

Jurassic Park and the Last Supper

A talk given at The Tablet Open Day, London, June, 1994.

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Last year I had to give a ten minute talk to the Union of Superiors General the heads of religious orders on the challenges to our mission as religious in the West. It seemed a pretty impossible task. What could one say in ten minutes? Then I went to see the film Jurassic Park and it became clear that this is a story that shows us a wonderful picture of the world in which we have to live our faith today. It is one of the most successful films ever made. At one stage it was showing in one in three cinemas in Italy, and the French Minister of Culture has declared it a threat to the nation. In motorway cafes our children can buy dinosaur biscuits. Why has it been so successful? It is surely because every culture lives by stories, narratives that shape our perception of the world and of ourselves, which tell us what it means to be human. And this is a narrative in which millions of people, perhaps unconsciously, find themselves.

But we Christians claim to live by another tale, which we gather to remember and re enact every Sunday, the story of the Last Supper, of the man who gathered his friends around him and shared with them a meal, who gave them himself, his body and his blood. This is the story that should, above all, shape our lives and self awareness. So the challenge of being a Christian is for us not just that of trying to be good. There is no evidence to suggest that Christians are, on the whole any better than anyone else, and Jesus certainly did not call the saints but the sinners. The challenge is rather to live by and through a story that some of our contemporaries may find very odd, and which offers a different vision of the world and of being human. This evening I want to touch upon just a few of the differences between these two stories.

I assume that most of you have been to see Jurassic Park. You probably took your children, pretending that you were only going to make them happy but enjoyed it enormously. Just in case you have not seen it, here is the story. A millionaire (Richard Attenborough) uses experiments on DNA to bring the dinosaurs back to life. He creates a Mesozoic Longleat, where all the dinosaurs can run free. Unfortunately they break out, start killing the visitors, and so the human beings desert the island and fly away, leaving the jungle behind them. This may not seem to you to be much like life in the suburbs of London, unless things have changed a lot since I left for Rome, but I will suggest that it touches on important elements of our contemporary culture.

Violence

The first point I want to make is really pretty commonplace. Jurassic Park tells us of a violent world, of herds of dinosaurs roaming the plains, and devouring everything they meet. It is a violence to which the human beings can only reply with further violence. Our other story, that of the Last Supper, is also a story of

violence, of the violence that is inflicted upon Jesus, and which he bears, "like a sheep that is led to the slaughter, he did not open his mouth". (Is 53:7)

When I asked recently a group of American Dominicans, brothers and sisters, what was the primary challenge for our preaching, they replied, without hesitation, that it was violence. In recent months I have visited Rwanda, Burundi, Haiti, Angola, Croatia and New York, and I have been confronted with the raw violence of much of our world. I suppose that most of human history has been violent and, except for the horrors of the two world wars, ours has not been much worse. Many societies in the past have glorified violence. I think that ours does so too, and in ways that are very subtle and hardly explicit.

Jurassic Park offers us a resurrected Darwinian jungle, in which animals compete to survive. The weak fail and die and become extinct, like the dinosaurs. The violent competition for food and territory is part of the creative process by which we come to be. That brutal struggle is what brings us into existence. It is our cradle. Ultimately, the film suggests, violence is fruitful. But Darwin's theory of evolution, which I cannot claim ever to have studied, is interesting as just one symptom of a deep shift in our understanding of what it means to be human which has occurred over the last two hundred or so years. It is the emergence of the conviction that all human society functions and flourishes through this fierce struggle between competing individuals, each pursuing their own good. The metaphor of the survival of the fittest, of life as a Darwinian jungle, haunts much of our language. Sumner, the Yale economist, even wrote that "millionaires are a product of natural selection They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work."

One of the first indications of this deep shift in our understanding of human society was a little parody called the Parable of the Bees, written by a man called Mandeville in the eighteenth century. He argued that greed, envy, pride, all the traditional vices, may actually be very useful. They are what makes the world go round and human society flourish. They may be private vices but they are public virtues. The politics of greedy competition go back a long way. It is this understanding of what it means to be human that makes of our cities urban Jurassic Parks, violent inner city jungles, where the weak are destroyed. Our story, the tale of the Last Supper, offers a deep challenge, not just because here is the man who bears violence and refuses to pass it on. It offers a radically different image of what it means to be human. He offers us his body. This is the new covenant, our home and dwelling place. The meaning of our lives is given not in the pursuit of self interest but by the reception of a gift of communion.

I think that most of us would agree, and it has often been argued, that the challenge of this moment is to break the fascination of what is ultimately a harmful and destructive image of what it is to be a human being, of us as solitary monads forever pursuing our own individual goods. We are flesh of each other's flesh, a communion that finds perfection in that flesh which Christ gives, his own body. That which we seek is most radically the common good. The problem is how we are to break the hold of this false myth of our humanity. What are we to do? As David Marquand put it in *The Unprincipled Society*:

“How can a fragmented society make itself whole? How can a culture permeated by possessive individualism restore the bonds of community? Granted that the common sense of nearly two hundred years is the chief obstacle to successful economic and political adjustment, how can common sense be redefined?”

The story of the Last Supper can liberate our imagination. It is the story of a community that is radically fractured, in which the man at the heart of the community is about to be betrayed and denied. All his friends will scatter in a moment. It is the story of the birth of a community which overthrows every form of alienation, betrayal, even death. It offers us hope.

Words

The central act of Jesus is to speak a powerful and transforming word: “This is my Body and I give it to you.” He speaks a word. Words are not so very important in Jurassic Park. There is a lot of grunting and roaring, the sound of breaking bones, but you are not encouraged to chat to a Tyrannosaurus Rex. A Russian or Chinese could happily watch the film in English and not miss much. This difference is significant. I would say that one of the ways in which we build a human society, and transcend that trap of possessive individualism, is by recovering a reverence for words, and of their potency to form and sustain community.

We are human and we belong to each other because we can talk together. A society in disintegration is one in which there is contempt for words. When I was in San Salvador I went to visit the room where the Jesuits were gunned down in the University. The murderers also shot their books. You can see a copy of Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, open at the page on the Holy Spirit, source of all wisdom, ripped across with bullet holes. I think of the library of a priest in Haiti, the books all destroyed and torn up. I think of a little village on the border of Croatia and Serbia, shelled out of existence, with the very bodies from the graves dug up and thrown around, and the missal in the Church ripped up, and desecrated with obscenities. What all these incidents speak of is both a hatred of words and a sense of their power.

When I land in England during my travels, to recover from jetlag and to wash my clothes, I do not read about MPs bursting into each other's rooms and ripping up their opponents' libraries. But I do get the impression of a culture in which we loose off words at each other with little thought as to their consequences, like children who play at cowboys and Indians without realizing that the guns they use are real. It is as if we had forgotten that speaking is a moral act, demanding the deepest responsibility. I could not help but be astonished at the difference between what was said about that fine man John Smith before and after his death. Was it all just words? Part of our deep social crisis is that we have lost confidence that words really show things as they are.

We have lost St Augustine's sense of awe when he says, “Words, those precious cups of meaning.”

The Book of Genesis tells us that the vocation of Adam was to call things by their proper names. God made Adam to help with creation. He showed him a lion or a

rabbit and Adam named it; he knew what things were and so assisted God in bringing a meaningful world out of chaos. His names were not just arbitrary labels stuck on things, so that he might just as well have called a rabbit a hare; they shared the power of God's words to bring to be, and to bring to light. To speak, to use words, is almost a divine vocation. Like God, it gives us the power of life and death. It is a religious matter.

The violence of our society impregnates the language that we use. The President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, contrasts the words of Salman Rushdie with the words of Ayatollah Khomeini. «Words that electrify society with their freedom and truthfulness are matched by words that mesmerise, deceive, inflame, madden, beguile, words that are harmful lethal even. The word as arrow." George Steiner has written:

"In words, as in particle physics, there is matter and antimatter. There is construction and annihilation. Parents and children, men and women, when facing each other in exchange of speech, are at ultimate risk. One word can cripple a human relationship, can do dirt on hope. The knives of saying cut deepest. Yet the identical instrument, lexical, syntactical, semantic, is that of revelation, of ecstasy, of the wonder of understanding that is communion." (Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?, London, 1989, P 58)

A Dominican sister from Taiwan told of a girl carrying the burden of a child on her back. Someone said to her: "Little girl, you are carrying a heavy weight." She replied "I am not carrying a weight, I am carrying my brother." A word that transforms.

The proponents of Political Correctness are on to the right thing in the wrong way. They have seen rightly that it matters desperately what words I use, because my words can be daggers that kill people. But the human community is not healed simply by us being forbidden to use certain words. As Robert Hughes wrote, in *The Culture of Complaint*, «We want to create a sort of linguistic Lourdes, where evil and misfortune are dispelled by a dip in the waters of euphemism.' He points out that one does not overthrow the horror of death by ruling, as proposed in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, that a corpse should be referred to as a 'nonliving person'. A fat corpse, he points out, becomes a differently sized nonliving person! The administrators of the University of San Francisco in Santa Cruz were wrong to believe that you could overcome racialism by banning expressions like there is "a nip, in the air" and a "chink in one's armour" on the grounds that in some contexts they may seem to be racially disparaging!

We build communion and heal wounds not by banning nasty words but by using words that create communion, that welcome the stranger, that overthrow distance. At the heart of our typical story, the Last Supper, is a man who speaks words that bring a community into being: "This is my Body and I give it to you." And if the doctrine of the Real Presence, of these words as truly and deeply transforming, seems foolish and absurd to many of our contemporaries, then surely it is because we have forgotten just how powerful words are. Emily Dickinson wrote:

Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped freight of a delivered syllable,
'Twould crumble at the weight.

Christ's words of consecration disclose that to which all human language aspires, grace perfecting nature. When the monks fled to the west coast of Ireland in the Dark Ages, they carried with them the texts of the gospels, which they copied and recopied and ornamented and revered. They founded communities which kept alive a reverence for these holy words. Perhaps what we are called to do is form communities in which there is a reverence for language, for truthful words, and words that build communion. If the Church is to be a place in which people can rediscover a deep sense of what it is to be human, to be those who in our deepest identity are one with each other, then we must be before all a community in which words are used with reverence and responsibility.

That means that we have to be a community of people which dares to debate, to argue, to dialogue in pursuit of the truth that we can never master. So often in our beloved Church there is a fear of debate. I do not mean of disagreement. There is plenty of vociferous disagreement. I mean that difficult struggle with one another, in which we both seek mutual enlightenment, that passionate argument in which one fights with the other precisely because one hopes to learn from them. In the Summa, St Thomas Aquinas always starts with the objections of his opponents, not just to prove them wrong but to discover in precisely what sense they are right. We wrestle with our opponent like Jacob struggling with an angel, so that we may demand a blessing.

Reverence for words implies a humility before the truth and the other person. Our words, both in the Church and in society, are so often heavy with arrogance. A last quote from Havel:

"We should all fight together against arrogant words and keep a weather eye out for any insidious germs of arrogance in words that are seemingly humble. Obviously this is not just a linguistic task. Responsibility for words and towards words is a task which is intrinsically ethical. As such, however, it is situated beyond the horizon of the visible world, in that realm wherein dwells the Word that was in the beginning and is not the word of Man."

Forgiveness

When we gather on a Sunday, to hear again our founding narrative, the powerful words that we hear are ones of forgiveness, of the blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. The word is a word that heals and absolves. Yet there is within our culture a deep resistance to the notion of forgiveness. Part of it comes, I would guess, from a suspicion that people who go on about forgiveness, especially Catholics, probably have an unhealthy obsession with guilt. Having been educated by the Benedictines, those humane men, this was not the sort of Catholicism in which I was raised. More fundamentally, I wonder whether in fact our culture is not suspicious of forgiveness because we suspect that it may not be a very good thing. Might it not be that within our contemporary culture there is a belief that, except in the most private and personal sense, forgiveness is harmful and even

dangerous. If there was too much of it around society would fall apart. Like butter and chocolates and other good things, it should be strictly rationed! And yet it is central to our faith.

Certainly after Dachau and Auschwitz, after Dresden, and Hiroshima, one might be hesitant of too easy an idea of forgiveness. As if such horrors could be simply forgotten. Yet our hesitation is perhaps deeper still, and we can see clues in Jurassic Park. In the Darwinian jungle there can be no forgiveness. The necessary consequence of weakness and failure is extinction. And it is good that this happens; otherwise there would be no evolution. We human beings are the result of a ruthless process which wipes out innumerable species because they could not adapt, but it leads to us. What is creative of our humanity is an unforgiving history. In Jurassic Park these dinosaurs are redeemed from death and we quickly discover that that is a great mistake. We should have left their DNA stuck in the drops of amber.

Now I cannot claim any expertise in economics. When the prior accounts were explained in English, it did not take long for me to get lost. Now that I live in Santa Sabina, Rome, and the explanations are in Italian, the darkness is total. But I suspect that the image of the survival of the fittest operates in a similarly unforgiving way in much contemporary economics and politics and that one of the functions of government is precisely to remove whatever shields and protects the weak and ill adapted industries. There should be no forgiveness. The weak should perish, and pity is a dangerous sentiment. I know that that is drastically over simple, and that we believe in safety nets, and dream of the Social Market, and of benevolent capitalism, and yet it touches some deep instinct of our contemporary sensibility.

This mercilessness seems to deeply penetrate our culture. One of the joys of my wandering existence sixty countries since July '92 is, apart from reading The Tablet, coming across an English newspaper. It may be a few weeks old, but I fall upon it like a hungry man. And yet it is depressing how often it will tell of denunciation and accusation. The dominant model of arriving at the truth is that of exposure, of showing up someone's sins. No doubt this is all said to be done in the name of morality, of getting back to basics. Yet one must ask: What is really exposed? What is discovered and revealed? The truth of other human beings, with all their virtue and vice, goodness and badness, can only be attained through patient attentiveness. One must listen very carefully, and let the others disclose themselves. The truth is given not through exposure but in a moment of revelation. It needs tenderness and not denunciation. The truthful eye is always the compassionate eye, even the loving eye, for, as Thomas Aquinas taught us, the true and the beautiful are the same. The journalist with a scoop reminds me of Pompey storming up to the Temple in Jerusalem, demanding to see what was concealed behind the veil of the Holy of Holies. And when he rips it away he shouts out, «But there is nothing, nothing at all.' There was nothing that he could see.

The forgiveness of the Last Supper is not primarily about forgetting. It does not reassure us that our God is willing to overlook our mistakes, to look the other way. It is a deeply creative act of healing. Forgiveness, within our tradition, is that utterly creative moment in which Jesus is raised from the dead. It is not what

enables us to forget. It makes memory possible. It is the mystery of the ever fertile God who, in the mediaeval image, made the dead wood of the cross blossom with flowers, and can make our dead lives flourish. Our two stories, Jurassic Park and the Last Supper, differ most profoundly in their perception of creativity. In one, humans are created through a pitiless process which destroys the weak; in the other it is a creative word which heals and redeems and makes us whole.

The heroes of Jurassic Park are the dinosaurs. They are of course the victims, the ones who were condemned by the evolutionary process. And they are suitable heroes in our culture in which the victim so often has hero status. And the anger and bitterness of the victim, of abuse or molestation or injustice, surely derive from the feeling that nothing can ever be done to heal the damage, that they or we are condemned for ever to bear the wounds, to be casualties. To even mention the possibility of forgiveness would be to trivialise the hurt and to intensify the anger. All that can be done is to drive out the perpetrator. Surely is only a belief in an utterly fecund God, who made everything out of nothing and raised Jesus from the dead, that can give us the courage to think on those whom we have wounded, or who have hurt us, and to hope for forgiveness.

In the Last Supper forgiveness is not just a private absolution, but the birth of a community. It is not just the offer of a personal interior peace, but the peace we live together. This was how it was seen in Europe, where the sacrament of reconciliation was the sacrament in which the community was healed, a public event until after the Council of Trent when we invented confessional boxes.

One of the most moving examples I saw of this shared forgiveness was in Burundi last year, during the massacres. The conflicts between Tutsi and Hutu that have decimated Rwanda this year had already begun in Burundi. Our brethren belonged to both ethnic groups, and everyone of them had lost members of their family. It was a time of deep pain for our brothers. How could we sustain and build a religious community in which traditional enemies lived together? That was our greatest priority. I toured the country with the Councillor of the General Council for Africa, who is Hutu, and the local superior who is Tutsi. We saw almost no one except the occasional band of armed men looking for their enemies. We visited the refugee camps and found the families of our brothers and sisters. It was enormously important that these accepted both these brothers, Tutsi and Hutu together. It was the first gesture of reconciliation and mutual forgiveness. And then before I left the capital, Bujumbura, we all sat down and tried to speak. Rather than the words of denunciation and accusation, each had to listen, to hear what the other had endured, so that he might remain a brother and not become a stranger. It was perhaps the most extraordinary moment of attentiveness that I have ever seen, of offering an hospitable ear to the one who seemed to speak from another world. It was a moment of deep silence, the sort of silence that accompanies words that are hard to find and hard to hear. Forgiveness here is not amnesia but the impossible gift of communion.

Fatalism

The last contrast that I would like to make between Jurassic Park and the Last Supper is deeply connected with the possibility of forgiveness. It is about the

different understandings of freedom that they imply. Jurassic Park is a sort of parable, like the story of Frankenstein before it, about the failure of our scientific culture to live up to its dreams of absolute control. It is a story of a loss of control, a failure of freedom. In the book this is made quite explicit when the control room of the Park ceases to function and so all the dinosaurs can get out. Pausing for a moment of reflection as chaos is about to overwhelm them, the hero says, "Ever since Newton and Descartes, science has explicitly offered us the vision of total control. Science has claimed the power to eventually control everything, through its understanding of natural laws. But in the twentieth century that claim has been shattered beyond repair." (Michael Crichton, Jurassic Park, p.313). In the end, the only freedom that remains for our heroes is the freedom to run away, to escape the mess they have made. It also means that we can look forward to Jurassic Park, Part 2. It is the freedom not to belong, which is the final freedom of our modern human being, that isolated and solitary being for whom to belong is to be trapped.

Wonderful things have happened in these last years, unexpected freedoms have been achieved. We have seen the Berlin Wall fall, Nelson Mandela elected as President of South Africa. We may even be on the way to peace in the Middle East. Yep despite all this, sometimes we are tempted by a sad fatalism, a feeling that nothing that we do can really face and overcome the growing poverty, the cruelty and the death. It is what Havel calls «the general inability of modern humanity to be the master of its own situation.' Maybe that sense of fatalism is due not just to a failure of science to provide all the answers. In *The Culture of Contentment* the American economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, argues this fatalism is in fact implicit in our economic system, that our politics has been deeply influenced, for the past two hundred or so years, by the philosophy of *laissez faire*. This asserts that any interference in the market will have a harmful effect. We must let the market work under its principles and all will be all right in the end. "Economic life has within itself the capacity to solve its own problems and for all to work out best in the end." (*The Culture of Contentment*, London, 1992, P 79) It is a philosophy that encourages us all to think only in the short term, for, as Keynes said, "In the long term we are all dead."

The Last Supper offers freedom precisely in the face of death, that long or short term prospect. It offers us the memory of a man fated to death. It is necessary one of the central words of Mark's Gospel that the Son of Man will be handed over to suffer and to die. It is his fate. And yet in the face of destruction, the night before he was handed over, he performs an act of mad liberty. He takes his suffering and death, he grasps his fate, and makes of it a gift. "This is my Body and I give it to you." Fate is transfigured into freedom. And the form that this takes is the very opposite of that of Jurassic Park. It is precisely by refusing to escape from the disciples who will betray him and deny him. He places himself in their hands. He lets them do what they will with him. This is a very different freedom from the heroes of Jurassic Park escaping in their airplane from the chaos of rampaging dinosaurs. It is the freedom to belong. It is the deepest freedom that we have because we are, whatever we may be tempted to think, flesh of each other's flesh and we cannot thrive alone. The freedom of escape is the flight from our own deepest nature.

If you were to ask me what I have most importantly learnt during these two years as Master of the Order, moving from airport to airport, I would say that I have learnt a tiny bit of what that freedom to belong might imply. What I have seen is so many people, women and men, so very often members of religious orders but also many lay people, who have dared to grasp that freedom to belong, to give their lives away, to make of their lives a gift. I have learnt just a little more about what it means to celebrate the Eucharist.

I have just come yesterday from Algeria, where the brethren have decided to stay on despite death threats from Islamic fundamentalists, as a sign of hope and future communion. Every Eucharist for them is celebrated in the face of death.

I think of a day in northern Rwanda, in the war zone, before these present troubles. I had visited the refugee camp with thirty thousand people and seen women trying to feed children who had just given up eating because they could not be bothered to live. I had visited the hospital run by the sisters, and seen ward after ward of children and young people with their limbs blown off. I remember one child, eight or nine, with both his legs blown off, and an arm and an eye, and his father sitting by the bed weeping. And we went back to the sisters' house and there was nothing to say. We could not find a single word. But we could celebrate the Eucharist, we could remember that Last Supper. It was the only thing to do, and which gave those sisters the courage to stay, and to belong.

To conclude, how are to break the hold, the entrancement, of the image of being human that holds our culture captive? How are we to be liberated from this recent myth, that we are really just solitary beings, each pursuing his or her own good in hot competition? How can we, as Marquand put it, redefine the common sense of the last two hundred years and discover that we are brothers and sisters, children of a single God, and siblings in Christ, who share the same flesh and cannot find contentment apart?

The deepest truth of our human nature is not that we are greedy and selfish but that we hunger and thirst for God and in God we will find each other. Alasdair McIntyre suggests we should follow the example of our ancestors in the Dark Ages, and form local communities "within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness." (After Virtue, London, IGH, p. 244) Certainly one of the ways in which we will testify to what it is to be human is to gather in small local communities and to re enact this story of the Last Supper, with its mystery of freedom and forgiveness. In England we call some of these small communities parishes. They take many different forms in the world. They should be communities in which we are nourished in the knowledge that the good that we seek is not our own private satisfaction but the common good. But they should not be introverted little groups, celebrating their own chumminess. I personally could not abide that. Here we should nourish a wider sense of belonging, taste our communion with all other humans, the saints and the sinners, and the living and dead.