

## Free and equal! Towards a more humane society

### The Place of Christians in Society

It is amazing, but it is still true. After 2000 years, and after more than 200 years in this country, the question of what role Christians *as Christians* should play in our society remains *contentious*, even *conflictual*.

*Some Christians* have merged their Christian faith with what is *legal*, socially acceptable or comfortable in our culture. They seem to have *lost any critical or prophetic edge* in relation to the ethos that determines our economics and our social norms and our political strategies.

*Other Christians* have divorced their faith from their social and professional life. They have *privatised* their faith. For them faith in Jesus Christ is a *private* and *personal* even *confidential* matter. In their civil and their Christian lives they march to different drum beats.

*Others* again have *withdrawn* from social responsibility and limit the consequences of their faith to *individual and personal ethics*.

And they *all* paint a *picture of Jesus* which is convenient to their vision of life.

So it seems that we have to *start*, ever again, at the *beginning* if we want to determine the *role of Christians* in our society, and what we as Christians may *have to offer* to our society.

### Jesus does not fit any norm

The *ground* and the *content* of our faith is not religion, but *Jesus Christ*.

Jesus *did not fit any given norm*, but the *passion* and *direction* of his life was clear. Indeed the *purpose*, the passion of his life was so clear that while *some* were fascinated, sought his nearness and followed him, *others* criticised, opposed, captured, tortured and executed Jesus within a fairly brief period of his activity.

Had he simply been religious, conversed about 'God', attended the temple or the Synagogue, go to the parties of the Sadducees, joined the meetings of the Pharisees, lived the acceptable life of a religious Jew, he would not have *provoked* trouble for himself in such a short time.

But he did *get into trouble!* Jesus became uncomfortable for the institutions and their leaders of his day and place. He obviously *meddled* in politics, economics and institutional religion. Jesus was a meddler. A spoilsport. A *nonviolent* instigator.

But *why* did *some* seek his *nearness* – even discovering in Jesus' presence that 'God' is more than a name - while *others* felt *offended*, got upset, planned to move against him?

The reason is that *Jesus had a passion and his life had purpose and direction!* 'God' was not simply a word in his conversations, but the passion of his life, his ultimate concern, the liberating focus of his conscience.

He retrieved the *best of his religious tradition*, he tuned into the song of his mother Mary, and announced the *program of his life*. The evangelist Luke put it into beautiful words:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Lk 4:18-19)

That refers to the *arrival of the 'reign of God'!*

But *what moved Jesus at the centre of his life?* How can we best describe the *outworking* of his faith in God?

Let me try to do it in the words of the season that we have just celebrated. Christmas. Epiphany. *Grace becoming event.* Divine hospitality in action. *God sharing God's rich life with the poverty of human existence.* Christians celebrate that God can no longer be understood apart from *making human life human!*

They celebrate this by *remembering* the grand story and by *living it out* in their daily life.

Jesus *fleshed out* this passion of restoring human dignity wherever he found it broken. *His awareness of God* was personal and intimate - *it became visible in his passion to make human life human.*

For that passion the authorities *moved against* Jesus. For Jesus the reality 'God' was *inter-locked with the dignity of human beings* - the dignity of *all* human beings.

So when there was a question of *priorities*, the *scene was set.* The *moral presumption was in place.* The ethical intention was decided - apart from the actual situation.

- Should he heal a person in need on the Sabbath or wait until the next morning as law and customs required?
- Should he have table communion with people who were considered religiously suspect or ritually unclean?
- Could he speak God's liberating nearness - like faith and forgiveness - into people's lives, even though he would be accused of arrogating divinity to himself?

Such decisions are never easy. Moral discernment and action always begin '*at the point of pain*'. The choice was *not easy*, but it was *clear!* Given a conscience focussed on God, Jesus acted out of that awareness. He was not a hypocrite. His deeds cohered with his confession of faith and its moral consequences. For Jesus,

*humanity*, the *wholeness* and *well-being* of human persons, is privileged over religious rules and customs (Mark 2:27).

For his religious opponents, however, Jesus was a *blasphemer* and *seducer* of the people (Deut. 13 and 17), and as such, in *their* eyes and by *their* interpretation of the law, he deserved the death penalty (Lev. 24.16).

But, my friends, the *grand story continues!* Where humanity said 'NO', God said 'YES'! That is what Christians celebrate at *Easter*. And God *continues* to say 'YES'. The words of the Christmas hymn in the Gospel of John cannot be surpassed: 'The light *shines* (!) in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (1:5).

The light of *God's humanity* cannot be extinguished because 'God is light'. The love of God's liberating compassion cannot be quenched because 'God is love'.

The *narrative*, its *author* and *content* now defines the life of Christians. Not withdrawal from the world, not assimilation into the world, not a militant overthrow of the world, but a divine naming, a baptism from above:

**'You are the salt of the earth', the 'light of the world', the 'body of Christ'!**

Not 'you *should* be' – defining life in terms of *morality*;

not 'you *will* be', *escaping* from the present into an undetermined future;

The indicative: 'you *are*'!

This is your identity, your destiny, your calling. Your life will have meaning, it will flourish as you *become* who you *are*!

- the '*salt of the earth*', preserving God's good creation, adding flavour and sustenance to the society in which we live;

- the '*light of the world*', highlighting what is good and beautiful, unmasking what is bad and ugly;
- the '*body of Christ*', by which the riches of divine hospitality are shared with a needy world.

That is the privilege of the Christian and the Christian community: to *witness in word and deed to the humanity of God*.

## **Affirmation and transformation**

What does it mean to *celebrate the humanity of God* – concretely? How does divine hospitality become *event* in our world? Where may we see *signs* of the presence of God?

As we look at life and our place in it I would like to suggest that we adopt an *attitude of affirmation and transformation*.

Not *withdrawal*, not *denial*, not *violent overthrow*, not *assimilation*, but *recognising and appreciating what is good and humane and beautiful* and at the same time *evaluating, unmasking, criticising and protesting* against what is *ugly and inhumane*.

The *norm* to adopt and live this attitude for Christians is the *story of Jesus*.

Let me illustrate what I mean on *four issues* that challenge us today. I want to suggest where we as Christians can and should *make a difference*.

## **Faith**

The ground and content of our life is faith in Jesus Christ. We acknowledge and affirm with modern anthropology that humans are *relational* beings. We agree that this relational reality includes our relationship with and our responsibility for

- *each other*, indeed for *all* human beings.

- *nature*. Whereby it is misleading to call nature our environment. Nature is much more than what surrounds us. *We are woven into nature*. The water we drink, the food we eat, the air we breathe becomes us. Whatever we do to nature, good or bad, we do to ourselves. Therefore the present climate policy of our government is so ridiculously short sighted.
- *the future*. The challenge of climate change reminds us every day that the future must feature in our thinking and doing.

So while we recognise that atheism is alive, and even becomes increasingly aggressive and intolerant, we as Christians joyously affirm that a flourishing life includes *the awareness that we cannot live by 'bread' alone*. Our personal awareness of and relationship with God is an integral part of our understanding of human life.

Martin Buber reminded us a long time ago that any true *community needs a living centre*.<sup>1</sup> Every culture that wants to prosper and survive needs a liberating story that nourishes, evaluates and criticises it. It is truth and justice that exalt a nation and it is selfishness that brings it down (Proverbs 14:34).

When we speak of *justification by faith*, rather than works, we are not simply making an insider religious statement, but we name the possibility of a *personal and social transformation*. We are making a claim for the worth, value and dignity of the human person. We are asserting *that ultimately a person is not defined by what they can achieve or consume, but by who they are!* A

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<sup>1</sup> *I and Thou* (1937 [1923]), p. 45: 'The true community does not arise through peoples having feelings for one another (though indeed not without it), but through, first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Centre, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another. The second has its source in the first, but is not given when the first alone is given. Living mutual relation includes feelings, but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective Centre.'

decathlon champion or business tycoon does not have more value as a human being than a disabled or old person. Life is a gift and this gift we celebrate in the event of faith.

### **Freedom as a *social reality***

This celebration includes the celebration of *freedom*. Christians joyously tune into the universal ethos that ‘*all human beings are born free . . .*’<sup>2</sup>

The primary symbols of the Judeo-Christian faith – the *Exodus* in the Jewish tradition and the *Resurrection of Jesus Christ* in the Christian tradition – are *symbols of freedom*. Freedom from slavery. Freedom from the encroaching powers of death. Freedom to celebrate life. The hospitality of God includes the invitation to a flourishing life.

Nevertheless! The Christian faith sharpens our awareness of a dehumanising *distortion of freedom*.

In the ‘West’ we tend to understand freedom in terms of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French Revolution. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) defines freedom as ‘the power of doing *whatever does not injure another*’ (§4). We tend to overlook the *ambivalence* and *limitations* of this understanding of freedom.

*On the one hand*, it inspired the industrial and scientific revolutions, as well as the economic and political structures on which our ‘Western’ political and economic strength is built.

*On the other hand*, it is widely recognised today that the negative by-product of the ‘Western’ ideal was that the weak, the under-privileged, and the economically powerless were at the mercy of the strong.

The ‘Western’ definition of freedom is *deficient* because it fails to adequately recognize the *relational* nature of the human

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<sup>2</sup> *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (§ 1).

person and the fact that *all* human beings make up the *human family*. It instils in us the impulse to see every other person as a potential enemy who may restrict *my* individual freedom. Such an *individualistic* understanding of freedom easily leads to separation and enmity in the human family. People become primarily concerned with staking out the frontiers of their self-interest and in that misuse human rights as entitlements. Concern for the neighbour or for nature is ascribed secondary importance.

Here *Christian faith* offers a *correction* by reminding us that we humans are not self-sufficient islands but *relational and social beings*. The classic biblical portrayal is well known: ‘God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God God created *them*; *male and female* God created *them*’ (Gen 1:27, emphases mine). The sociality of being human became individualised by an intentional and unbending focus on the self.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, when the Christian community celebrates the salvation that God has established through Christ, the *communitarian nature of human life* is affirmed:

. . . in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or Greek,  
there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> The *individualism* often associated with human rights is a *distortion* rather than the essence of their intention. The fact that they are too often claimed as *entitlements* to further certain interests does not negate their *social* intention. Nicholas Wolterstorff comments that an ‘ethos of possessive individualism employs the language of rights for its own purposes.’ (*Justice. Rights and Wrongs* [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008], p. 388); see also: *Justice in Love*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 90-92, 134-8. While individualism remains an ever-present danger, the intention of human rights is to protect human dignity within the network of society and nature.



(Gal 3:26-28)

Christians joyfully affirm freedom rights, but at the same time we add the extra dimension that, at its deepest level, freedom is a *community experience* in which our human brother and sister is not our potential rival whom we need to fear but the one whom we need to experience and celebrate true freedom.

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas puts into words what Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela fleshed out with their lives: 'No one is free until we *all* are free.'<sup>4</sup> Freedom therefore implies equality – with a specific bent.

### **Equality – with a specific bent**

*Equality* is a celebrated *ideal* in the global village. 'All human beings are born free and *equal* in dignity and rights' we read in article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Christians readily agree. Where God is confessed as 'creator of heaven and earth' there the *inherent dignity and equality* of *all* human beings is affirmed.

Nevertheless, while equality is the *human ideal*, *inequality* is all too often the *historical reality*. Ask women; ask girls in India and China; ask indigenous people; ask those with disabilities; ask old people; ask refugees; ask Christians in Muslim countries and ask Muslims in Christian countries. The affirmation that '*all* human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' is *neither obvious nor apparent* in our world. Indeed, by looking at the world *as it is*, there are more reasons for affirming *inequality* than equality as a '*natural*' fact.

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<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas says it well: 'Freedom conceived intersubjectively distinguishes itself from the arbitrary freedom of the isolated individual. No one is free until we all are free.' ('A Conversation About God and the World. Interview with Eduardo Mendieta', in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, Eduardo Mendieta, [ed.], The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2002 [pp. 147-167], p. 161).

Christians wholeheartedly affirm and support equality rights. However, being aware that the *empirical evidence does not support a universal ethos of equality*, we base our commitment to equality not on what *human reason perceives in the nature of things*, but on *God's dealings with humanity* as it becomes historically manifest in the story of Jesus. Christians assert the equality of all people because God has created and redeemed all human beings to be *one humanity* – of course, with interesting and colourful differences!

And yet, for Christians there is a *specific bias* to equality. Of all ethical theories – and there are many! – it is the Christian understanding of reality that clearly, openly, publicly *privileges the victim*. Jesus was *focused* in his activity and *his focus* was the *victim*.<sup>5</sup>

The early theologians therefore portray Jesus as promising grace to the poor, to the hungry and the sorrowful (Lk. 6.20-21), and as displaying healing and liberating solidarity with the vulnerable and marginalized people of his day. In word and deed he revealed to them the justice and compassion of God. 'Jesus joins the victims; therein, God joins the victims.'<sup>6</sup>

Jesus' praxis of compassion led to his *becoming a victim himself*. The resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals that neither the perpetrators, Caiaphas and Pilate, nor the institutions of state and religion carried the day, but rather that *God identified with the victim without ceasing to be God*.

It is consistent with this understanding of reality that the earliest Christian churches located the *presence of Christ in the world* not only in the preaching of the word and the

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<sup>5</sup> This has recently been emphasised again by Nicholas Wolterstorff (*Justice*, p. 110) and Jürgen Moltmann, (*Ethics of Hope*, p. 182).

<sup>6</sup> Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 110.

administration of the sacraments, as Christian churches generally emphasise, but also in the vulnerable child (Mk 9.36-37) and in the hungry, the stranger and the prisoner (Mt. 25.31-46). Early Christians confessed that their solidarity with and compassion for victims was a reflection of their relation to Christ.

My friends, human life will flourish if we give more room to freedom and equality. Are we not part of the *one* global human family? Why do we have a 'firewall' mentality towards refugees? Are they not human beings like us? Do they not deserve a safe space to live? Can there be a conversion, a transfiguration, from a fortress mentality to a mentality of solidarity with our fellow human persons?

### **Compassionate Solidarity**

Which brings me to a final point as we try to discern our place in and our responsibility to society.

*If we affirm freedom as a social reality* where the 'other' is interesting and important for the flourishing of our own life; where I perceive the 'other' not as competitor and potential rival, but a fellow member in the *one* human family;

*if we affirm a common humanity* where all human beings have an *inherent dignity* and where *all human beings are equal*;

*then* what else can we do but intentionally take our place in the global human family and accept responsibility for shaping a *humane* society? *But we must do it!* Compassionate solidarity must be *waged!* Our words and deeds must cohere lest we be accused of hypocrisy.

Our *Christian identity* of being the 'salt of the earth', the 'light of the world', the 'body of Christ' includes the passion of showing *compassion* and *solidarity*, especially with the *victims* who are left half-dead on the side of the road of life.

## Conclusion

I *conclude*. Christians are people whose *conscience* is freed by and therefore focussed on God who comes to us in the story of Jesus.

Our conscience is *therefore* irritated, even traumatised,

- when *fear* rather than *freedom* is fanned in our society;
- when refugees are treated with *disrespect* rather than as *equal* human beings;
- when calculating *sloth* rather than compassionate *solidarity* seems to be the order of the day.

If we as Christians play our part and make our society aware

- of *God as the mystery of life*;
- if we constantly remind each other of the *social dimension of freedom*;
- if we as Christians can increase the awareness that a commitment to *equality includes a special concern for the victim*;
- and if we can remind each other that engaging in *compassionate solidarity* we enhance freedom and equality;

then we have made a positive contribution towards a *more humane society*.

Therefore, I invite all of us to renew our intention to *be who we are: the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the body of Christ*.