

## Change and Trust [*be converted and believe*]

There is an ambiguity about me - nothing to do with my family or my upbringing. I can't define it, but I can sense and feel it. There is an energy in me that some people seem to appreciate, of which I have but a vague awareness. Could it be a need to be liked?

What I do feel, is that, at times, I seem to be drifting through life. I would like to find the words to describe - perhaps *change* says it! Has there been too much simply drifting through life? Days pass by, months even - with the occasional wake-up call, and become aware of drifting.

My faith tells me it is never too late to get a grip, before surrendering to inevitability. I do still have a choice. But it will take more than me! First, the realisation that the words that I am using are not just mine. It's as if someone is prompting me, that the words are gifted - every gift from God is prayer. I've always felt uncomfortable with *prayers that have to be said*. No doubt there is value in this, when we need to pray together for example.

To use these unwritten words, to hear what I'm saying, takes me into the presence of the Giver of these words. I need to hear the words, *because they don't come from me*. When I do pause to listen, the words *change and trust* never seem far away; realising I'm not the only one hearing. God is telling me something, using my own words!

I never hear about what I have done, or what I've failed to do. I never hear - *get on your knees*; in the sense that I am being told that my lack-lustre life, my wrong-doing - my sinfulness - though very real, is not my whole story, that every such awareness is an opportunity to accept what could be, rather than what has been. This is what *now is the acceptable time* in the Gospel, is all about - now!

Without denying any of my shortcomings, I believe, albeit without any deserving on my part, that I am forgiven; not because Jesus has told me, but because his loving and compassion makes forgiveness inevitable. I am not forgiven because I am good, but because God is good. It is entirely who Jesus is that makes the difference. I matter to him more than my sinfulness. He is what he says.

What he says - God is love, and only creates the lovely; and wants the loveliness of creation [me included] to experience what happens when love and forgiveness are truly the intended energy for change. We are anxious and vulnerable when we opt to go it alone. See this in the embrace that dismisses all attempts at apology of the Prodigal's Dad, hugging his son into new life. A love that will scandalise his brother - as his presence at home in Nazareth prompted his own folk to throw him over the cliff!

Peter, on realising who Jesus really is, advised him to stay away from *the likes of him* - you'll get hurt; was told - *yes, but if you stay with the likes of me, you will discover what life really is all about. This why I am here*. God's forgiveness is his love for me, just as I am - no *provided you repent* - just as I am. His only concern is that I believe this. How do I know? Look at the Cross, and move beyond *this is what my sin has done* - and hear him whisper, *you matter so much to me, that you will be lost over my dead body!!*

Why do we set limits on God's love? Love never looks at how it is wasted, because it comes from his freedom to give, no matter what the cost. How love is received is not love's problem! Love doesn't control us – it risks rejection, and remains. All God can do is wait – I am in control of love. God cannot not love me – I can reject it. This how vulnerable God is!

Is God really vulnerable? *Almighty* love means almighty vulnerable! God's love knows no ending – forgives endlessly. There's so much of me for God to forgive, and so little chance of me returning this love. Listen to Jesus tell the story of the money lender, who had two men in his debt. One owed 500 denarii, the other owed 50. Neither could pay – so, he pardoned them both. Which of them will feel more for the money lender? The one who owed most.

Take the message – not just being pardoned so much; but *my need to be pardoned is my entitlement to love*. How do I know? He told me – *I have come for sinners!* - Lk.5.32; Mk.2.17. God is not concerned with *what I have done or failed to do* – just, *do you believe me?* Do I? How will I know? *By the fruits of believing – I will listen to what the Lord has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* – Ps.85.8. Love experienced is peace of mind and heart; no matter what life's experiences. What I am being asked to believe is paradoxical – the greater my sins, the greater my entitlement to Christ! And the time is now! It is obviously not right to say – *life is wonderful!* Sometimes it isn't. But with faith guiding me – *everything is not all right, but that is all right!*

## **Forgive**

*Traditional* forgiveness has a price: sinners are forgiven after repentance has been shown; it is conditional. Not so for Jesus; for him it is sheer gift, and freely given – not a reward for repentance. Like mercy, it reflects the generosity of the one who forgives, never the worthiness of the one who receives. Nobody *deserves* mercy – it is not mercy if it is deserved, that would be justice.

This *human* forgiveness is the bone of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. God's forgiveness is never an issue. Generosity underpins God's forgiveness, and God is very good at it – after all, we give God plenty of opportunities for its exercise!

Even the disciples had trouble with this – for them, surely there must be a condition? *Seventy times seven times* means forgiveness without terms and conditions! Caiaphas was gathering ammunition against Jesus – *blasphemy, treason, perverting sacred tradition, soft on sin...*

*Anyone who places loyalty to a person above loyalty to truth puts mercy and forgiveness out of reach.* Fear and alarm at Jesus' behaviour were the hidden witnesses to his condemnation. It seems that Jesus had no talent for survival – he could make himself scarce; but had little chance of seeing old age. His journey to Jerusalem meant an appointment with his executioners, and he knew it. Pain avoidance is never an option.

She was caught in adultery – so was he, but we have no mention of him! Her critics seem pleased to have found another victim, on whom they could impose all the rigours of the law – death! The accusers were all men. The bystanders knew what was about to happen – until the procession met Jesus! He was sitting, teaching. Her accusers pushed her in front of him – delighted at the chance to catch him out. They quoted the Law of Moses, which decreed stoning to death.

Jesus looked at her, a look that assured her he would not abandon her. The lawyer faced Jesus, who had heard everything he had said, and asked *what have you to say about this?* Jesus looked at the lawyer, then at the woman – he bent down and started doodling in the dust. The crowd was silent, wanting to hear what he would say. Some taunted him to say something, believing they had caught him out.

He wasn't fooled by what they were about – he knew they wanted to kill two birds with one stone. Jesus stood up and faced the accusers, then turned towards the woman, pointed at her and said: *let anyone among you who is without sin throw the first stone at her.* He sat down, and continued doodling.

No one moved – no one spoke – it was as if he changed the focus away from the written Law, to their own personal histories. People began to fidget nervously, as if embarrassed by the silence – looked at the lawyer, hoping he would say something. Stones, waiting to be hurled at her, were suddenly dropped, people began to leave, until she was there, alone with Jesus. She prepared herself to hear correction from him; only to hear: *where are they, has no one condemned you?* She said: *no one, sir. Nor do I,* said Jesus: *go and sin no more.*

Life is rarely simple – mercy can be unnerving, probably because it makes expectations – she had been released *from*, but what now? She had escaped – but what about him? He'll surely be made to pay.

## **Disillusion**

Innocent people suffer, because Jesus never admits he is wrong; while exhorting us to be frank about our mistakes, confess our sins. There's more – whatever results in failure is hailed as success, as if it was always meant to be so. Even if he got himself killed it would not be his fault! It would be easier to believe in him if he were more like the rest of us.

In his teaching, he says: *you have heard it said... but I say to you!* When he's asked by what authority he can say such things, he refuses to answer. He calls the religious leaders *arrogant and blind.* He criticises how they dress - attempting to be noticed. He clearly has no loyalty to the religious leadership. Why doesn't he join a group and change it from within, instead of criticising from outside?

His arrogance is strong – he is always right; his way is the way to God. In debate, few can equal him. He rises to the occasion, as with the woman caught in adultery. When the Law of Moses is invoked and put to him – he focuses on their track record. – *which of us is not guilty of sin?*

He avoided conflict with the Roman occupying forces. If he wants to tackle real oppression, why doesn't he face them down? The Romans had nothing to fear from Jesus – their brutality, their paganism, the suffering they cause are all ignored by him. Why does he ignore such issues of justice and peace? He even praises a Roman Centurion's faith, in contrast to others.

What does he mean by *I've come to bring fire to the earth, and will not be content until it happens?* He was invited to speak at the house of a rich man; a lot of us followed him there, and we were welcomed there. During the conversation a woman at the door asked that a message be given to Jesus – that his mother and family were waiting outside, asking for him. Jesus asked *who are my mother and brothers?* He

pointed to the present company and said *here they are – anyone hearing and keeping God's word.*

## **Nicodemus**

Was keen to meet Jesus – but careful not to be seen in his company, so he went to see him by night. He'd heard of Jesus' reputation as a healer, which sparked his interest. As a Pharisee, he was hurt by some of the things Jesus said of them. He couldn't be content with hearsay – his curiosity was greater than his apprehension. Jesus asked him *what can I do for you?*

Jesus told him, only one thing matters in life – a new start! He spoke of being *born again*. New life needed new birth. Nicodemus asked *how can we be born again – we are born only once!* Jesus told him that new birth can happen any time in life; God isn't constrained by chronological time. He was talking about *new birth in the Spirit*, not the flesh. It didn't change where we came from, or where we are at present – only where we were going.

He was taught that God revealed himself mainly through the Law. Certainly, God spoke through the prophets, but they were calling people back to what they had promised – the established covenant. God is unchanging. Wind is fickle, unpredictable. Allows no control. Recognises no boundaries. How can the Spirit of God move like that? How can a teacher of the Law learn anything from the wind?

Jesus told him a story – a father had two sons he dearly loved. He said to one, go and work in the vineyard – his son refused – later he thought better of it and went. He said the same to the second son – who said yes, but didn't go! Which of them did the father's will? The first, said Nicodemus.

## **Caiaphas**

Married Annas' – the High Priest's – daughter. Which did no harm to his prospects. He later became High Priest. He maintained good relationships with the Roman forces [*who had a controlling say in his appointment*], without prejudice to the Jewish religion. Rome looked for someone who commanded respect from the people.

A traditionalist – promises no heaven as a reward, nor hell as punishment. Jesus' name started coming-up regularly. He didn't belong to any religious grouping. His following was mostly Galilean fishermen. He challenged the rules for interpreting the Sabbath, and frequented the tables of sinners.

His impact on people was growing, with some hailing him as the promised Messiah. This caused a growing split in relations with Roman authorities.