

# A freedom like no other!

## *Salvation through Christ*



### The human predicament

All is not well with the world. A quick glance at the evening headlines confirms this: wars, starvation, crime, loneliness, broken relationships. The problem of evil confronts us everyday – at times in terrifying proportions.

Even those who choose God find themselves in a constant battle with selfishness, poor self-esteem, anger and fear. St Paul expressed this tension in his letter to the Christian community in Rome: 'I cannot explain what is happening to me, because I do not do what I want, but on the contrary, the very things I hate' (Romans 7.1). There is a brokenness about the world which we experience as a dividedness within ourselves, a tendency to be selfish. Furthermore, the very finiteness of our humanity means that we experience ourselves as limited, restricted in our potentials, and destined for death.

The brokenness is nothing new. As the Church's teaching on Original Sin indicates, humanity has a history of a bias against God, a refusal to live according to God's ways that goes back to our earliest beginnings and has opened up a path of destruction. Deeply embedded in our human condition there is a refusal to accept God, even when we know that God's desire for us is a life of wholeness, love and freedom from the barriers that frustrate and limit our God-given potentials. It is the exercise of our gift of free will which allows us to turn our back on such a promise. The biblical account of Adam and Eve (Genesis, chapter 3) tells the story of this choice against God, the effects of which envelop the human race to this very day.

### The Solution

The world is full of individuals and groups proposing solutions to the world's brokenness: economists, politicians, psychiatrists and psychologists, welfare agencies, new age positive thinking, self-help books, transcendental meditation.

*'Sometimes I can't believe my dad could love me that much. Our family has been through all sorts of difficulties, and I for one have certainly been the cause of a lot of worry and heartache. Yet, no matter what I do, no matter what happens, dad is always there for me.'*

### Approaching the Topic

This comment from an 18 year old attests to the power of unconditional love at work in family life. How much more profound and inexplicable is the love that God offers our human family. No matter what we've done where we've been, God loves us and offers us a place to call home. With this backdrop, we turn now to explore a Catholic understanding of redemption, the salvation offered the world through Jesus Christ.

All these are human efforts to seek wholeness and to replace chaos with harmony. Catholics, too, strive to create such solutions. However, deeper than all these, we believe that the only real solution is God's solution: the saving love of Jesus Christ. All other solutions must ultimately find their source and completion in this fact: that Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection and through the power of God's Spirit, has liberated humanity from its sinful predicament. Without the underpinning of this conviction of faith, our human efforts – noble as they may be – are limited.

### How has Jesus 'saved' us?

Catholics believe that Jesus, the Son of God made human, reveals to us the fullness of life. Through his Spirit he calls us to our ultimate destiny which lies beyond this earth as we know it. Our true home is with God.

In the wake of Christ's resurrection, the early Christians caught a glimpse of the original goodness in which they were created.

They had a taste of what the world could be like when people lived in love and peace. Before their very eyes they witnessed healings, conversions, reconciliations and other great works of God. They recognized that such a world was none other than the beginnings of the 'kingdom of God' of which the Jewish prophets had spoken:

*'He will rule over the nations and settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not raise swords against nations; they will train for war no more'. (Isaiah 2.4)*

Jesus himself drew upon the words of the prophet Isaiah to describe his mission:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me*

**For God so loved  
the world that he  
gave his one and  
only Son, that  
whoever believes in  
him shall not perish,  
but have eternal  
life.**

*to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up broken hearts, to proclaim liberty to the captives'. (see Luke 4.16-21)*

By giving of himself in this way, Christ revealed the extent and immediacy of God's presence and opened up humanity and all of creation to a whole new way of living. This is the great gift of 'new



life' we celebrate when a person is baptised into the Christian family.

### Salvation and Suffering

In the face of such a great gift, however, opposition emerged. The authorities of Jesus' day could not cope with the consequences of his love. It challenged their control over the people. It undermined their authority which was built on self-interest. They conspired against Jesus and put him to death by

### 'GOD, ARE YOU REALLY THERE?'

Revelation: how God is known to us.

About what has been from the beginning,  
and what we have heard,  
and have seen with our own eyes,

what we have looked upon and touched with our hands, I mean the World who is Life.

(1 John 1.1)

These words of the early Christians speak of a tangible experience of 'knowing' God. How can this be? How can Christians claim to 'know' God? Such fundamental questions lead us to the topic of *revelation*. Christians believe that God has been revealed to us through the ages as a God of infinite love.

How is this revelation manifested? Perhaps you can begin answering that question yourself. Have you ever stood in awe of a breathtaking sunrise? Or gazed at the intricate beauty of a dew-tipped spider-web? Do you recall the inner sensations of wonder, of being in the presence of a scene whose artistry goes beyond the possibilities of human hands? The scriptures are full of people who have been deeply moved by such encounters (see Psalm 19.1; Romans 1.19-20). Experiences like these point to God's existence through the beauty and order of nature and the universe.

However, revelation through nature can take us only so far. Christians believe that humanity is offered an even deeper understanding of God. As recorded by the sacred writings of our ancestors in faith (the Old and New Testaments), God has been revealed not as a what but a who. Not primarily as a set of rules or commandments but as a person.

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crucifixion.

Yet even death did not stop the power of God's love. In fact, it only proved the point even more! The Christian faith is built upon this conviction: that Jesus rose from the dead and lives on with God in a new kind of life which we too, by faith, are invited to share.

But sharing in this new life means also undergoing the suffering and death that Jesus went through. For some Christians this has meant physical death – martyrdom.

For others, it means facing many small 'deaths' in daily life. For example, when:

- we surrender our selfish attitudes and destructive habits;
- our deepest religious convictions are ridiculed;
- those closest to us let us down;
- tragedy impinges upon our lives;
- we suffer at the hands of unkind people or unjust systems;
- our hopes and enthusiasms seem to be crushed.

Like Jesus, we must face the paradox that loving involves pain. Yet, such love ultimately brings us beyond this pain to true happiness, wholeness and freedom.

**How do we live as a**

## **God is nothing like a politician imparting policy statements from some remote, impersonal government bureaucracy. God's approach is 'hands-on'**

**'redeemed' people?**

There are a variety of terms Christians use to refer to the salvation Jesus brings us: redemption, freedom from sin, liberation from captivity, the renewal of creation, humanity made whole. In other words, our faith in Christ allows us to live with a special kind of freedom, a freedom which finds tangible expression in the world today:

- when we find it within ourselves to forgive and be forgiven.
- when we form genuine relationships with others and live in community.
- when we experience healing and reconciliation.
- when we discover untapped potentials within ourselves and act on it.
- when we are prepared to face our difficulties with hope.
- when we are not afraid to take a stand against injustice.
- when we sense a loving and

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We sometimes speak of this revelation of God as 'the divine self-communication'. Imagine a dialogue in which a man speaks of his love for his beloved. As the woman who is his beloved listens to his words, she is drawn into relationship with him. She cannot receive his words as mere pieces of information or statements of fact, separate from the man or herself. The act of communication evokes an interpersonal encounter. Similarly, when we talk about the revelation of God, it is incomplete to refer simply to a series of propositions *about* God (doctrines, creeds). We need to see it in terms of personal encounter and dialogue. God invites each of us into a living and personal relationship of love, in order to discover the true meaning and joys of life.

The deeply personal nature of God's revelation is shown in an extraordinary way in the person of Jesus Christ. That God should want to come and live amongst us as part of the human race, even suffer and die out of love for us, tells us just how intimate is this self-communication. God is nothing like a politician imparting policy statements from some remote, impersonal government bureaucracy. God's approach is 'hands-on' – right here with us – in all the ups and downs and mess of life. It is Jesus who makes God's revelation so personal. It is Jesus' invitation to each person to come to know God as our Father that leads to live – true, abundant life in this world (John 10.10) and eternal life with God in the age to come.

**Having touched on this immense topic of how God is revealed to humanity, we leave you with this thought to ponder: What experiences in your own life, dramatic or ordinary, have opened you to the reality of God's loving presence... or have at least raised the questions?**





hope-filled presence sustaining the universe and touching our lives in subtle and unexpected ways.

The more we open our hearts and minds to the Gospel message, the more abundantly we open ourselves to 'salvation experiences' like these and to the reality of the Kingdom of God.

## The role of the Church

Furthermore, the salvation offered us by Jesus in integrally connected with community. God is love, and love goes hand in hand with relationships, intimacy, and a sense of belonging. Thus, our faith draws us to Jesus, but not an 'isolated' Jesus. It is a Jesus embodied in his people, his followers, those whom he lovingly draws so close to himself that we call them 'the body of Christ'. The Church is the visible structure which gives expression to this body on earth. It is the community which bonds people of Christian faith and allows them to collectively witness to

and 'speak' Christ to contemporary society. When people are baptised into this Church family they are enveloped by sustaining relationships of faith which enable 'salvation experiences' to grow, deepen and attract others in turn.

## Eternal life

While our journey towards wholeness has already begun on earth, as Christians we look forward to the fullness of life; the day when all things will be brought to completion in Christ and we will share eternal life with God. With the assurance of this promise, we live in confidence and trust. This does not imply, however, a glib sense of superiority. A Catholic understanding of what it means to 'accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour' includes, not just a once-and-for-all decision, but an ongoing acceptance and re-commitment to Christ throughout our lives. It also involves mission. Ours is a gift to be shared with all peoples of the world.

## A Story

When I was a teenager, I suffered a traumatic experience that caused me to become very cynical. I was often angry and sarcastic towards men. Rob received the same treatment when I first met him. So I couldn't understand why he hung around, until one day I realised he really did love me. Gradually, the icicles on my heart began to melt. I started to trust again. We were married, until he died in a car accident ten years later. The grief was terrible, but I will never allow myself to become bitter like before. You see, Rob's love gave me my life back. How could I turn my back on that gift now? He showed me how to look at the world with different eyes – 'God's eyes'. Through Rob I came to understand God's love. He taught me to see the hand of God at work even amidst the debris of the world's mess. While others became overwhelmed by all the negative news, Rob would never fail to notice little kernels of hope. I recall him excitedly waving *Time* magazine at me the year it displayed the cover photo of the Pope,

his hands extended to his would-be assassin. 'Why forgive?' was the headline. I thought of him when I read about the belated welcome home parade for Vietnam vets in 1987. Rob would have delighted in that scene. 'More evidence,' he would say. Evidence that wounds can heal. Wars can end. Love does win through. Rob was the sort of guy that worked tirelessly to bring about a reconciliation between two estranged relatives, long after others had given up. I remember him, too, talking glowingly about the caring neighbourhood initiative that started up in our locality – volunteers helping elderly people in quiet, everyday ways. Rob's life – and even his death – has instilled in me an unshakable belief that Christ's love is at work in the world, whether or not people recognise him as the source. How much greater are the possibilities when we recognise the face of Jesus, call him by name and make a choice for him. (Sarah)

## Your Story

### Think

Reflect deeply upon your experience of life:

- In what ways have you encountered the world's 'brokenness'?
- In what ways have you observed healing taking place in the world?
- Where is there brokenness and wholeness in your own life

How would you describe your relationship with

- God?
- Jesus Christ?
- followers of Christ?
- the Church?

### Pray

Loving God,  
reveal to us your hopes and dreams for our lives. Bind our wounds and bring the world to peace and wholeness. Amen.

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