

# BREAKING DOWN THE DIVIDING WALL

Yaaro Lesjay

*Karl Rahner's essay 'A Spiritual Dialogue at Evening: On Sleep, Prayer, and Other Subjects' is presented as a conversation between a priest and a doctor.<sup>1</sup> A similar form—a priest talking to a woman theologian—fits well with the topic here, that of mending broken relationships, especially appropriate in this Year of Mercy. This text traces the pain and struggle of such a relationship, between the priest and his sister, and reflects on the loss of that relationship. In the process it works through the slow conversion of mind and heart that Jesus requires and makes possible—sooner or later. This conversion involves knowing mercy oneself and offering mercy to the estranged person, psychologically and spiritually.*

*As the sibling relationship described here dwindled and finally ended, the only way out was to rationalise the situation, though enduring a struggle within and reaching stalemate. When the man who was the primary cause of the break suddenly died, the problem began to unwind itself, leading to attempts to regain the lost relationship. This conversation between two confiding, knowledgeable friends itself reflects one of these attempts.*

**Priest:** You know my sister's story over more than thirty years. But you don't know what has happened recently. Ella's husband has died. I found out the news the next day by a text message from a younger brother, who has been in touch with her for as long as I have been out of touch. So I can't avoid reliving what went on for so long (the struggle between the blood relationship and Christian fellowship) and also what did not happen till now (love, joy and peace). My relationship with her was as good as broken when she broke away from the rest of us, marrying stealthily into a

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Rahner, 'A Spiritual Dialogue at Evening: On Sleep, Prayer, and Other Subjects', in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, *Theology of the Spiritual Life*, translated by Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1967),

Hindu family. They were rooted in Hindu culture and a Hindu trade (sculpting idols), though not all of them had religious beliefs themselves.

**Theologian:** Her story, of course, is yours too, isn't it? And your story is shared by others like you. You are certainly no exception. There are, indeed, many among us who find themselves in a similar position. I recently heard of a priest going to bless his cousin's engagement, only to find that the case involved a divorce. He still managed a blessing of a sort—knowing that no one is outside the sphere of God's benediction, though not knowing how to communicate in such a situation. That, however, was the end of his having anything to do with them.



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**Priest:** I'd have done the same, seeing no possibility of any meaningful relationship. But I am not sure if the younger generation would agree. There was a deacon who left his congregation—I don't know for what reason. Some time later his father was found to have a terminal illness and he wanted his son to marry before his death. Of course, the marriage could not be blessed in the church because, as a deacon, the son remained bound to celibacy. But a relation who was a devout priest still went travelling for six or seven hours to take part in the celebration, though I don't know if, on his own or at others' request, he blessed the couple in his public, priestly role.

**Theologian:** *One may well wonder what theology priests live by and what faith they witness to—a thing that concerns me as a pastoral theologian.* I do not think, though, that such a thing would ever happen among women religious in India. The rule of life among sisters leaves no doubt about where they stand in such aberrant situations. It is one aspect of how they respond as a group to irregularities that may bring disorder to the Christian community.

**Priest:** But the few sisters who know my story used to ask me if I saw Ella on my visits home!

**Theologian:** Their interest is understandable, and not a matter of mere curiosity. It suggests the second aspect of how women religious typically respond in such situations. They have a way of combining what seems irreconcilable. They would not violate the clear, basic laws governing Christian social living, so they would stay away from a formal ceremony unacceptable to the Church as the community of faith. This derives from a sense of propriety about public deportment within the Church. At the same time, their willingness to associate with people who have walked away from the Church is based on the biblical principle, at once ancient and modern, of the Immanuel: God being with humanity and bridging the infinite abyss caused by sin.

That is to say, sisters tend to make a distinction between public and personal propriety, each of which, they believe, has its own place without having to clash with the other. Spontaneously avoiding the divisive principle of ‘either/or’, they act on the uniting principle of ‘both/and’—a theological principle that is both incarnational and redemptive. The Church, after all, is at once private and public, as it is sinful and holy.

**Priest:** Perhaps more than religious sisters and brothers, rightly or wrongly, we priests are seen as, or pass for, public figures, giving visibility to the Church. Anyway, I felt very embarrassed and far from pleased when the sisters asked me if I visited Ella, from whom I estranged myself, as far as I was concerned, for purely religious reasons.

**Theologian:** Their questions gave you a jolt; they unsettled your definite, if uneasy, stand with regard to your sister: your decision that she did not exist for you. They disturbed your peace—a sort of peace, yes, but only an uncertain one because it relied on her unobtrusiveness, her physical distance.

**Priest:** Yes, her presence would have disturbed me and affected my peace. This is, in a way, the result of my choice: my choice of Christ. She had chosen her man and followed him, privately and publicly. Did she bargain away Christ in the process? Anyway, having chosen Christ, I felt that I had to follow Christ publicly and, I hope, privately too. I only hope I did follow him: ‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 10:32).

**Theologian:** I appreciate your sensitivity in the matter of your following of Christ. You feel more sure of following him in the public sphere than

in the private sphere. But you would not have become a man of Christ in public without first adhering to him in your heart, before and during your training as a priest.

**Priest:** I hope it may be so, my friend. But *only the Lord knows; only he knows to judge*. Honestly, the division in the family caused by Ella was not all her own doing, but the fault of a boor of a brother, self-conceited and blind, who almost drove her to desperation! Equally honestly, I wanted to heal the breach for myself; I wanted to reach out to her, certainly, if not to him. I won't bring him up again in our conversation as I don't want to bite off more than I can chew. I must say that Ella was a victim of circumstances partly, if not wholly, of her own making. And so I waited for the day when I could confront her without losing face, hoping her situation would take a turn for the better, for her to untangle and undo the wrong she had committed!

**Theologian:** I know you hoped in the beginning that she would meet you halfway. I remember your sharing with me, long ago, your hope of seeing her return to Christianity and bring up her children in the Christian faith without hindrance, whatever her life-partner might believe.

**Priest:** That was not to be, as became clear with the passing of time. As much as Christ came to bring peace and, indeed, himself became our peace, he also brought disturbance, holy disturbance. Would that it had been happy, too! 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10:34): a sword of division among us. There wouldn't only be the proverbial clash between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, Jesus said, but he himself would be the cause of discord between mother and daughter or father and son!



*Christ carrying a sword, fourteenth-century fresco, Visoki Dečani, Kosovo*

**Theologian:** Yes, he did. But even before him the rabbis had spoken in such terms about the upheaval that the Day of the Lord would bring among the people. With his hard saying, Jesus drove home an unsuspected, difficult lesson for his audience: the predicted end-time had come, when some would follow him and others would oppose him, fulfilling the prophecy that Simeon made of him as a child.<sup>2</sup> A host of believers, generation after generation, have proved Jesus right when their families turned against them for their faith in Christ, even to the point of having them put to death.

**Priest:** But no one wanted me to be put to death! Besides, we Christians today don't have such a lively sense of eschatological times as those Christians of old.

**Theologian:** No, surely. Still, in your Christian way of life, because of your stand for Jesus, you had to suffer—suffer the loss of your peace and the love of a dear one—and that not just for a while, but for years.

**Priest:** It strikes me—perhaps you were leading me on—that my martyred feeling in relation to Ella is not exactly like that of the Christian martyrs and their relations. The hostile families of the martyrs did not believe in Christ, whereas Ella did! So I should not have rejected her outright, without any mitigation or the slightest sign of reconciliation, over so many long years.

**Theologian:** That is no small insight. But how will you square it with Paul's injunction to exclude someone who has committed a serious offence from the community's gatherings?<sup>3</sup> Ella herself perhaps felt constrained to observe this injunction, knowingly or unknowingly?

**Priest:** In my intentions as well as my actions I have followed Paul's objective pastoral guidance. Even Jesus advocated excluding offenders this way, and asked his followers to treat the unrepentant as public sinners!<sup>4</sup>

But Jesus also surprised and even shocked the moral-minded public by saying that sinners might make their way to the Kingdom of God while the lawful and righteous might be left out. That has often been on my mind, and has long troubled me. And now it strikes me that perhaps, even if I am conscious of having dealt with Ella according to the law best known to me, *I may have only literally kept the law, and I wonder if I have acted according to the spirit of the law.* And so I find myself in a Pauline

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 2: 34–45.

<sup>3</sup> See 1 Corinthians 5: 1–5.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 18: 15–17.

dilemma. I can't wrench myself away from wrestling with the thought: 'I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.' (1 Corinthians 4:4)

**Theologian:** And how do you think the Lord judges you?

**Priest:** He judges with justice, only 'greater justice', the kind G. K. Chesterton spoke of. In our context, it is pleasing justice, pleasing to those who need it for whatever good or, if I may say so, saving reason; and so it is *not condemnatory but conciliatory justice*. The Lord's justice, unlike man's (if not woman's), is such that it 'blesseth him that gives and him that takes', in Shakespeare's words, so that in the course of justice *we all* must see salvation!<sup>5</sup>

Though you asked about me, let me say a word about Ella first. After years of her break with the Church, she did find her way back to it and began taking the sacraments. I was happy, though I don't know how it happened. The way the Lord's justice was shown to her, resulting in his justification and reconciliation of her to the Church, made me see the shadow side of my own kind of justice.

Unlike God's justice, human justice is, more often than not, marred by limited knowledge of the issues involved. It can become too overconfident and presumptuous to be fair and true *hic et nunc*, as Job's friends learnt from God. Job, the man clamouring for justice, also had to learn a lesson about justice from the God against whom he protested. If, in general, God's thoughts are far higher than those of human beings, it is nowhere so true as in justice.

**Theologian:** Justice among people must be therefore be judged by checking their kind of allegiance to God, the God of truth, the God of no ordinary truth. When two women wanted justice done by King Solomon regarding their claim to the same child, the real mother evinced a sense of truth and justice far higher, incomparably higher, than the false mother. The mother with the just claim was ready to lose her cause in order to save her child, whereas the woman with the false claim accepted a version of justice that would destroy him!<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the more vocal and aggressive the shouting for justice the more spurious the case proves to be. Truth will be the first casualty in causes that only seek to promote an ideology or pet idea, often

<sup>5</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, IV.i. For Shakespeare justice without mercy is such that 'none of us / Should see salvation'.

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Kings 3: 16–28.

enough nourished by aversion and animosity. It is always easier to fight for religious principles than to live up to them, as Georg Lichtenberg observed.<sup>7</sup>

**Priest:** You are touching a raw nerve in me: a sort of aversion, if not animosity, could hide behind the façade of justice. I have already said *the Lord's justice made me see the shadow side of my own justice*. What I mean is this: in the beginning I might have been justified in keeping myself away from Ella; but now I begin to suspect that my stance, continuing unchanged for so long, blessed neither me nor her—let alone her husband—with anything bordering on salvation. I remember the Tamil proverb: the king kills then and there, whereas God will bide and kill. But I never questioned myself as to whether my unrelenting attitude reflected God's forbearing and long-suffering in God's dealings with humans right from the beginning. Because of my unexamined life, a certain aversion had wormed its way into me and tainted my behaviour without my knowing. What is worse, as I sense it now, a spirit of vengeance was lurking in my heart.

**Theologian:** With this insight into your own heart you prove Jeremiah at once right and wrong. For it was he who said so pointedly: 'The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?' (17:9) Can I serve you any further as a sounding-board for your self-discovery?

**Priest:** If only friends like you had helped me long before! Of course the death of Ella's husband's has induced me to deal with this long-standing burden—fortunately not alone, but in your company. Never before had I seriously paused to suspect if my heart had reasons that were hidden from my reason, or to doubt whether my thoughts about Ella's situation reflected God's. If only I had struggled with God, like Jacob or Job! I cannot but wonder, with regret, if all my prayer has been out of sync with reality!

**Theologian:** But the reality of God is never out of sync with ours. What is more, God creates new reality in ourselves! Never leaving us to our own devices, it is God who heals us when we find ourselves torn or struck down.<sup>8</sup> So the Lord pursues us and knows to wait for the right time—the positive, hopeful aspect of his long-suffering—even if we have fled down the labyrinthine ways of the mind, with its own, all too human, postures and fears and self-defences.

<sup>7</sup> This is often attributed to the psychologist Alfred Adler, who famously refers to it. See Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Philosophical Writings*, translated by Steve Tester (New York: SUNY, 2012), 173: 'Is it not peculiar that men are so glad to fight for religion and so reluctant to live according to its precepts?'

<sup>8</sup> Hosea 6: 1.



Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery, by Lucas Cranach the Younger, after 1532

**Priest:** I feel like the bunch of scribes and Pharisees who were so quick to catch a woman in adultery but let the man escape, arraigning her alone before Jesus, all of them seething with zeal for the law about the adulteress, but not the adulterer and his adultery. Jesus saw that the time had come for the woman to be saved, more than she or her accusers thought; he made it known to her. And he let the accusing crowd see that their time for salvation would hardly come as long as they did not know their own sin. They did not know—how could they—what I myself have had to learn concretely only late in my life: that even if our conscience condemns us, God is greater than our conscience and knows everything!<sup>9</sup>

**Theologian:** That is the way Jesus judges—judging to save and not to condemn, as he explicitly told the poor, victimized woman: just as his Father had purposed in sending him to the world (despite the primordial and proverbial shame of Adam and Eve that led them to judge and hide themselves); just as he went on working to redeem everyone from the condemnation of themselves and others (at the very end even excusing his executioners); just as the Spirit orders and restores from the beginning and continues age after age. All this remains so even while there is, often

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 3:20.



enough, little or no sign of progressive, incontrovertible transformation in the world!

**Priest:** And so, facing God's peculiar way of judging, I came to be confronted with the Pharisaic streak in me—the streak that is so common among humans. In the light of the gospel I had to own up my own sins, some of them, shockingly enough, far from small. A Telugu proverb hits the nail on the head: you are a lord when you haven't been caught; once caught, a robber! If I had been saved from, or only escaped, human judgment and rejection and ignominy—because my sins were not public knowledge—I came to realise, in the course of time, my true need for God's salvation.

I felt a growing recognition that I needed salvation just as much as Ella, and even her husband, whom I almost loathed. If, on the basis of external righteousness and respectable morality, I once looked askance at them, I don't dare do so any longer. Though I might have presumed to take the side of God against them in the past when I was not conscious of my sin, I am now wisely aware that *my legitimate place is not beside God but with the sinful souls in need of God's succour.*

**Theologian:** What you are saying has the resonance of Paul; he speaks about the Jews and the pagans being in the same boat, in spite of the Jewish Christians boasting about their privilege as the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, God's own people. Paul wrote: 'Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?' (Romans 2:2) That is what has appeared so strongly and shockingly in recent times, as God has allowed the Church and the hidden sins of its priests and religious to be exposed to public scorn. In his last month in office, Pope Benedict considered it necessary to warn the Church against religious hypocrisy and rivalry.

**Priest:** It has come home to me, in my personal situation, that standing on the high moral ground when dealing with the moral failures of others is a sin in its own right, though it is considered respectable. If I need to mete out punishment to other errant souls I must be all the more subject to God's demands on me, which could be far greater than mine on people such as Ella. God has rightly said in the era of the Hebrew covenant, 'Vengeance is mine' (Deuteronomy 32:35). There is always *the temptation to play God and to be more jealous than God when dealing with others*—a temptation to which friends of Job succumbed with all their apparent good will.

**Theologian:** Jonah, too, seemed to be intent on the just punishment of the whole of Nineveh. But God's will was to convert the city and not to condemn it. Jesus revealed the same unfamiliar God as he went about his saving work. 'He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory' (Matthew 12:19–20): totally unlike Jonah!

**Priest:** The same kind of ungodly spirit could be found even in Jesus' chosen disciples. Once two of them, James and John, wanted to call fire from heaven to fall on the Samaritans, who would not let Jesus pass through their land. His rebuke to them—'You don't know what kind of spirit you belong to' (Luke 9:54)—resounded in my heart when I closed my heart to Ella and her family. The reason why Jesus came among humans was not to destroy but to save: 'I came not to judge the world, but to save the world' (John 12:47)!

**Theologian:** That leads us to a whole new perspective on our relationship with God, *and also* on our relationship with one another. Jesus came into our midst not to save some but to save all, you and me as much as Ella. All stand in need of redemption, without exception, as Abba God let the good Abraham know, undecieving him through his plea for the ten innocent persons living in Sodom.<sup>10</sup> God let Jeremiah know this too. And Jesus let his people know, leaving them in no uncertainty, when he disabused the Jews of their self-righteous uprightness, time and again.<sup>11</sup> You know surely—don't you?—this line from one of the Catholic Letters: 'It is hard for the righteous to be saved' (1 Peter 4:18)?

**Priest:** And so, we can save others in need, not in the supercilious way I adopted in relation to Ella, but *if only, or to the extent that*, we sense what it is to be saved ourselves, time and again. When we first experience true salvation, we begin to feel the greater need of continued salvation for ourselves! That is why Paul could say not only that 'the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners', but also that he himself was the foremost of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Without such an appreciation of the salvation brought by the Immanuel's incarnation our concern for others' spiritual welfare will

<sup>10</sup> See Genesis 18:16–33.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 18:9–14; John 9:41.

be dubious; it will bear no resemblance to the way Jesus made salvation available and accessible to all without making any exception.

**Theologian:** The reality of incarnation has a very practical bearing on the matter we are sharing. God being holy, absolutely other than what women and men are, God has nothing in common with our human nature.<sup>12</sup> And yet, God's incarnation means that God leaves or sheds divine transcendence and assumes our flesh, and shares closeness with our nature so that God may redeem humanity, dwelling within humanity. God who is more inward than my inmost self (*intimior intimo meo*), as Augustine said,<sup>13</sup> is equally inmost with regard to human society.

**Priest:** And so, in my desire to save people such as Ella, I ought to be far from being distant to them, indeed near, close, intimate to their situation. On the face of it, it is as spontaneously true as it is instinctively unacceptable and naturally repugnant.

**Theologian:** Yes, that is why Christianity, at least in its visible practice, is what it is—bereft of its salt and worthy of being stamped upon! But the reality of incarnation being what it is, we either accept it or not and cannot escape the challenge. Anyone who tries to escape it needs to be confronted.

**Priest:** I know; I can't deny it philosophically or theologically. I wonder if I've subscribed to it psychologically, in my flesh and blood.

**Theologian:** But flesh and blood does not reveal this to us; it is the Abba Father in Heaven who, as he made it happen, will also make it come home to us.

**Priest:** Historically humans have exhibited, more than anything, a skill in building walls (the Berlin wall, the Israeli wall) and curtains (iron or bamboo) between themselves and among themselves. These are huge symbols of the unseen walls and curtains between siblings, in-laws, neighbours, clans, classes, castes and sub-castes (as in India), language groups, races (as in apartheid, overt or covert), religions, states, nations, and so on. I know now that I had built my own kind of wall between myself and Ella and her family, not unlike the Pharisees, whose very name meant 'the separated'—separated from *hoi polloi* with the avowed purpose of keeping their cherished laws.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 40: 6–8.

<sup>13</sup> *Confessions* 3.6.11.

Jesus says nothing like this, but just the opposite: 'I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 8: 11–12). Following such new, universal teaching, made clear by continued revelation, the early Christians began welcoming, in fits and starts, all racial and social groups into their fold. In this respect, in spite of the good beginning, their history ran out of steam and ended up building new walls. The resulting tragedy of our *Christian kinds of wall* is that, though we call ourselves Christians, we have woefully missed and lost an essential aspect of redemption. But the original tradition grasped it, against all odds and not without struggle. As Paul famously put it, Christ made Jews and Gentiles one: 'in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Ephesians 2: 14).

**Theologian:** That was how God in Jesus did justice to all sinful humanity, divided in itself and distanced from God. God had prepared for such justice-making by leading prophets such as Isaiah to proclaim true faith, faith that knows how to do justice, the kind of faith that sees justice as a true religious practice: 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?' (Isaiah 58: 5).

**Priest:** I found that message from Isaiah so uplifting when I first heard it. While honouring God, the worshippers of God had also to consider those around them, especially those in need and penury, unlike themselves. The commandments of God were not to serve only God's glory but also the life of the people. St Irenaeus famously said, and we can tirelessly repeat, the glory of God is the living human person, the man and woman fully alive.<sup>14</sup> So, as Isaiah makes it clear, those who seek to please God by their devotion should equally please their neighbours in their utter human need.

That can happen only when people associate with each other, deal with each other, face each other without any barrier. The ancient, yet still relevant, challenge of God is 'not to hide yourself from your own kin' (Isaiah 58: 7). If this challenge once seemed pleasant, I found it hard in my relationship with Ella and her family. The cap fitted me but, squirming, I shirked wearing it. Until recently I failed this challenge, knowingly or unknowingly choosing to turn away from my own kin!

<sup>14</sup> See Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4. 34. 5–7.

**Theologian:** No flesh and blood can teach us this spirit, much less train us in it, but the Spirit of the Father by the demonstration of the flesh of the Son who pitched his tent among us (John 1:14). Thus becoming all things to all people, and so being more intimate to humanity than itself (*interior intimo humanitati*) by virtue of his solidarity with humanity, the Son of God not only said, ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28), but also, ‘anyone who comes to me I will never drive away’ (John 6:37). As he was, he would have us be. So he instructs us with injunctions such as: ‘Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you’ (Matthew 5:42)

**Priest:** The very last teaching of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel concerns precisely this.<sup>15</sup> His judgment of all people on the last day is based on the judgment that each has delivered on his or her neighbour. Entrance into heavenly fellowship with God and the angels and saints depends on entrance into earthly fellowship with one another, giving each his or her due. And so the practical law comes down to something like this: oblige your neighbours in their situation of need, not only any physical need but all human need.

**Theologian:** I appreciate the wonderful point you have made. I know that Ella and her family were not in any need of food or drink or clothing or shelter; but they had the far greater human need of acceptance. They



*From the Seven Works of Mercy, by Christian Schmid, seventeenth century*

<sup>15</sup> See Matthew 25: 31–46.

were strangers among their own kith and kin like you, wanting a sign of recognition, expecting a word of invitation, and waiting for a hopeful gesture towards the path of (mutual) forgiveness.

**Priest:** Normally I would have done all this for strangers. I did not do it for Ella and her family because—this is what I thought till now—they made themselves unacceptable strangers by their choice, by going their way, by showing no sign of turning back. I regret my long-held discrimination.

**Theologian:** What has changed your thinking now, and how? Have you had some new intuition into the unplumbed mystery of the incarnation, more known to us as an idea than a revelation of God.

**Priest:** God becoming man means, radically, that God turns towards those who have turned away from God. God in Jesus was indeed looking into the faces of men and women penetratingly, to befriend them, comfort them, eat with them, call them, chide them, confront them, reveal to them the Abba God, choose them for friendship and intimacy, and send them out to do work like his. By his works all that God incarnate wanted to achieve was to reach out to them in their need and make them look at him in his utter humanity. All through his life he stayed with them, not only at their best but no less at their worst. The worst of the worst started with the betrayal of him by Judas. He did not avoid Judas till Judas avoided him and then, till the end, he did not shun even his accusers and persecutors. Even on the cross he turned his gaze not only to his Abba and his lamenting sympathizers but also on those who were gloating over him, fixed to the cross.

**Theologian:** As I listen to you the poignancy of one of the earliest hymns moves me as never before.<sup>16</sup> The emptying of Christ Jesus, his taking the form, not only of a man but of a slave, with no freedom except to serve God and humans generously and humbly—all this I see like a blind man gaining new sight, or a hardened criminal agonizing over the pangs of conversion.

**Priest:** Paul expressed this divine–human mystery in his typical ways. In the name of all Christians he said, for example, that God proves God's love for us in that, while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>17</sup> He also said, in his own name, that Christ loved him and gave himself for him.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Philippians 2:6–8.

<sup>17</sup> Romans 5:8.

<sup>18</sup> Galatians 2:20.

Christ's gift was not achieved from above in the company of angels but on earth, where he keeps company 'among the poorest, lowliest, and lost', and that face to face, and even cheek by jowl.<sup>19</sup>

**Theologian:** Tagore's song reminds me of another celebrated song, the ancient song of the servant of Yahweh,<sup>20</sup> in its sombre tone. In his passion and death Christ had nothing attractive in his appearance; so victimized, in his suffering and ignominy, he became one from whom others would hide their faces.

**Priest:** In this way he bore the very appearance of sinners, all sinners, even the worst sinners—worse than all the onlookers—so much so that we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. They say, or we used to say, that he suffered and died for us sinners to atone for our sins. But, *in a way*, God does not need any atonement, as God does not punish for the sake of the so-called demands of justice. It is rather humans with a taste for punishing others who clamour for justice and atonement. And so, *Christ chose to meet the demands of human justice and punishment and atonement*, before religious and political authority, by becoming an accused worse than a brigand and so deserving condemnation to death on the cross.

**Theologian:** This unravels the mystery of the sinner Christ, Christ identified with sin, as Paul shockingly formulated it: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Corinthians 5:21)! The mystery of God being more intimate to me than myself, more intimate to society than society itself, becomes deeper: God is so intimate to me as a sinner, and to a society full of sin. Christ not only had the appearance of a human being, but of a human being caught out committing sin, in a society where everyone was ready to condemn others, especially others who were different from themselves. We have a prophetic illustration of this mystery of Christ in the Wisdom of Solomon, in the way the ungodly crowd treats the exceptional, righteous person, testing him and torturing him to death.<sup>21</sup>

**Priest:** Yes, we all turned our own way and Christ followed us; not that he sinned against God or humanity, but he let himself be taken for a blasphemer, troublemaker, wrongdoer, criminal, to the extent that not

<sup>19</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Here Is Thy Footstool', in *The Complete Poems of Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali*, edited by S. K. Paul (New Delhi: Sarup, 2006), 55.

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 53.

<sup>21</sup> Wisdom 2: 10–20.

only human beings but apparently also God took him to be so, which made him cry out to God, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) In the forsakenness of sin he was most one with humanity, with the humanity of sinners who had all gone astray.

**Theologian:** I see what you are driving at.

**Priest:** Seeing Jesus, who was not a sinner, forsaken as a sinner, convicted and crucified, I experience an uncomfortable revelation. Jesus' purpose was not to abandon any sinner, but to save all sinners and help them to abandon their sin. I have been at variance with his purpose; and I have been so unlike him. Though not above sinfulness myself, I had forsaken those whom I saw as sinners worse than myself, for more than half my life!

**Theologian:** In our sort of religiousness we have played many roles: we have been like Judas, betraying innocent blood for greed of some kind or other; or like the religious leaders in the Gospels, not stopping short of any evil in order to achieve their survival; or like Herod, using others only to satisfy our base instincts; or like Pilate, knowing what is right but failing to do it for fear of losing face. Of course, unlike any of these, our roles may, and do, bear our own signature.

**Priest:** Like mine. I only wish that, as I have taken the role of evil ones while playing the good, I could now retract what I have done and take my place beside the Good One to save those who are lost, myself first. He was the repairer of the breach between God and humanity, and I know he needs and seeks companions:

To love life and men as God loves them—  
for the sake of their infinite possibilities,  
to wait like Him,  
to judge like Him,  
without passing judgment,  
to obey the order when it is given and never look back—  
then He can use you—then, perhaps, He will use you.<sup>22</sup>

*Yaaro Lesjay* is a priest from India.

<sup>22</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 112.