

Justice and the StrangerPart 2

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Review of Part 1:

In Part 1 of Justice and the Stranger we focussed solely on texts from Scripture.

We looked at the shift in self-understanding of the Israelites with reference to two areas:

- The development in their understanding of God, from being an exclusive tribal God to a God for all peoples;
- The growing self-awareness of their role in God's plan of salvation. An awareness which recalled their identity as an alien people, a people on the move. This identity, it was hoped, would increase their empathy with the strangers and vulnerable people they encountered;
- Furthermore, we looked at Jesus' own understanding of his mission. He was sent, not only to his own people, but to all nations;
- Finally, we noted how his followers also had to experience a shift in their understanding in their narrow understanding of Jesus' mission. They moved to a point, where they understood "that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:1-43);
- For our purposes in these two seminars, we are looking backwards, at how the early Christian communities welcomed the stranger; secondly, we now have to look at our own current situation, and reflect on how the texts from scripture touch our lives and the way in which we welcome the stranger in our midst. This latter reflection may chasten our tendency to negatively judge the failings of the early Christian communities.

I invite you to take a few moments of silence to reflect on the text below:

"There in every beggar and foreign wanderer the first suspicion was whether or not s/he might be God...It was impossible to host anyone without first asking: who is this stranger? But only because one respected the divinity in him/her, did it come down to human questions, and that was called hospitality, which was why it was counted among religious practices and virtues. There was no 'last person' among Homer's Greeks! S/He was always the first, that is, divine." C. Norwid, Pisma Wszystkie, Vol 3 pp 673-96

For this second part of our seminar, I invite you to focus on the impact, both on a global and national scale, of the current mass movement of peoples in our world today. I will do this by focussing on the following:

- **Being White**
- **The Other**
- **René Girard on Scapegoating**

Being White:

The issue of race and colour has been placed on the world stage through the recent killings of Afro-Americans. Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement found a universal echo, not only among the Afro-American peoples, but also in the First Nations people in Canada, and some Asian communities being randomly attacked and blamed for the current Covid19 pandemic.

I lived in South Africa for a number of years. I was never conscious of my skin colour until I lived as the only white person in my parish. I was *the* white person. Children would call me 'the stranger'. For some of the children, I was the first white person they had ever met. I was also conscious of the particular history of the apartheid system in South Africa. Being white meant power, wealth, domination and a whole life-style denied these rural people. I was also conscious of the Dutch Reformed Church who justified the apartheid system based on their understanding of selective texts from scripture!

The current reality of the BLM maybe a call to us white people to reflect on our privilege. Being white gives us a privileged position. We are not always conscious of this privileged status. So, it may be no surprise that some white people have a difficulty in coming to terms with their privileged position. Given that we have been saturated and permeated with a privileged position, which in the light of BLM has been exposed for what it is: a privilege and an advantage. Consequently, this awareness of our unconscious privilege may, in time, lead us to a dilemma. The dilemma being in the form of a question: 'What can I do about this privileged position and, to what extent am I even aware of this privileged position?' Race has become an issue we have to face. Race is not something someone is; race is something done to one group of people by another group. Our whiteness was produced and can only be sustained by structures that reinforce dominance and marginalization of others. Those same structures, as I witnessed in South Africa, racialize people of different skin colour. Sometimes violence and exclusion are structured in such a way that, in time, they are woven into the legal and political fabric of a whole nation. This can be seen in matters of housing access, health care, access to good education, local infrastructure, behaviour of the police, membership of churches, and many other ways of exclusion. An invisible 'border' or glass ceiling is put in place to keep the unjust structures in place. "Whiteness can become a 'way of anchoring power' in white bodies, and at the same time excluding non-whites". (Achille Mbembe – Critique of Black Reason, pp 11 and 33).

This racialisation also happens within our churches. The visual images of Jesus of Nazareth are usually white and Caucasian. Some of the NGO organisations present recipients of their work as being totally dependent on donations from white people in so-called developed countries. This week the Mexican government has asked for an apology from the Vatican for the Catholic Church's role in the violence meted out to indigenous peoples. Columbus arrived with Spanish missionaries to colonize the indigenous peoples, sometimes with violence and even death. Christian expansion and white supremacy have, at times, historically been intertwined. One saw this in the negative response to the emergence of Liberation Theology. Poor people, robbed of human dignity, began to reflect on their life experience of oppression and exclusion through the lens of scripture. These peoples found their voice through praxis and community reflection. They recognised themselves in the cry of the prophets who denounced the unjust structures of their day. Now it was time for the oppressed of Latin America, Africa and others to have their voice heard. The response of the Catholic Church was, in some instances, a strong admonition to listen to authority from the 'top-down'. The lived experience from 'the bottom up' was told to keep silent. We find this response also to Black Theology, Gay Theology and Feminist Theology. As I understand it, this is no different to what we saw in Part 1 when we witnessed the exclusive thinking in both the Old and New Testaments of scripture. We may be quick to judge the peoples of the Old and New Testaments who turned away the outsiders; but we need to be more chastened in doing so, given the recent silencing of the voices of the poor and marginalised in our own Churches. No doubt, we have moved on from a situation in the southern United States when

“a slave had to have his or her master’s permission to receive communion? What kind of sacramental theology did we have in this country when it was the regular practice in much of the southern United States for white Catholics to receive communion first and Blacks to receive last”. (Cyprian Davis, OSB - “Reclaiming the Spirit: On Teaching Church History: Why Can’t they be More Like Us?” in Black and Catholic – The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk, pp 46-47. However, we still witness exclusion when our Catholic Catechism refers to certain acts as being ‘intrinsically disordered’ (Catholic Catechism 2357). One recalls Thomas Aquinas’s stating that, it is sinful to force a person to act against his/her nature.

When one thinks of the wave of European immigrants to the United States, the following questions may arise: were they transformed from Irish and Italian Catholics into American whites? Was whiteness prioritized as the chief form of belonging to the Catholic Church? Was white subjectivity shaped by anti-blackness? Were the models of inclusion in the US Catholic church dissolved into the inclusion of all (non-white) people into the (white) church? It is sobering to reflect on these questions.

In its wider meaning, heresy is not only the rejection of doctrines of the church, but a rejection of normative Christian practice that causes division within the body of Christ. If one accepts this wider meaning of heresy, then, we may say that racism as practised by Christians is a heresy. In Part 1 we referred to the laws of exclusion, and how they were used as barriers to exclude the non-Jew. We saw Jonah’s anger at a merciful and inclusive God. When we jump forward to contemporary societies and communities of faith who practise subtle and overt forms of racism, we have to ask, if we are any different from the practices of the Jewish institutions or from Jonah’s understanding of God? Has the white church failed in its lived proclamation of the inclusive God? Is the Church which has codified behaviour excluding women from full and active participation, members of the LGBT community and people in faithful and monogamous second unions, has it denied the God of the scriptures whose love is illogically wild and open? We need a deep self-examination as individuals and as a Church when confronted with such real lives. We need to pray deeply the texts we offered you in Part 1. Those whom Churches have alienated and estranged are still being excluded from the table of the Eucharist. The Leviticus 19:34 text which invited the Israelites to practise empathy, is also addressed to us today: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God”.

The Other:

In Part 1 you will have seen biblical references to ways in which the Israelites practised the exclusion of non-Israelites. Ritual customs were used as a way of exclusion. During the Exile they saw some of their fellow-Israelites intermarry and assimilate into foreign cultures. For others, the Exile was a time to codify their religious and civic laws. The latter bound them closer as a people and sought to prevent any further assimilation. We saw this also in the New Testament: the sick, the foreigner and others were regarded as impure. Jesus, by identifying with the outsider, ushered in a new way of God’s presence, especially towards the outsiders. Jesus ate and socialised with them; he had them amongst his closest friends. He was to die as an outsider, outside the city walls.

In a world of mass migration we are confronted by the reality of encountering the Other, the one who is different to us. Do we see the Other as a gift, a challenge, an invitation or a

threat? In our lifetime we have seen the fall of the Iron Curtain. It has become a concrete moment in the history to encounter the Other. It is no surprise therefore, that Emmanuel Lévinas, one of the greatest thinkers on studying the impact of the Other, should emerge from an Eastern European country. Here was a voice which gave another way, other than extermination of the Other. He wrote offering hope. He offers us a way to shift from mass society to a humane global society.

Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995):

In his book, The Other, Ryszard Kapuściński, stated with reference to Lévinas: “He was 33 years old at the outbreak of World War 2. Mass society was forming in Europe, and fascism and totalitarianism were emerging. The person living in a mass society was typified by anonymity, indifference towards the Other, losing their cultural identity, defencelessness and susceptibility to evil: with all its tragic results; the most inhuman symbol of this phenomenon would be the Holocaust. Stop, he seems to be saying to the person hurrying along in the rushing crowd. There beside you is another person. Meet him/her. Look at the Other’s face as s/he offers it to you. Through this face s/he shows you yourself: more than that – s/he brings you closer to God. Lévinas goes further. He says you must not only meet the Other, accept and converse with him/her, but you must also take responsibility for him/her. Lévinas’s philosophy distinguishes the individual and singles it out. He indicates that apart from myself there is also someone Other, but -if I fail to make the effort to notice or to show a desire to meet – we shall pass each other by indifferently, coldly, and without feeling, blandly and heartlessly. Meanwhile, says Lévinas, the Other has a face, and it is a sacred book in which good is recorded...Yet at the same time this difference does not erase my identification with the Other: ‘ I am someone Other.’ ... Lévinas took us further still, proclaiming praise for the Other, and our duty to take responsibility for him/her. Lévinas even went so far as to say the Other is our master and that s/he is closer to God than I am, and that our relationship with the Other should be a movement towards Good.” The Other Pp 34-36

The Other is s/he who is different from me. Every person carries a dual identity: s/he is a person like us: with joys and sorrows, good and bad days. The other identity is a person with specific racial and cultural features. So, every encounter with the Other is an enigma, even a mystery. The wonder of this encounter with the Other, is that, to know ourselves, we have to know Others. Western philosophy was very influenced by Descartes’s *cogito, ergo sum: I think, therefore I am*. This rather limited self-definition can be transformed into ‘*I know that I am, because I know what another is.*’ Xenophobia has been described as a sickness of people who are scared, terrified of having to see themselves in the mirror of the Other. Instead of being scared, one can see every encounter, even a conflict or a collision, as a contact with the Other.

In Part 1 I offered an overview of the history of Israel. Let us look at a specific overview, that of the relation between Europeans and Others (non-Europeans). We can present this overview in seven points:

1. The era of merchants, envoys, trade missions. Lasted until the 15th Century;

2. The era of great geographical discoveries, a period of conquest, slaughter and plunder, the real dark ages between Europeans and Others. It lasted several hundreds of years;
3. The era of Enlightenment and humanism, openness to Others, the first attempts at understanding them, making human contacts, and developing the exchange of goods, cultural and spiritual values;
4. The Enlightenment gave rise to a new era that continues to this day, marked by three turning points;
5. The turning point of anthropologists;
6. The turning point of Lévinas;
7. The turning point of multiculturalism.

The move from merchants and envoys to current multiculturalism shows a gradual recognition of the Other as distinct from me. The interim history was marked by bloodshed and oppression of the Other. Anthropology offers us a key to the Other: to live with and encounter the other, not to dominate or remain aloof from the Other.

Who will this new Other be? What will our encounter be like? What shall we say to each other? And in what language? Will we be able to listen to each other? To understand each other? Will we jointly wish to refer to – as Conrad puts it – *‘speak to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds people to each other, which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living and the living to the unborn’*. Joseph Conrad.

René Girard(1923 – 2015) on Scapegoating:

I wish to present this final section as a very brief introduction to René Girard’s reflections on scapegoating. I invite you to keep in mind the biblical texts from Part 1 which allowed the exclusion of the Other as a way of strengthening the identity of the specific Israelite community. We referred to rituals of exclusion around food and admission to other rites of belonging. We also mentioned how Jesus both identified with and befriended the excluded.

René Girard spoke of what he called the Mimetic Theory. Put simply, we all learn by imitation. The child imitates his/her parent or another sibling. Built into this imitation is a desire to have or be what the Other is or possesses. I can desire my best friend’s partner: I want what s/he has. I can set up situations to try to take his/her partner away from him/her. If needs be, I may even resort to ways that involve hurting my friend. So, what was his/her desire now becomes my desire. If we transfer this to a community or a nation, we can see how wars start. Most wars are about what my enemy has and I do not have, so, I will take it from him/her violently.

Scapegoating focusses in on a specific person or group. In ancient times, the evil present in a community was symbolised by a goat. The same goat was banished by the community. In this banishment, the community believed it cleansed itself of all impurities; it could then resume

its daily life without the presence of the evil in its midst. You will find this echoed in the Passion narrative of Jesus. The High Priest announced: "You don't see that it is better for you that one man die for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed". Jn11:50 Whenever an individual or group is singled out as the cause for a particular malaise in the wider society, we can see scapegoating in action. Currently in Ireland, one sees the new Nationalist Party calling for restrictions on both immigration policies and the benefits given to those in the asylum process. We have witnessed the burning of two hotels designated as centres to house asylum-seekers. We have heard in pubs and at school gates the comments that "They (immigrants) are taking our jobs". Language around scapegoating does not have to be as sensational as the statements of the Nationalist Party; equally vile are the statements in the pub, at home or at the school gate when people scapegoat immigrants.

Conclusion:

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa was once criticised for his involvement in politics. To his critics he responded: "What Bible do they read?" I quote Tutu, because in these two seminars I have sought to give you the biblical texts and the reality of today's world. We are, as were the Israelites and the early Christian communities, in a pluralist and multicultural world. We, in Ireland, had until the 1970's lived in a monochrome world. The "No change" from John Charles McQuaid, and "No surrender" from Dr. Ian Paisley summed up our ghetto island. Today we are told that 1 in every 10 children in our primary schools are foreign nationals. So, the future is already here! This is our new reality. How we live the new choices facing us will determine our closeness to the Other. In our particular focus, namely looking at our culture through the lens of the scriptures, we have sufficient texts to direct our feet. We must be vigilant to the warning bells when we find ourselves thinking of excluding others from our Eucharist and our Christian gatherings. For some, this is the language of giving in and total immersion into the 'world'. I respond: there is no such thing as another world; this is what we have and here we must make our mark in imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who died an outsider. There is no such thing as a 'spiritual life' apart from the reality of our daily lives. The fact that God as Trinity, chose the way of the Incarnation in a poor child, soon to be a refugee and spent his adult life as an outsider to the religion of his day, is this not enough for us to realise the wisdom of Tutu's response above? "Is this it?" you may ask. Yes, this is it...we have this life, this place, this day to welcome the stranger and to be the men and women to live "the faith that does justice" (Pedro Arrupe, S.J.)

Reflections:

1. Allow yourself a few moments to list the advantages of being white.
2. Select one of the following realities, then, list the ways you may feel excluded (an alien) from participation in some Churches: a) In a monogamous and faithful second union for 15 years and the parent of two children from that union; b) A gay or lesbian individual/ couple in a long term faithful union or civil marriage. How does such exclusion fit with God's self-revelation as a universal God?
3. Pope Francis has frequently made gestures of mercy towards the above two groups in a) and b). Can you understand, in the light of our two Papers, the responses of those who perceive Pope Francis as being too lenient?

4. Xenophobia = a sickness of those who are scared, terrified of having to see themselves in the mirror of the Other.” Please Comment
5. In his book Fear of Freedom, Erich Fromm stated that, in times of political and economic insecurity, human beings are willing to sacrifice their individual freedom, even to following a dictator or totalitarian person who promises them economic security. Please Comment
6. “Early in the Bible, it is written that ‘Anyone who wished to consult the Lord would go to the meeting tent outside the camp’ (Exodus 33:7). ‘Outside the camp’ is where we meet God. Outside the institution, outside culturally conditioned beliefs and perceptions, ‘outside the camp,’ God speaks to us ‘face to face’ (Exodus 33:11). It is ‘outside the camp’ that we meet a God who cannot be controlled. And it is outside the camp that we meet the Other who is different – and discover who we are. And where our home really is.” - Chris McVey, OP Dialogue as Mission, p. 73.
Some commentators have said that McVey is ignoring our whole Christian tradition of dogma. Do you agree with McVey or the commentators?