. Certainly the creativity that comes from occupying a place of shame with generosity was beautifully captured in their account of a “repugnant other” as the driving force behind the banquet. In any case, the chef is busy in the kitchen, behind those swing doors, the sort that waiters can push through while balancing improbable numbers of trays.

You have been invited for two reasons, which are really one: because the Chef likes you, and because he wants to feed you. In fact, this is the Chef's way of showing that he delights in you: by feeding you of his very best in such a way that makes you even more aware of how aristocratic, privileged, and fortunate you are. The food is a sign of his delighting in you, and at the same time a nourishment that will put you into a rollicking good humour. Thus it will both enable you to think more imaginatively, and give you the energy to realise whatever it is that your growing good humour suggests that you would really like to accomplish.

Here, as in every classy restaurant, there are waiters and sommeliers whose job it is to scurry back and forth between the kitchen, the cellar and the tables bringing you menus, suggestions, cutlery, napkins, and eventually food and drink to suit you. Except that in this restaurant something is out of synch. The waiters are suffering from a serious problem of perspective. They seem to think that the restaurant is all about them, and this of course introduces an element of farce into the proceedings. I mean, how many of us go to a restaurant because of the waiters?

Nevertheless, in this restaurant, at the same time as the chef is hard at work

preparing the food, and the aristocratic guests are beginning to relax into knowing how aristocratic they are at the tables, the waiters, whose task it is to serve the chef by serving those whom the chef wants to nourish, are engaged in a constant series of drama-queen hissy fits. Sometimes it is about which one is the Maitre'D, or whether there ought to be a Maitre'D at all. Then there are rows about the gender, the marital status, and (Dear Lord!) even the sexual orientation of the waiters. Then there are endless snits about who has a nicer uniform, who is promoting whose friends, who has been insufficiently attentive to whose dignity and so forth. Furthermore, the waiters seem to have picked up, through their forays into the kitchen, that they are somehow emanations of the chef, but know better than the chef who the guests are, and what is good for them. The result is that they are inclined to offer the guests very eccentric accounts of the menu, ones strongly biased to what is less effort for themselves. They have a tendency to filter the very wide list of "specials" into something much narrower, which boosts their own understanding of what the restaurant is about and their place in it. They also come up with strange translations of the menu that make the food sound rather unpalatable.

Sometimes, amidst much rolling of the eye-balls, they make it quite clear that they dislike some of the guests, don't think they should be in the restaurant. They refuse to serve them, or serve them tiny portions, or portions in which they have spat *en route* to the table. Miraculously they can't actually poison the food. Nevertheless they can so poison the atmosphere as to make even the hardest guest wonder whether the food isn't poisoned also. Sometimes they withhold bits of cutlery out of spite, while convincing themselves that it's for the guests own good. All in all, they seem entirely run by their own concerns, driven by what's going on in their own group dynamic. The chef's guests are, from the waiters' point of view, incidental extras, a backdrop to their own addictive soap-opera.

Well, what a show! Just as well that the guests are Really Very Aristocratic. If the guests weren't very aristocratic, they might be inclined to go into rivalry with the waiters, to start protesting, to be dragged into the waiters' internal rows. They might completely lose perspective, and start being sucked into the waiters' delusion that the point of guests being at the restaurant is for the benefit of the waiters. Luckily, as I say, the guests are really Very Aristocratic, and they know

that they have been invited by a Very Aristocratic Chef, the very source of Aristocracy. So, being Aristocratic, they are able to chortle with amusement at the goings-on among the hired-help: “Ah well, it’s awfully difficult to get good service nowadays”! “Downstairs are playing up again”. And rather than being dismayed about the inability of the servants to get their act together, the Aristocratic guests are relaxed about how the Aristocratic Chef is in fact going about the whole thing in an unflummoxed way, and will continuously smuggle delicious food out to the guests, in clever disguises so that the waiters don’t notice it, by means of non-uniformed employees whose existence the waiters might well refuse to acknowledge if they could even perceive them.

Isn’t it lucky, as I say, that the guests are very aristocratic, so aristocratic in fact that they are not at all sucked into the waiters’ soap-opera! They can be mildly amused by the goings on, when they notice them, but not at all obsessive, let alone contemptuous. A real Aristo would never be contemptuous of servants, not being in rivalry with them, but might actually be very fond of them, grateful for their being there at all, tolerant of their foibles, able to see the hilarity of the farce without losing the ability to be pained by its pathos. Having no horse in the race of her servants’ rows, a real Aristo might even be able to offer occasional clear-sighted advice to this or that waiter. However she wouldn’t at all let Downstairs’ dramas occupy too much of Upstairs’ time or attention, which are very properly dedicated to much more enjoyable, creative and leisurely purposes.

Well, I hope the main purpose of the image is clear. I’ve introduced it in order to facilitate a shift of perspective. Most discussions of what is meant by Church emanate from a waiterly perspective and assume that the Restaurant has much more to do with the waiters than it has. But in fact Church is really all about the Chef making something available for increasingly aristocratic guests, and what the guests then make of the energy they are thereby given. So I’m going to concentrate on these two poles of the image: what’s in the kitchen and what it’s like to be at the Table. We will, eventually, have a brief look at the role of the waiters in all this, but initially I want to get you used to the idea that the waiters (of which I am one) have a proper and genuine role whose perfection in acting out coincides with our near invisibility. Every restaurant has waiters, but no good restaurant is really about the waiters. The very best waiter is the one whose

advice, elegance, speed and availability for service enhances your experience of the banquet which the Chef has prepared for you, without ever drawing attention to himself.

2. The half-way house

The next image that I'm going to ask you to inhabit, as we imagine our way through some more shifts of perspective, is that of the Half-Way House. In some countries, when people are released from prison after serving long terms, they are not sent straight back to the communities from which they came. Rather, our governments have so disposed it that they spend a period in a half-way house. There they become accustomed to the freedom that is coming upon them, and begin to re-acquire habits of socialisation, self-reliance and employability. Habits which they may have had before being sent to prison, but which are likely to have been severely atrophied by their period of institutionalisation. Many convicts become so accustomed to prison life that, as their sentences come to an end, they experience considerable fear as to whether they will be able to survive on the outside. A number re-offend very shortly after release in order to be returned to a security which they are unable to provide for themselves. Hence the value of the half-way house: a period of adjustment to freedom, with some supervision, some conditions, some enforced moments of presence, but also some networks, some guidance as to how to cope with a "world out there" which may have altered almost beyond recognition in the fifteen or twenty years since the ex-con was last a regular citizen.

Of course, the very fact that half-way houses exist at all is a sign that those "on the outside" – the authorities and the ordinary citizens of civil society – consider that there are certain normal, decent values, ways of behaving, habits, abilities to care for oneself and one's family, most of which are out of range of those in prison. There are patterns of courtship, mating, procreating and educating, ways to conduct commerce and leisure, all of which are good things in themselves, part of what being a viable free adult is all about. It is because these habits and practices exist so massively "on the outside", however flawed and fragile their living out, that those who are used to them recognise that enforced incarceration in total institutions defined by gender over time has deleterious consequences for

personal viability. Long term imprisonment, more than an extended temporary deprivation of liberty, is an enforced re-socialization into a total, but seriously diminished, form of human culture.

It is because those on the outside share among themselves significant elements of an understanding of what is sane and healthy that they know that convicts, who may have had a somewhat weak hold on normal and healthy social habits and practices in the first place, *need help* in being able to move from the diminished and vitiated forms of living together which are cultivated in prison, towards the richer and more open forms which go along with freedom, family, regular employment, creativity and so on.

In other words, however little an ex-con who is coming out of a total institution after, say, twenty years, may understand of what it's going to take for him to be successfully re-socialized into the practices and forms of life "on the outside"; however little he may genuinely comprehend quite what a distance he will have to travel before being viable, it is people from those "outside" forms of life who "reach down" as it were, and set up a half-way house, with accompanying social workers, probation officers, and employment counsellors, among others, so as to facilitate the draw of the ex-con back into less frightened, more healthy and more productive patterns of getting on with life.

I'd like to explore some ways in which the image of the half-way house can help us re-imagine what it is and isn't like living with Church. First some similarities. A central one, perhaps, is that *the Church, like the half-way house, is not an end in itself*. No one thinks that the chief joy of coming out of prison is that you get to go to a half-way house. The half-way house only has existence at all as a staging post, something which has enough elements in common with the sort of life that the prisoner is leaving behind that she not be completely drowned in her own inability to cope with returning to freedom. Nevertheless its whole purpose is to prepare people for freedom, a way of life which has very little in common with what they are used to. This new way of life is one where they will be relied on to be creative, responsible, imaginative, full of initiative, perseverance and so on. In other words, the half-way house exists only as a means at the service of something much greater than itself: forms of social flourishing and togetherness

which are initially out of reach of the ex-con. For those who have “come through the system” the idea is that after a time, they become viable in entirely new fields. Then they will have, in the best of cases, only a loose affiliation with the half-way house, an entirely voluntary desire to be associated with it, gratitude for the help derived from their association with it, and a longing to help other ex-cons who are coming through.

Another point of similarity with Church is that the very existence of the half-way house is a firm sign of a benevolent intention implanted by “outside”. “Outside” knows what it is like to live well, and knows that those who currently don’t know how to do so, owing to their time in prison, are in principle capable of living well and can be nudged beyond their current patterns of desire. The quality of the bricks and mortar of the half-way house, and even the competence of the social-workers and probation officers, are secondary to the fact that these are genuine signs, more or less effective signs, of what is a real instantiated project, more or less effectively instantiated, a project which is the fruit of a pattern of desire, a draw, from an outside which knows that there is a way, an arduous way to be sure, of people moving from their prison socialisation to their free socialisation. *The half-way house, like the Church, is an effective sign of a draw from beyond itself* that is empowering its residents into becoming creators of society.

A third similarity between Church and the half-way house might be that neither is concerned with producing pre-determined results. A half-way house is not designed to train ex-cons specifically to be computer programmers, or beauticians, landscape-gardeners or air-traffic controllers, though any half-way house would be delighted if its former residents were to achieve stable careers in any of those fields. Its purpose is relational, enabling an arduous change in the ex-con’s pattern of desire, imagination, capacity for socialization, self-esteem, such that they are no longer constantly liable to trip themselves, and others, up, but are able to imagine some good, one that is in some way matched to the talents and idiosyncracies that they are coming to discover as their own, a good that they are increasingly equipped to realise as their talents are allowed to develop. The hope is that eventually they be empowered and connected in such a way as to turn renewed imagination into recognisable flourishing. The half-way house is a structured space in which people move beyond merely being free *from* something

(enforced confinement) to being free *for* something: constructive and creative involvement with society. Likewise, Church is a structured space in which people move beyond being free from something (being run by death and its fear) to being free for something: constructive and creative involvement in new forms of togetherness and enjoyment.

So: not an end in itself, but an effective sign of a draw from beyond itself, whose hoped-for outcome is free lives run by changed patterns of desire. Well, so far so good. But in fact all of these similarities depend on something which is in evidence when it comes to half-way houses, but not at all in evidence when it comes to Church, and this is the way in which a more or less healthy “outside” society is what people are used to. In our normal countries “Outside” is vastly bigger than “inside”: those who are in prison are, it is to be hoped, a tiny minority of the populace; they are there because of failures to respect the norms of healthy outside life, and their presence there is a more or less long term, but in principle, a temporary, abstraction from where they normally belong. Thus, from the point of view of those in prison the existence of a half-way house is a comparatively banal statement of the values of the wider society, an indication of a continuity between life on the Outside and life on the Inside, along with a helping hand to face the challenges of adapting to a less-structured normalcy. None of those inside a prison deny the existence of an “outside”, even those who will in fact never see it again. So the fact of the existence of a half-way house is not, in itself a very revolutionary or radical statement.

3. The portal

When it comes to seeing the Church as half-way house, however, something much weirder is going on, something requiring a much greater rupture in our imagination. Because the image starts from the recognition that *everyone* is in prison, and *no one* has ever had a previous regular normal life on the outside. In fact, of ourselves, we would not even know that there was such a thing as life on the outside, let alone that it might be available for us, and that we can be, as it were, retro-fitted for it.

And here of course is what is odd: when everyone is in prison, and always has

been, and it is the only reality that everyone knows, then of course it doesn't appear to anyone that they are in prison. What they are is normal, and life just is what it is. Remember how long it took Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show* to learn that there was an "outside" to his "normal" world? It is only when such people receive a communication from someone who is not in prison that they learn that they are in prison. A communication from someone who is entirely outside their social and cultural world: someone who offers signs of being from somewhere else, and of there actually being a somewhere else which is in fact more truly where all those who are in prison are from and for which they are capable of being re-fitted.

Now please notice the shocking quality of the act of communication: the Good News that you needn't be in prison and weren't made for prison inevitably also communicates the beginnings of an awareness that what you regard as normal may more properly be characterised as "being in prison". This awareness, and the new characterisation of your situation which comes with it, an awareness which depends entirely on your taking on board a regard from outside, may be perceived as quite intolerable!

Well this of course is what is central to imagining Church. As humans we were quite literally unable to begin to imagine that there might be such a thing as life not run by death. All of our presuppositions are death-laden ones in ways which we couldn't even recognise as such until something that wasn't part of our culture structured by death unfurled itself in our midst. It was unimaginable that what seemed to us to be simply normal might in fact be a symptom of our having become trapped in something less than ourselves. And yet that is what the entire burden of our *Forgiving Victim* course has been: we are being inducted into becoming able to imagine the deathless one unfurling deathlessness as a human life story in our midst in such a way that we can share it and begin to participate in a deathless sociality as that for which we were really made.

Given this, I hope you can see that whereas an ordinary half-way house is a comparatively banal conduit between two social realities, the unfurling of the beginnings of a deathless sociality and the possibility of our being inducted into it, in the midst of our death-run culture, implies much more of a rupture. A

shuttle docking at the International Space Station to take the astronauts who've been spending a few months there back to Earth is experienced by the astronauts as part of a certain continuity. However a portal from another universe opening itself up over the White House lawn and beginning to communicate with us about taking us into the other universe, asking us to trust that that universe is more fully our home than the one we know, is much more of a shake-up.

Yet this latter picture is the more accurate analogy with Church: a completely unknown social reality has started to instantiate itself in our midst, thus entirely altering our understanding of the social reality which we took for normal. It is one thing to know where you are, and know that there is an elsewhere, and that there is a way to get adapted to life elsewhere. It is quite another when a previously unknown "elsewhere" turns up and is *just there* making elsewhere available to you starting now. Where you are, what you are used to, is now completely and shockingly relativized. So in this way the Church is quite unlike most half-way houses. The very fact of its existence, which is the same as the beginnings of the new form of living together which it contains, is already an irruption of elsewhere. It is a reality-altering statement, or sign, of an unimaginably powerful "just there" alongside, and breaking into, what we had taken for granted as normal.

4. Shifts in perspective

I hope it is by now clear quite how different the same reality can look, depending on where you find yourself as it arrives. Those who share our culture are perfectly at liberty to see it as not a half-way house at all. The portal that has opened up on the lawn does look remarkably like a dead criminal, executed under shameful circumstances. A failure like that scarcely seems like an act of communication, much less an opening into a richer universe that is *just there*, palpitating alongside our own.

For many in our culture the visible elements of the half-way house are merely signs of the strange obsession, or escapism, of some within our culture, pointing to nothing beyond that. The "portal on the lawn" is simply a hologram set up by clever projectors behind the bushes. Such people have no sense of a regard on us

all from an “outside” which knows of a healthier form of human flourishing. It is logical, therefore, that they should have no sense of being trapped on the “inside” of something that is an atrophied or distorted form of being.

Nevertheless, even those of us who are beginning to undergo the draw of the act of communication, to sense it for what it is, we too are almost entirely run by the same patterns of desire and imagination as all the rest of our fellow humans, so it takes some time for our perception of what is going on to shift. Indeed, the first impression that someone would get if they perceive a previously unknown “elsewhere” opening up a portal inside their reality, is not: “Oh, someone’s setting up a half-way house”. The first impression is: “We’re being invaded!”; Then after a time, as what has happened sinks in, the second impression is: “what looked like an invasion is beginning to look more like a prison break-in, of all absurd things”. And it’s worth remembering that this is the sort of imagery which Jesus uses in the New Testament – a thief in the night breaking unexpectedly through a wall into a house. I use the image of “prison break-in”, because as what’s really going on in the “invasion” begins to become clear, it also becomes clear that the “invasion” – an unfriendly term – is in fact an “irruption” – a friendly term – into a reality which seemed normal, but in the light of the irruption is being seen for what it is: a hostile form of existence, a form of prison, an unnecessary confinement.

As time goes on, the perspective shifts again: what looked like a prison break-in has had the effect of producing a gaping hole in the prison fabric, the portal through which “elsewhere” has been unfurled in our midst. So some people, seeing the hole in the fabric of their reality, imagine that “elsewhere” is to be found by going... somewhere else. In other words, that what has been opened up is a form of escape from prison. Not a half-way house, but a hole through which they can climb in order to get somewhere else. For these people there is really no such thing as a half-way house, a process by which they can be drawn into a new socialization. There is simply what they have discovered to be a bad socialization, from which they have been given an exit hatch, without any particular notion of what any good socialization might look like. For such people (and many modern Christians are of this sort), Church may point to a reality “outside”, but it doesn’t contain within itself the beginnings of the reality to

which it is pointing. It is not a portal by which another reality begins to instantiate itself in our midst, but a hole through which we climb into a better place. There is rupture, but no real continuity.

However (and this is where I love the Catholic “thing”), if we stick around with the perception of the prison break-in, and the portal, for long enough, we begin to notice something rather odd: a prison with a hole in it which is just there, and just stays open, isn’t really a prison. A prison with a temporary hole in it, a tunnel made by some escaping prisoners, or by friends of theirs from the outside, becomes an effective prison again the moment its authorities seal the escape route. However, any prison in which there emerges an uncloseable hole ceases to be a prison and becomes a quite different sort of collective. While some in it may prefer the stability and order of life before the hole, and act as though there were no hole in the system, the fact is that the entire system has now been altered. It has become not only possible, but normal, to reconceptualize “inside”: what used to be a closed system which didn’t even know it was closed, turns out instead to be a satellite reality dependent on a huge and massively healthy “outside” whose existence had not previously been suspected.

It is as this perception develops and stabilizes that the image of the “half-way house” comes into its own. The shock of the rupture yields to the realisation of the continuing “just there” of the “elsewhere” that is instantiating itself via the portal in our midst. And with it the realisation of quite what a small satellite our reality is to the “elsewhere” that is beginning to draw us into its orbit. Eventually, along with this there develops the realisation that the portal is habitable, that it is training us to start to be already what we were always meant to be, and didn’t know it. So “Church” can begin to be understood as a quite normal function of the “just there” of the portal, a stable sign of a healthy sociality from beyond which is reaching into our midst in quite regular ways to draw us out of our diminished culture of togetherness marked by death and start to make us viable creators of new, deathless, forms of togetherness.

It is here, alas, that Catholics, of whom I am one, become presumptuous. So sure are we, and rightly so, of the “just there” which is unfurling itself in our midst, so clear to us is it that humans are not really prisoners, yet have all been accidentally

born in and formed by prison, and are now being empowered to be citizens of elsewhere, that we forget that we are, all of us, still, largely formed from within by the pattern of desire which seemed normal in prison. The result is that we play down the rupture which the portal has introduced into our manner of being together, and assume too easily that the stable, regular objectivity of “just there” is like the stable regular objectivity that we knew from prison. And the result is that we are far too often inattentive to the ways in which we are treating as part of the stability and order of “Elsewhere” things which are in fact part of the oppressive, death-ridden order and fake stability enjoined on us by the prison officers and administrators of the system that is passing away.

The challenge is to be sensitive both to the rupture and the continuity simultaneously – and that is a great challenge. Becoming sensitive to this is part of becoming alive to the sheer vivacity and variety, the sense of fun, the desire for our delight, the essential lack of seriousness by which the Other other is inclined to scandalize our narrow little hearts.

5. The Embassy

One further shift in perception tied to my inadequate, ever-shifting, “Half-way house” model of the Church. After a bit, what seems like a Half-Way house morphs into an Embassy. The image is easy to understand. An Embassy is a portal of another country in the midst of our own. We recognise that once a person is through the gates of a country’s embassy, then they are on the sovereign soil of that country, even though the Embassy building be physically located in the midst of one of our cities. That person cannot be hauled out by our own armed forces, as they could be if they were, for instance, a bank robber who had “gone to ground” in a warehouse. Furthermore, the employees of the Embassy are typically citizens of the country whose Embassy it is, and they come among the citizens of our country as the bearers of the values and the interests of their own country. They sign to us by their presence that “elsewhere” is not only geographically removed, but is also in our midst; when they look at us we are being gazed at, from close up, with a regard formed by “elsewhere”. And their gaze, if we are drawn to it, can teach us to look at our own country and values in a quite different light from the ones to which we are accustomed. Their boss is

the Ambassador, but they are all ambassadors in the sense that each one, by being who they are, instantiate the Embassy.

We also use the word “ambassador” in a looser sense. People who have gone through a particular course of training, and become particularly fine examples of what this school, or that apprenticeship, hopes to turn out, are then treated as “ambassadors” – bearers before the public of the values for which the institution in question would like to be recognised. You can imagine then that some, indeed hopefully all, of the residents of a half-way house will eventually be able to be regarded as its “ambassadors” – people who can be seen as its success stories. Not ex-cons who were merely grudgingly re-inserted into “outside” values, but people who have become shining examples of what those outside values are about, and are unashamed of it being known that it was the help they received through the half-way house that equipped them, say, to set up and run a small business, itself employing various other ex-cons.

Well, the oddity of Church is that it is not only the sign of a prison break-in that creates a rupture in the fabric of the system, opening us up to an outside that is “just there”; it is not only an escape tunnel to get outside the system; it is not even only a half-way house, by which ex-cons can be stably and regularly drawn into the forms of socialization which are proper to life on the outside, but it is a portal of “just there” solidly implanted in the territory of here which turns ex-cons round completely. They come to find their real citizenship in the country that is “just there”, and take on board its values in such a way that they are transformed into ambassadors of another kingdom and what it’s about. In other words, the whole point of the portal is not to extract people from prison and send them somewhere else, but to “turn” apparent citizens of one reality into active agents of another. This happens when these people discover their real citizenship in another reality and take that citizenship on board so completely that they can become part of the irruption, the breaking in, the effective instantiation in our midst, of the deathless life that the portal has opened up.

In our session six, when we looked at the Fernando story, we saw how Paul talks about the role of being “ambassador for Christ”, and I suggested that this meant someone who has allowed themselves to be forgiven by the class-fairy who is not

run by the space of shame, and so has themselves become an imitator of the class-fairy, being themselves prepared to occupy the space of shame, fear, and death without being run by it. I hope you can see now how this Embassy might work: part of the work of the portal, its half-way house function, is to enable us to get used not to being run by death, shame, fear and rivalry until such a time as we find ourselves “turned” so that we can actually become part of its Embassy function.

But please notice what this “turning” does to my inadequate “half-way house” image: it deprives it of an “elsewhere”, a healthy outside society, for which ex-cons are being prepared, so that they can leave behind prison life for ever. It turns out that the portal that has opened up has never had any intention of taking any of us “elsewhere”, which would suggest a certain despair about, or contempt for, the reality into which the portal has inserted itself. On the contrary. It turns out that the only “elsewhere” is *here*, beginning to be instantiated in our midst by signs that contain and produce the reality that they are pointing to. The result is that the Embassy-creating portal is turning the reality which we have perceived as prison “on our way out of it” into the adventure playground that it was always meant to be. It is not so much taking our reality by *storm* – a military image suggesting one reality which takes over another and shuts it down - as taking it by *surprise* so that it begins to yield delighted glimpses and gasps of of what is coming into it, and what it is becoming.

6. Rules and Officers

Well, I hope that it is more or less obvious that what I have been trying to do with you is get across something of the notion of “sacramentality”: insinuations of how the irruption of the Other other in our midst has a regular shape that we call Church. I want to ask you to notice a couple of things derived from the shifting perspective that I’ve been trying to illustrate for you. And this is how very different “Rules” and “Clerical leadership” look if we consider them according to my “morphing half-way house” model of Church. I mention these two, since they are both issues which can become unhealthy fixations (whether of love or of hatred) and my whole purpose in this session is to facilitate freedom from idolatry.

The only difference initially as regards pattern of desire between those who are in prison but don't know it, and those who are being persuaded of the portal's invitation and are just beginning to move into a half-way house, is that the latter, having received hints of a regard from outside, have some sense that their imagination and pattern of desire is atrophied and distorted. But this scarcely makes them any more capable of imagining and desiring healthy forms of living.

For at least his first few days in a half-way house, and even though his heart be singing at what is opening up for him, the ex-con is hardly any less atrophied and distorted in his desire, expectations, and ways of relating than his former cell-mates who have remained in prison. What is also odd is that from the point of view of his former cell-mates, those who are in prison but don't know it since for them there is no outside, the half-way house does not at all look like what it claims to be – a staging post *en route* to a yet-to-be imagined freedom. Quite the reverse. It looks like a series of restrictions on such freedoms as they already have, and pointless and arbitrary restrictions at that.

Let's explore this gap in perception by means of an example. You can imagine that it might be a normal part of life in a particular culture to tell lies for immediate gain. Those within that culture know this, understand it, are used to this, and participate in it. The result is that people don't really believe each other, consistently treat each other, and thus themselves, as means, not ends, and consequently are not prepared to entrust each other with much. Overall the group is pretty stagnant: consider how weak and unstable commerce, for instance, would be in such a culture. Now imagine that there is another culture where truthfulness is the norm, and because truthfulness is the norm, people can entrust things, roles, projects, deals, to each other, and all move ahead very well because of the cooperation this engenders. For these latter people, the instruction "don't tell lies" is redundant, moot, since truthfulness is habitual to them, and they already enjoy all the benefits that come from living in this way.

However, for a denizen of the "lying is normal" world, it is not at all clear that there is such a thing as a world of habitual truthfulness, nor can they imagine any benefits to be had from it. So if it were the case that the inhabitants of the

habitually truthful world were to set up a half-way house to enable habitual liars to be drawn into their world, the half-way house would look, from the perspective of those outside it, and even from the perspective of those recently inside it, like a pretty restrictive place. It would appear to them under the sign of a prohibition: “Thou shalt not tell lies”. For dwellers in the “lying is normal” world, this would simply be a silly, and purely negative, interference with their normal way of doing things. Even for many of those recently entering the half-way house, they would have to trust the good intentions of those who had set it up, for initially there would be no profit for them in obeying the prohibition. Merely the inconvenience. For the only way to taste the value of habitual truthfulness is by being habitually truthful.

Until such a time as you are habitually truthful, then, you may find yourself having painfully, and on an incident by incident basis, to forego the immediate gains you are accustomed to getting from lies, without seeing any positive return. Only when it doesn't occur to you to reach for the immediate gains will you start to see that you have already been receiving a whole lot of non-immediate gains in terms of how other people treat you, how you are able to treat them, and what you are able to do together. These gains were entirely invisible to you before, and are so obvious to you now as not even to seem gains, but normality, just part of what being human is all about. From your new habitually truthful persona it is perfectly clear that the culture of habitual lies is not even really a human culture in its own right, simply a terribly atrophied and distorted version of what it might be but can't imagine. Part of its distortion is that of being locked into rivalry with the absolute prohibition “Do not tell lies”. This has the effect that from within the culture of habitual lies, the culture of habitual truthfulness cannot be seen for what it is, but appears as a restrictive culture absolutely centred on a prohibition.

I stress this, since one of the joys of life within the Church is actually discovering that prohibitions have no real place in it at all. They are merely the moot remnants of what things looked like before you found yourself sucked into a new way of life. Once you are living it, on the inside of it, you gradually lose your need for a description of what it looks like to trespass outside it, since you are becoming free even of being able to imagine trespassing. All your freedom is *for*, to such an extent that you don't really understand any more what freedom *from* is

from: you are so entirely dedicated to what is constructively appropriate that all prohibitions are moot¹.

So life in this half-way house really does look completely different depending on the perspective of different patterns of desire and imagination. For some people, it is simply a derangement, for others a place of cruel and pointless restrictions. Even for those coming close to it, at first its narrowness and sobriety is quite frightening, for they are having to trust what is not evident: that there is a world of freedom beyond the restrictions, that the restrictions are only the entry-point into a process of re-habitation. For the moment they will have to trust the probation officers, psychologists and employment counsellors to help them find their way into enjoying that re-habitation from within. Sometimes, initially, what they now recognise to be the prison they have left behind will seem to be positively attractive by comparison.

Well this brings up the thorny issue of the officers! In most half-way houses, comparatively few of the probation officers, psychologists and employment counsellors are themselves ex-cons (though some may be, and it is difficult to think of a better training). They are people from the outside who are employed by others on the outside in order to facilitate the acclimatization of the ex-cons into their new outside reality. They are, if you like, already visibly and imitably competent fully habituated citizens of the healthy social reality. Their job is to be part of the draw which makes the half-way house a sign of something beyond itself.

However, in the half-way house that is the Church there is not a single officer who is not just as much an ex-con as all the other residents. Every one of us started in prison, like everybody else; and our imaginations and patterns of desire, despite, and sometimes because of, our intensive training and style of life, are just as subject to lapsing back into the habitual cultural patterns of prison life.

If a prisoner who doesn't realise she's in prison is confronted with someone who claims to be a probation officer mandated by a social reality of whose existence

¹ Cf 1 Cor 6:12 where St Paul says “ ‘All things are lawful for me’ – but not all things are beneficial – ‘All things are lawful for me’ – but I will not be dominated by anything”.

she, the prisoner, is ignorant, she doesn't see a probation officer from elsewhere, she sees just another representative of "law and order" – a prison guard with a gaudily coloured uniform. That's no surprise. However it is also the case that all of us who are more or less newly arrived residents in the half-way house also find it difficult at first to distinguish between those whom we now understand to have been prison guards, to dealing with whom we are used, and probation officers, who at first seem awfully like prison guards. Only with great difficulty do we come to perceive that there are social workers and psychologists whose joy it is to help us get adjusted to a new reality, and that this is not the same as the similarly uniformed people who brainwashed and sedated us in prison in order to make us more functional and manageable. And it is even more difficult for us to reach the stage where we perceive from any of the counsellors hints of direction for future employment in the new society, rather than barks that we should stop dreaming and instead get useful in maintaining the prison economy.

And of course, the officers themselves, since they are also ex-cons in different stages of re-socialization, are as likely to have difficulties of perception in this field as everyone else, or more likely. Think of it like this: after a comparatively short time in a half-way house, you are told that you are to be a probation officer, or an employment counsellor. But you have either no experience at all, or merely the tiniest hint of an intuition, of what the healthy society you are supposed to be inducting people into is like, and your only experience of uniformed officials is prison guards. Well, it is scarcely surprising that you will, at least initially, be much more like a prison guard than like a probation officer, much more inclined to react to a changing situation by calling for lock-down than by helping the residents imagine creative new possibilities for the freedom that is coming upon them. And of course, there will be plenty of half-way house residents who will be glad that you are like a prison guard – it enables you to be part of a give-and take with which they are familiar, and so helps them put off the arduous training of imagination and desire which will equip you and they to be socialised into the new society.

7. The Banquet

At this point I would like to reintroduce, but in a slightly different form, the

image with which we started, that of the aristocratic guests in the restaurant. That image, morphing now into an image of a Banquet, takes us into the full reality of the draw and power emanating from the “healthy outside society”. For this healthy outside society is a party which has gate-crashed into what turns out to be our prison, set up a portal from elsewhere which is “just there”, opened up a half-way house to enable us to be re-socialized, and started to staff an embassy so that signs of “just there” begin to transform from within our perception of “here”. Just beneath the surface of each of these images and palpitating at the centre of all of them, is the image of a Banquet, actually a Wedding banquet. This banquet has already begun, and the consummation which it is celebrating is already taking place. Yet it unfurls itself amongst us as something already now reaching into our midst from a future we cannot grasp, something which is beginning to turn us into signs of a becoming in which we are held securely. This is, of course, the central reality which is made available to us through the Mass.

One of the things which gets very little attention when people discuss the heavenly banquet, the marriage supper of the lamb, is the nature of the joy involved. And when people talk about heavenly joy, you sometimes get the impression that they are talking about something rather linear, and pure and rarified. I wonder whether this is really bearable. If a party is for us, then it is for us to enjoy at least *starting* with our sense of humour, and because the host actually really likes *us* and wants *our* company. Indeed, likes our company so much that, of all ludicrous things, he wants to *marry* us, take us into sharing his life on terms of equality! So I would like to suggest that we allow a certain raucousness of humour, spilling over from the banquet, to break through to us.

We are all aware that laughter and humour can be very cruel, and cruel laughter would scarcely be compatible with the joy emanating from the banquet. There is however a form of laughter and humour which is entirely without cruelty, which is in fact one of the firmest signs that there could be of the absence of cruelty, and of the presence of general health and sane enjoyment; and that is when people are able to laugh *at themselves*. We’ve perhaps all been in a situation where someone has started to laugh at us, in a way which might have seemed ironic, for we were indeed doing something ridiculous, but as they laugh we find ourselves noticing that their laughter is not out to get us, it is for us, enjoys us and welcomes us in.

Rather than becoming all defensive, grim, and closed-down we find that their laughter lightens us up, so that we are able to receive ourselves again through their perception of us. Thus we can let go of our brittleness, our defensiveness, are enabled to climb down from whatever postures of pretentiousness we were grasping on to and find that we are able to join in with all the mucky-seeming others who are going through the same thing in a growing cacophony of shared delight. It's as we go through this process of laughing at ourselves along with others that we discover how like them we are, what fun it is to be with them, and how much fun it is going to be to enjoy them more in the future.

Earlier, when we were looking at the image of the aristocratic guests at the meal, I asked you to consider something of the mixture of hilarity and pathos which enables these guests to put up with the more or less farcical behaviour of the waiters, and now I would like to see if we can inhabit the tension between that hilarity and that pathos a little more fully. For it is easy enough to see that the waiters, who have now morphed into scarcely-prepared probation officers in the half-way house, are run by patterns of behaviour so contrary to that of which we are supposed to be becoming signs, that the guests are simply scandalised by us, go into indignation at us – and Lord alone knows we have given grounds for this indignation.

The tension which holds together the hilarity and the pathos, allowing each to be filled out by the other without being collapsed, is, I think, one of the most difficult things to gesture towards successfully. How can you talk about a dynamic which enables you simultaneously to treat something extremely seriously, and yet not take it seriously at all? The tension hints at something of the power of the passion for us, the inside taste of the love for us, that shapes our host's besottedness. A power which begins to be sensed in our midst as the ability to laugh at ourselves as we find ourselves being forgiven, becoming self-critical, brought into a new way of enjoying togetherness; and yet a power that has a longing for us, a concern for our well-being so strong that we are tempted to use words like "anger" to describe its pathos at our constant and persistent rejection of its invitations. I wonder whether exactly the same longing, love and joy which is experienced by us as an ability not to take ourselves seriously and to laugh at ourselves as we are "let off" our pretentiousness and become self-

critical, is not also experienced as wrath by those whose sense of righteousness clings to an impossibility of being tickled by ridicule. And curiously, the richness and joy of finding ourselves able to laugh at ourselves, is not diminished, but enhanced by the fact that it constantly stretches us out with pathos towards those who most seem averse to it. Which means also the bits of ourselves that seem most averse to it. In other words part of the joy of the hilarity that is coming upon us is precisely its gentle, stretched refusal to concede definite existence to a “they” off whom our laughter might cruelly rebound, condemned to a separate sphere of ever more fixated seriousness.

I bring this out here since I think that being able to inhabit this tension between hilarity and pathos, tickled by the hidden bursts of mirth that are summoning us into the banquet, is an essential element of life in the Church. It is this tension which empowers us not to be in rivalry with each other, not to be indignant with each other, to withstand the siren lure of being scandalised by each other, and I suspect that this tension is going to be vital if we are to give flesh to God’s project.

Think, for instance of these words, emanating out from the Banquet. Their speaker seems to know so well how we are inclined to collapse the tension into either cruel laughter or cruel righteousness. I suspect that these words, words which last for ever, were not given to us as “critical snark” designed to make us look at each other in a jaundiced and cynical way. I suspect that it is because the Presence who opens up the portal knows how difficult it is for us not to hurt each other that he gives us these words. They are there to protect us from each other as we grow out of prison-thought. They remind us how much bigger and more spacious is the project that is seeking to make us free than our frightened, prison-run imaginations will allow.

Consider this:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your servant; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your slave: even as the Son of man came not to be served, but

to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many².”

So the titles, the costumes, the weightiness of tone, the gravity of attitude are pure kitsch, fading remnants of prison life, unless they are brought to life by someone who is throwing themselves lightly into being your servant, which means finding out and ministering to your actual needs, not to what they tell you your needs should be. Only those who are prepared to sit lightly to being a nobody will be found, to their own surprise, to have become a somebody!

Or this:

“How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God”³

Are we, or our officers, locked into dependence on each other’s approval, which is part of prison life, rather than acting as sons and daughters whose approval comes from elsewhere, acting from beyond being frightened, blackmailed and ashamed?

Or this:

“Beware the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known”⁴

So we are encouraged to learn to be *systemically* self-critical... it’s not just this or that bad apple that covers up. Fake goodness imposes itself as a system, a leaven, which runs people, starting with ourselves, and we must always be on the watch for it.

Or this:

² Mt 20, 25b-28

³ Jn 5, 44

⁴ Lk 12, 1b-2

“You... make void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on⁵”

So there is a real difference, and one to which we are encouraged to be ever attentive, between the apparent incorrigibility of our ideological systems of goodness and the unchanging “just there” which is a living, delighting, act of communication producing huge and constant changes in our ways of understanding each other and living together;

Or this:

“They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not lift a finger to move them⁶”

“The system suits us, adjust yourself to it if you want to belong on our terms, which are the only real terms”

Or this:

“You blind guides, you strain out gnats and swallow camels⁷”

This might translate as “We strain out condoms and swallow wars”... please be encouraged to continue self-critically in this vein!

Or this:

“But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one Teacher, and you are all brethren...you have one master, the Christ⁸”

The one master, the dynamo of Presence in the Portal, is always *just there*, his teaching and example always alive independently of any of us. So anyone who

⁵ Mk 7:13

⁶ Mt 23: 4

⁷ Mt 23:24

⁸ Mt 23: 8, 10b

would teach in Christ's name is always to us as one on the same level as us, as one whose job it is to enliven among us the sign that the Master is producing. Someone who insists on their authority will always be an anti-sign, and we will be right to suspect them. Where true Authority has been given it will always be sensed in the enlivening of the sign in those being taught, and in the transparency and loss of self-importance of the one teaching.

What I find curious, and what we officers or waiters find hard to take from these words of Jesus, and many others like them, is this. Precisely because the Portal which has opened up for us all is much more of a rupture than a continuity; and precisely because all of us, officers included, have a very slow, arduous path out of having our minds and hearts run by the patterns of prison; so the very same Presence who gifts us with signs of himself as Priest and Teacher, turning particular ex-cons into probation officers, counsellors and the like, this same Presence simultaneously gifts us with a *strongly quizzical* presumption concerning the officer being out of synch with what he's supposed to be about, and does so as part of the education of all of us in freedom.

All the phrases that I have quoted above tend to encourage in us, as a normal part of growth in health in the new Kingdom, an instinctive suspicion of religious leaders, a presumption of pretension until the contrary is demonstrated. They suggest that we are right always to ask, with relation to any religious teaching "Cui bono?" Who does it benefit? If it is really from God then it is for our benefit. Our benefit is the criterion of its Godliness. Maybe it will take time for us to understand why it is beneficial, because the freedom that is coming upon us is so difficult for us to imagine; but there is also the real possibility that such and such a teaching is just one of those things that may have seemed, and even been, helpful at one time, but is now being shown up as part of the prison structure of fake-goodness which we should learn to leave behind. The active and creative ability to discern in this area is an intrinsic part of the gift of life in the half-way house as it morphs into the banquet⁹.

I hope you can see how this ties in with the image of the Restaurant with which

⁹ cf 1 Thessalonians 5, 19 "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic words; rather test everything, hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil."

we started. The Really Aristocratic guests do not despise their waiters, even as their relationship to them is undergirded with a giggle. The guests are aware of quite what a curious task the waiters have been given in appearing to face them from the same “side” as the Chef. All of us undergo an arduous transformation of imagination and desire in our passage from the prison, through the half-way house, into becoming well-equipped ambassadors of the Portal. But not all of us are commissioned to be signs of the Portal’s draw to those alongside us within the half-way house, signs made alive as those commissioned and those with whom they interact blossom publicly into lives shaped as purification from fake goodness. If the Priestly vocation is to undertake the route from “magnificently decked-out offerer of sacrifice” to “visibly generous dweller in the victimary space of shame” then it is fair to say that the life-story thrown up by a faithful traversing of that route will not lend itself to obvious charting. If the Preacher’s vocation is “Be a professional hypocrite who will become an authentic sign of Christ in your publicly being set free from your own hypocrisy as a truthfulness not your own comes upon you” then it is fair to say that the calling does not come with a straightforward career path.

Conclusion

Well, I apologize for this barrage of images. I have wanted to offer some ways in to a less idolatrous living out of the reality of “Church”. Every one of us is liable to be sifted by the shocking realisation of how easy it is to become the enablers of a self-serving rhetoric which passes as “good” and “holy” and yet is entirely run by the pattern of desire that is proper to prison, tending towards lockdown; how easy it is to be fully committed to thinking we are acting as supervisors or educators from the Half-Way House, or even the Embassy, while in fact we are the pig of prison administration, gaudily decked out with lipstick borrowed from “Elsewhere”. And every one of us is right, as part of our process of growing in life in the half-way house, to be learning to discern, gently, aristocratically whether those who claim they are “serving” us or “teaching” us are in fact doing any such thing. It is part of our increasingly relaxed, non-rivalrous way of being in the Half-way house that we be regularly quizzical as to whether it is in fact the One Master who is speaking himself into being in us through this or that official, this or that pronouncement. Maybe, it is rather the case that, even as the Master

tries to nudge the officials (people like us, and alongside us, whom he really rather likes) beyond cowardice tricked out as obedience, at the same time his love, service and teaching, his hilarity and the pathos which deepens it, is spilling past those officials to reach us through conduits whose freedom from self-importance are a better match for the message.

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