

Westcott House Evening Prayer

20 February 2007 [Shrove Tuesday]

readings: Genesis 37.12-end; Galatians 2.1-10

His name was Eugene Stern. His parents were Russian émigrés, scientists who had managed to get out of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and to start a new life in the United States, in Boston. We were twelve years old when I got to know Eugene, and for reasons that I cannot quite explain, he fascinated me. Not that he was in any sense charismatic: in fact, he was one of the most unpopular kids at school. He was bad at sports, he spoke with a funny accent, and he seemed incapable of being sociable. Yet for all this, he also had the ability to seem arrogant, and often wore a smirk on his face that suggested that he thought the rest of us were complete and utter fools. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Eugene soon became the object of derision and sometimes outright persecution in the schoolyard. No doubt out of some innate contrariness of my own, I awarded myself the task of Eugene's defender during school recess. In this way, I cashed in what little social capital I myself could spare in the Darwinian world of early adolescence. And in this way too, Eugene and I became friends of a sort, at least until the end of the school year, when my family moved away and I went to another school.

Ten years later, I ran into Eugene again. This time we were both students at Harvard, and he still wore that same smirk on his face. He appeared to have emerged from the rest of his education well enough without my protective oversight. He informed me that he was off to do a Ph.D. in higher mathematics at Berkeley, and in the course of the same conversation also managed to let me know that I had just wasted four years of my life by doing a degree in English. More recently still, I have learned that Eugene is now a consultant in New York making lots of money. Plainly, he has moved on from being the easy target of bullies that he once was.

I thought of Eugene again when reading over the story from Genesis of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. Here is another person who has the capacity to attract the animus of those around him. And not entirely without reason, it would seem: like Eugene, Joseph is at once vulnerable and arrogant towards his peers. One might be forgiven for feeling that Joseph's brothers have good reason to resent the one whom they call in tonight's reading 'the dreamer' (Gen. 37.19). It is therefore striking that, of all of them, it should be the eldest, Reuben, who actually tries to save Joseph from the plot to kill him. As the firstborn of Jacob's sons, Reuben by rights ought to enjoy the special favour and privilege which Jacob has conferred upon Joseph instead. Yet rather than giving in to his jealousy or resentment and joining the others in hatching their plan, Reuben comes up with an alternative designed to defuse the situation and return Joseph to safety (vv. 21-4). We cannot know for certain what is motivating Reuben: perhaps he fears his father will blame him personally for Joseph's death, or perhaps he hopes that his father will think more of him if he saves his brother. Or maybe, just maybe, Reuben has compassion on his brother, a compassion which leads him to face up to the crowd of his brothers and to contradict their murderous plot. The point is not finally whether Reuben's motives are entirely pure – there is enough ambiguity in the story to suggest they are not. But what does matter is that Reuben intervenes in such a way that saves Joseph from the immediate fate of the scapegoat. Somehow or other he does not accept that Joseph's death will solve all the conflict and unhappiness that the family is experiencing. Reuben may not feel he has succeeded in saving Joseph, but in fact by his gesture of defiance, he has created a vital stopgap in the human cycle of violent retribution. And it is this crucial moment that ultimately sends Joseph on his odyssey into Egypt and eventually will lead to his vindication and his chance to forgive his brothers.

Reuben's gesture, it seems to me, speaks to some important questions about how we understand the relationship between those who are victims and those who are victimizers. And this, in turn, speaks to the very core of how we understand the Christian Gospel. For above all, what Reuben's action opens up is the possibility that not every human relationship in the story is reducible to these simple, fixed terms of victim and victimizer. Here is someone who finds himself in between. And this surely ought to give us pause to ask whether such terms, and the roles they describe, are ever entirely fixed in human relationships generally. It is surely closer to the truth to say that we are all, in different ways and at different times, capable of being both victims *and* victimizers, both those who experience exclusion and aggression, as well as those who impose it upon others. The great lesson that came to me when I saw Eugene Stern again after a decade was the realization that although I remembered him as a victim from my childhood and myself as his protector, in fact he had long ceased to be that person. Like Joseph, he had eventually emerged as a confident, capable man. And lest I should conceive of myself too fondly as a Reuben-figure who had bravely stood up against that and all other murderous crowds, I had to recognize at that moment that no one can claim such a role for himself permanently and as of right. The error is to assume that any such roles 'belong' to individuals. Heroes, villains, damsels in distress – these are masks which all of us are capable of wearing, and sometimes we put on more than one of them at once.

So how do we escape this dynamic of dysfunctional relationships, this zero-sum game where yesterday's victim becomes tomorrow's oppressor, and vice versa? For those of us who are Christians, the obvious answer is that Christ liberates us from this cycle by becoming the victim to end all victims. And this is absolutely right. Yet it is also only part of the story. For in embodying and teaching the perspective of the total victim – what the Catholic theologian James Allison has called 'the intelligence of the victim' – Jesus is inviting us to relearn the very basis of how we relate to one another. Interactions based on rivalry and exclusion are to be replaced by those which place the disempowered, the excluded and the unloved in the centre. But where this becomes difficult for many of us is when those who we take to be the disempowered, the excluded, and the unloved *change*. Like our roles and our relationships, we want our God to stay in one place. Yet God moves to wherever there is hurt, even when it moves to those who also are or have been cruel or exploitative. This does not mean, of course, that there is no such thing as human justice or moral accountability. But it does mean that these are not the ultimate standards on which our shared life in Christ is built.

Now I admit that this is an idea I personally struggle to accept. Jesus' call to stop fighting, to stop judging, to stop keeping score – such a call is both wonderful and very hard to answer. It means letting go of so much that we take to be crucial about ourselves, about what we think we owe the world and what we think the world owes us. Yet if we want to join the new humanity that we are offered in Christ, then we have to be willing to take the risk and let go of all the old boundaries and badges. This is why in Galatians St Paul is so uncompromising about his mission to the Gentiles. As a former victimizer who in Christ has embraced the intelligence of the victim, a persecutor who is now associated with those who in this context are excluded and judged inadequate, Paul is not about to submit to practices that reflect the old way of thinking. He understands that without a radically generous and unconditional extension of the Gospel to everyone, its essential universalism will be hampered and it will remain locked in the identity politics of first-century Judaism. Of course, the universal offer of inclusion through Christian faith in turn becomes a universal requirement that all other loyalties become secondary. And this is where the invitation of Christ to learn the 'intelligence of the victim' threatens not only our individual senses of self, but also our collective identities. We are invited to see that the most basic allegiances by which we are inclined to define ourselves – those of gender, race, sexuality or nationality – all of these must finally defer to the moment when we see vulnerability and respond to it. It is in such moments that we transcend ourselves, what we think we are or ought to be. Just as importantly, we transcend what we think others are or ought to be. In such moments we are simply invited to look for the victim face of Christ wherever it may be. Reuben seems to have caught an unexpected glimpse of it in the anguished eyes of his brother Joseph. Paul appears to have seen it in the eyes of Gentiles like Titus. Looking for Christ the victim in a thousand faces, we are free to stop being victims and victimizers. Looking for Christ the victim in a thousand faces, we are suddenly surprised to see that it is actually the resurrected one who is smiling back at us instead.