

The Story of Then

This piece of fiction arises out of a way to use art – literature – as the introduction to my PhD project with the Taos Institute and Tilburg University (Humanities). The use of story is intended to offer some context to a very old Christian debate, which occurred between two church leaders in the 4th century CE: Pelagius and Augustine. Central to the tension was whether or not the human species should be seen through the lens of *Original Blessings* or *Original Sin*.

The intention of the story is not to convince or sway the reader that one perspective was or is right. Rather, the use of fiction will hopefully allow the reader an opportunity to better appreciate a different time during the Christian church's history. It is by hearing a story that we might begin to imagine how *Then* was, in order to explore generative ways to better understand our *Now* ...

The Rock burned – it wasn't supposed to. The dream for which we'd all longed, for which so many had been martyred, seemed tangible, touchable, and attainable. And now, it's fallen. Perhaps that's too dramatic, but there it is nonetheless.

You might be wondering – depending how long it is from now when you are reading this: what's the Rock? For some, it's simply Roma – once the seat of the Pax Romana. A city where the once pagan Empire reached out into a world of violence and disarray and offered a semblance of stability – of order. But for those of us who have inherited the teachings of Jesus and continue to learn from those who endured the Way, the Rock is so much more. Hopefully as this diary unfolds that will become clear: simply know that the Rock – the place where Peter brought the Gospel – was supposed to be mark the culmination of such a long journey.

The Rock fell and now we are all scrambling trying to understand its meaning? Is our fate to be like that after Jerusalem was torched? From that came such change. So many of us left the synagogue to follow the One, the Way, the Christ ... but wasn't that supposed to be the beginning of the New World? Wasn't *Revelation* the map that brought us– finally – to the Kingdom? Well, it's gone now and I can see it in his eyes. As he writes his *City of God*, there's a light gone and the Sin about which he has constantly warned us seems to have come to be. The Serpent is in our midst!

I have so many thoughts – they're varied and scattered – and I am not even sure why I am writing this. At one time, I might have been allowed to write a biography – when women like Lydia and Phoebe helped Paul build the church. But it seems like that moment – when gender was not a barrier – has come and gone like so much. When did it all change?

I know that there have been debates and arguments. Oh, such arguments! I wonder if Jesus would have approved of how rhetoric seems to have replaced parable? I wonder what he would think of the right and wrongs we have created? I wonder if I am simply romanticising a church that seems to be slipping away? Perhaps, which never really was?

I also realise that I'm penning these words as my own lament. I've wrestled with trying to understand fully the musing thoughts and theology of the Bishop. In moments, he seems to demonstrate an openness to our – women's – ideas and then it's gone. All too often the promise of acceptance becomes tempered. At one moment we are almost equals and then he sees the Fall, the Serpent entwine the Rock and everything crumble. It's been like that since we all fled Roma: it's been that the way since we arrived in Hippo. Sometimes I wonder to which Bishop I am speaking: the inspired or the fearful one? I also wonder for which Kingdom does he long – Roma or the Promised One?

Am I getting ahead of myself? I have read, re-read, even asked Miriam to take a moment to edit – in between her own work with numbers – to see if this is the right way to record this moment. Because – trust me – this moment will change everything. Perhaps not the moment – exactly – but the completion of the *City* will set a course – I believe – that will reach well beyond his own intention. If I do not speak now, then I am lost to the Call to which I myself have responded.

Sin, the Garden, the Fall and the Rock, as far as I am concerned occurred in debates that I had wished would lead to agreement, not defeat for one idea and the idolatry – yes, I use that word most intentionally – of another. It's already begun: if we are all inherently sinful – even though Grace exists – then I fear what that means for us. What does a church built upon human brokenness mean when it tries to understand the Christos as one who loves all, not because of piety or privilege, but as fellow children of God?

If only the Monk had softened, if only the Bishop had listened ... and I guess that is the story I will revisit for you ... I pray you will hear a tale that was grounded in creativity and dialogue, but which ultimately failed to reach a mutually acceptable way of seeing our human relation to our Loving Father. Perhaps you will begin to imagine new ways to continue a conversation that will eventually need to be explored once more – for all of our sakes ...

As I continue to tell this tale, one in which two ideas of what it means to be human competed without the possibility of compromise, it feels important that you know something about us, our time and the way we write. I do not know if this will survive the years, but it is our tradition when we utilise speech or word to try to convince and to sway: not those with whom we are in debate, but those who are listening or reading. Whether a treatise or history, poetry or myth, there is

always a sense of a competition in which one must convince or withdraw. Some might call this invective, but rhetoric has been what has served the Empire.

Another thing that feels important to share is that the church, the one from which I write and the one found in those first letters of Paul are ... the same, yet different? We are no longer pursued, executed or ridiculed. Even more important to note is that there are few, if any, who are called to martyrdom. The irony is not lost on many of us that we now occupy the seats of authority that were once used to shackle and torture those of The Way.

I know that some have claimed the Monk was a martyr – but I do not want to get ahead of myself. I guess what you may need to know is that the church of my now, though hearkening back to the first, sits in a very different context. As such, it seems difficult – at times – to reconcile the two. I have consulted with Miriam, before proceeding, and I have decided to try to do this differently. I know I am not objective, especially after the barbarians violated the Rock. I will – nonetheless – try to present the Monk and the Bishop as dispassionately as I can. If you are to learn what you need whenever you are reading this, it seems necessary to try to share our time with you, while attempting to remain impartial.

Theodosius I was Emperor when he arrived in Roma. As Emperor some even attributed the title of ‘the Great’ to him. I’m still not sure that he earned that. The Empire began to crumble around him and – finally – was broken into two: east and west. I do not presume to understand the ways of politics and how to balance matters of states with Goths and barbarians, but in hindsight it seems to me that we should have seen the plaster falling from the frescoes then. I have no doubt the Bishop would disagree: from his perspective, it was Theodosius who finally established the needed orthodoxy the church required to be the Empire’s spiritual centre. To the Bishop’s delight, the Nicæan Christianity was finally entrenched and – as a result – less room was now made for others for whom Christianity might be explained in other ways.

It was into this political reality and warring diplomacy that the Monk arrived. He was already known as a moralist and – if memory serves – there was initially even concord between them. His exploration of Paul’s letters was exciting and it also highlighted the changing reality of the Church. It had been almost 100 years since the last martyrdom and almost 70 years since Emperor Constantine was converted during the Battle of Milan. The stories of Constantine having seen *Ἐν Τούτῳ Νίκα* blazing in the sky was enough for him to recognise in that sign that victory lay before him if he would but submit to the will of God. On that very day, his soldiers placed Christ’s ☩ upon their shields and the day changed everything. Even now – when that tale is told in house churches – I am not sure if the battle or Constantine’s deathbed baptism excites those new to The Way more! I wonder, sometimes, shouldn’t that worry me more?

As for Pelagius, however, people whispered that he had come as one of the old prophets from Britannia. Dressed in his simple asceticism – both literal and figurative – he carried with him an air some likened to the Baptist. He had come to assess the state of the Rock and already people were sympathetic to the message he brought.

At first, it was challenging, but not ... critical? But that quickly changed. Already sects had appeared in Spain. They had about them a missionary fervour that some said had not been seen since before Milan – in fact some went so far as to claim that their zeal went to the very heart of the church. These were gossiping whispers in 380 ... they would become much more than mere whisper.

It is difficult to fully describe the church at this point. There were no barbarians threatening the Eternal City – Theodosius was able to create an illusion that remained well painted for too long. Already the church had made great strides – in fact some contended that the new age was Golden because of the adoption of the Way as the state religion: Christianity. Our early forbearers' ways of organising soon found their way into the governance of the Empire. This merging of Empire and Christ's ministry was the sign for many that now the Kingdom was becoming and Christ would certainly soon reveal that which was promised!

For the Monk, however, such certainty and confidence was not the true teaching. Though at first he was less articulate, some already saw the beginnings of a Priestly revival. What does that mean, you might wonder if you were not here at the time?

It is the oldest tension the Bishop would contend. Of course he tries to make that clear, but his deference to Plato and Aristotle often seem more confusing than illuminating. I think Miriam explains it much better – at least for the newly baptised. In her own way, she cuts through all of the debate. For her it was as simple as 'who was in and who was out.' The Bishop believed everybody was invited and longed for Christ's message of the Father's universal love. The Monk, however, was never convinced of that (in the same way) and the ensuing debates were – even then – already demonstrating that the Good News could be wielded – with sad irony – like a weapon.

I know that I have mentioned this, but you have to remember 410 in all of this. In every word that I write and in every attempt to try to explain to you the swirling ideas that threaded between the two of them there was the Rock's burning ...

There are points in time and space when everything changes. One of those moments that we celebrate is Moses' acceptance – even if reluctantly – to free us from Pharaoh. And though that decision is certainly remarkable, it is the moment when choice and God's action in the world mark a miracle.

That point in time would be the parting of the seas to allow the exiles to follow the Spirit. Without that moment, that particular action, I would not be writing as one who was born into a house church, thrived in the Eternal City, enjoyed the freedom that came with the loss of my dear Lucius and who will likely live out her days in Hippo hoping that the church that is being fashioned by the Bishop will remain tolerant, even though each passing day feels more confining.

And obviously the mystery and wonder that is the resurrection of the Christ is central to our identity, our sense of who we are. That moment – miracle – which remains so difficult to understand has led men and women to choose death to be free.

As it was then, we still long to see Christ in one another. Just imagine what it must have been like for Mary – years after the miracle as she reflected on what she had seen that day. How do we reconcile that in strangers – as in the gardener – Christ can be seen in others? A gardener who likely was not of the Way, perhaps did not even know who Jesus was, was just going about a normal day though all around him was the extraordinary. And – in him – Mary saw the Risen One! How do you explain faith, how do you share it? Early on we simply did what Paul told us: go out, help others and – when asked – share the Good News with those who wondered why we did what we did. When asked, we offered that our freedom came in sharing the bounty that is God's in the world with one another. That our freedom came in simply letting go of the constraints of Empire and following Christ. And – in turn – we were able to respond to the needs of both our own and others. Spreading the word occurred in relationship, not mandate or doctrine. There were no letters flying from Hippo to Bethlehem, there was no politicking to establish orthodoxy. I apologise, I believe in the zeal of remembering the past, I have been distracted. Simply remember, please, as I proceed that 410 shifted what had been moralistic and theological debates and discussion into a battle for what it meant to be a follower of Christ.

For the Bishop this was no longer an intellectual exercise, it was an exorcism of a taint that threatened the very church he loved, the very structures to which he had devoted his life. If Pelagius' response to the Bishop's *Confessions* was confrontational, perhaps even personal, Augustine's response to the Monk's belief in Free Will was violent. For the Bishop – therefore – the central thing that was threatened was the church itself and – as you know and I hope is becoming clear – church and Empire were now intimately entwined and for Pelagius that was a heresy!

When would I say this escalated? I have thought about this for some time. There is no question that the expanding trauma we experienced followed by the barbarians' violation of Roma affected everyone. But I think the spark, the catalyst was in Bethlehem. The riots that occurred around the monastery were like the wicker on the pyre that the northern pagans used in their idolatries. More specifically, the fires opened the way for Jerome and the Bishop to finally

reconcile. Though there remained strain in their reunion, it established a commonality that allowed the two to look in the same direction for the first time, as opposed at one another like two war dogs on the field. And that focus was upon those who were enamoured with the growing purity movement: the Pelagians!

Jerome was not unlike Augustinus. His youth was spent in revelry. He was attracted by the vagaries that Roma held for those misguided by the Greek drink and orgiastic cults. Those experiences during his years of study were some of the major sources of repentance he sought after his hearing Christ call him to the fold. I cannot imagine what lascivious and wanton pursuits would have been so ingrained that he continues to experience guilt, but for many this devotion has only increased the esteem with which he is viewed. His commitment to visit places of honour for the Martyrs and the catacombs of the Apostles while he was in Roma continues to be a model of repentance.

Before the Monk created an opportunity for them to smooth over their disagreements, I understand that part of the tension between the two was Jerome's use of the Hebrew texts to translate the Holy Testaments. Augustinus – and others who supported him – argued that the Greek version was far superior. For the Bishop, the depth and richness of the Greek was much preferred: as his own ongoing commitment to reconcile the Platonic schools with Christ's teaching well illustrate. A pursuit that some find tenuous, but that's another distraction.

Even then, the use of the Hebrew was tainted by a sense that Jesus' betrayal by those in the synagogue would only be perpetuated by using an inferior language. There can be no doubt that for many this reinforced a growing sense of antagonism to the Jews, which many of us feel does not bode well as the church becomes further enmeshed in the matters of Empire. We whisper these concerns, lest we experience further disregard by those writing in the school of Timothy. As I have mentioned, though there was a time when women could discuss theology equally, that freedom has become more precious, guarded and tentative. And that uncertainty is only increasing as certain interpretations of Paul become more accepted.

As I write this and prepare to pause, I realise the growing tension with our relationship with the synagogue and increasing sense that Paul's egalitarian message is being encroached upon, reimagined, may also connect with the timing of Roma's fall. In fact, perhaps for some the Monk's own challenges and the events in Judaea simply mark that change. In fact, I am only recognising this possible connexion now, as I write upon this parchment in the waning evening light!

Riots – that's how it started. I don't think anyone would have known, least of all the Bishops, that he would find himself having to confront another heresy. So many had arisen around the time of Alaric's violation, that many of us thought the second coming – as was prophesied – was about

to happen. Of course, that was not to be and it still feels like we are trying to reconcile ourselves to such hubris: or such is what I have come to believe. I am not – however – so sure what the Bishop feels anymore.

This heresy, of course, would eventually lead directly to the Monk. But the violence that occurred at Jerome's monastery and the subsequent correspondence between him and the Bishop made it inevitable. Regardless of who was right, Augustinus realised that there was another potentially divisive theological idea that was competing with his own work, the die was set.

I realise that you may wonder about such conflict occurring between Christians – especially of a violent nature. I pray that from your vantage such unfortunate situations, as this, are no longer the case. I pray that the church has found ways to embrace one another in that metaphor that still touches me deeply: one body made up of equal and necessarily different constituents.

But for us – and I have discussed this with the Miriam and the others Sisters – it seems that once The Way was adopted as the Empire's religion – Christianity – we went from being persecuted to endeavouring to make sure that all the threads in the tapestry were complementary and no longer frayed or tangled. What this meant – of course – was that we moved from a place of freedom in struggle to the constraint of power. Once again – the irony is not lost on us.

And what – do you wonder – might have been the cause of this fray in front of Jerome's hermitage? Remember, that it is shortly after 410, everywhere there seems to be an unravelling and the Bishop was dealing with ongoing debates and controversies. Usually he addressed these through his correction of choice: epistles or letters.

I believe that he had no idea what was happening in Bethlehem, however. I also do not think that he was aware that Pelagius was a threat to the order toward which he was striving. Jerome, however, was indeed aware and this became clear the moment that Augustinus had his report from Orosius. Jerome and the Monk had been at odds for some time, perhaps years and possibly as long as decades. Regardless of the duration, Orosius' arrival was indeed fortuitous: if he had not, who knows what theology might now be prevalent: the Bishop's 'sin' or the Monk's 'blessing?'

I realise there are so many names and people involved that I am worried I may either miss something important or overwhelm you with all of the characters and voices, debates and snares that was the Pelagian Debate. I will, therefore, side with caution and name only those who seemed to directly connect the Monk and the Bishop. Should such a gloss, however, prove to have been a mistake, I pray I will have your leave of pardon for trying to present a cohesive tale, as opposed to a litany of names and dates.

Orosius was many things – but for the sake of this story he is best appreciated as the Bishop's collaborator – especially in the writing of the *City of God* – and perhaps more importantly his

confidant abroad. The Bishop was often too busy to travel. He had too many responsibilities and projects underway that travel was not possible. From his ongoing use of letters to bring the church into a semblance of conformity, his regular ecclesiastical duties to his writing and exploration of reconciling the Platonic and Aristotelian schools with Christ's teachings, it is any wonder he had time to enjoy the gardens and Sabbath offered at Hippo! And yet, it was important for him to know what was happening throughout Christendom. Where Paul could travel and write when the church was much smaller so many years ago, Augustinus did not have that luxury. As a result, Orosius was often his eyes and ears, listening and watching for the Spirit's revelation and also wary of lurking heresy.

Some have been less kind to Orosius and – in turn – the Bishop. Some have tried to frame their role and relationship as an oppressive enterprise intent on purging, even suppressing, the creativity of Paul's church. Some have claimed that it was in Palestine and in the streets of Jerusalem – particularly – that the church continued to dance sublimely, in order to avoid what some believed was an inevitable schism between east and west. A rift that overlooked a chasm of competing views of the nature of God and how the Holy of Holies related to the Spirit and Son. Often – and hopefully rightly so – such voices of discontent were most often those found guilty of heresy. And in this regard, the Pelagians' actions and choices were of concern to those in Jerusalem and to Jerome in particular. Upon his arrival, they would also become those of Orosius'.

Orosius had been dispatched to Palestine. The primary reason was so that – through him – the Bishop might be able to learn from other fellow Christian intellectuals in the Holy Land. Specifically, with an increasing – though usually unspoken – division between the Latin and Greek churches, Augustinus was keenly aware that his letters alone would be insufficient to maintain the integrity of his beloved church. Orosius, therefore, arrived in Jerusalem several years after the fall of the Eternal City with two objectives: nurture and establish new relationship with the up and coming Greek Christian thinkers; and, assess to what extent there were fermenting threats to the church.

As I have mentioned, the concern was not external – any longer – but the reality of internal aberrant theologies or philosophies that might be festering owing to the limitation of the Bishop's reach that far from the Latin centre of the church. Still – even then I would him hear him say, sometimes even yell – the divisions between Peter and Paul still ran too deep and that only through intentionally maintaining relationship and enforcement – hopefully through the use of letter, though the final arbiter of a Council and its ability to issue a condemnation of heresy was the penultimate tool of excommunication – could the integrity of all that had been achieved thus far be maintained. For in his eyes – at these moments of bluster – I could see him hearing the

Roma fall. And that haunting now drove him, sometimes that his very health was of concern. Others may not see it, but for the Sisters and I, we see the toll and pray that there may be reprieve from what the Greek's once called his inner daemon, though we knew to be the Spirit driving him toward a goal that perhaps one day might become clear.

What finally caught Orosius attention – not that Jerome was not persuasive – but it was the Monk's public use of one of the letters of correspondence with which he had been pursuing with the Bishop. Their letters were familiar and cordial, but in general there was not the depth in them as occurred with those with whom Augustine was in serious reflection. The letter – in and of itself therefore – possessed little substance. But the way that Pelagius was using it, however, incensed Orosius!

One of the traditions that the Greek church had adopted from the pagan philosophers was public testimony and debate. In the agora and markets, in the public spaces, the various schools would gather and – as I have mentioned before – would endeavour to convince the listener, those passing-by of the validity of their perspective, philosophical trajectory, and school of thought. This tradition would become the purview of Christians. And – in like manner – the nuances and nature of faith would be openly discussed and debated. Often – too – it was in this formative soil that new and exciting developments – for which the Bishop was always seeking – would occur. And, unfortunately, so too could the deviant be found.

Imagine a wide open space, filled with stalls of wares and goods and in the midst, on the sides and along the entry ways, people are clustered. Often sitting around someone who is talking. Perhaps on a wall, a pedestal, or a box. And the speaker is addressing anyone who will listen. Often, there might be two groups, three or more, and each groups teacher or envoy are talking – well more like yelling – at one another. Fine tuning their rhetoric at one another. And – remember – the intention is not to convince the other, it is to entice the listener, the passer-bier that their argument is the more refined, the more convincing: the true!

Often these clusters are made up of men and civility is often balanced tentatively. Some of the more ardent and passionate of any particular school may even be carrying, usually concealed, an appliance or two should the debate turn quickly from simple rhetoric to the use of violent emphasis. And it is in such a venue that the Monk finally came to the attention of Orosius, and ultimately the Bishop. On an innocuous day, in the agora of Jerusalem likely, Jerome had advised Orosius to attend the daily banter and debate. The rest unfolded as it was wont to do.

As Orosius listened, his disgruntled acceptance of Jerome's direction quickly turned to what ... anger? Shock? At the very least dismay. As Pelagius addressed the large crowd, he held a letter emphatically. And that stress of prominence directly implied to all who were listening that the

Bishop himself supported what he was saying! I can only imagine Orosius' manner, but I have no doubt he was internally fuming.

The ire that Orosius experienced in the agora, on that day, might have been less – though no doubt just as concerning – had it been anyone other than the Monk. Pelagius was effective in communicating his theology and ideas both through the spoken and written word. While he was in Roma, he had already demonstrated his ability to convince and had begun to establish effective sects in Spain.

After that, even those in the nobility in the Eternal City were listening. While he talked about the establishment of the holy elite that comes with a pure discipline many began to listen. And as the illusion of the Empire's safety that Theodosius was painting – especially in respect to Roma – began to fade, more were drawn to the Monk's ascetic arguments.

As with many of us, the Monk left the Rock after it had fallen. Though his ideas and theology were provocative, perhaps even exciting for some, it was not (at least at the time did not appear so) heretical. For the Bishop, all were welcome into Christ's church. Regardless, he would argue, we are all sinners and it is only through God's grace that salvation might be found. The church – therefore – was the Body and instrument for such universal invitation. And – on the day when that universality was established – all might experience the healing of our sinful nature through God's act of love.

During those early years, as the Monk preached and critiqued in the Eternal City, therefore, he seemed to echo that sentiment, but with a further expectation of a commitment that some felt was lacking in a blanket universality that the church might promise. For the Monk, therefore, it was not just an open policy that was important for healing, but the act of committing to it and letting go of the trappings that held one back. Provocative indeed to talk about relinquishing worldly things in order to attain salvation, but not heresy ... then.