

## 6 The Way of Salvation

(6:12 – 30)

As an important step was about to be taken, Jesus spent the whole night out in the hills, praying. The work of God was beginning, and Jesus could only begin by talking to God. It would not be the work of a day. Nor would it be the work of one man, even Jesus. Whatever Jesus' role, it was God's intention for others too to be involved. God was taking Israel in hand, and, with Jesus, there would be others to do the work. After his night of prayer, Jesus chose twelve of his disciples who were to be "apostles", that is, they would be sent out to do God's work.

It was hardly the gathering of an army, but it was the selection of a team. If we thought that salvation was like the cavalry coming over the hill in the nick of time, we have to think again. God's salvation is going to be a program. People will learn to live the new way of life, and the leading learners have been chosen. It's no longer just Jesus, but Jesus with Simon, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, another Simon, another James, and two named Judas, one of whom would later betray him.

He came down with them from the hills, and on the level plain large numbers of his disciples were gathering, and people from all over as well, who wanted to hear him speak and to be healed of their illnesses. They crowded around just to touch him, for they found that that was enough to heal them.

His following had grown huge and something was beginning here that would form and grow over time, with the people learning to live their lives under the rule of God. The kingdom would begin to change them, and those who welcomed it would learn to change with its coming, for Jesus' work will be done not by drawing spectators or enlisting passive subjects. It would call on active learners. God has a program, for the present and the future, and those who trust Jesus will learn from him to live it. He spoke to the crowd, but he had his eye on his regular followers, from whom he had chosen the twelve.

For the teaching of Jesus, on this and other occasions, Luke relied on a collection of sayings and other material that Matthew also used. They show us how radically everything is changed in the new order, and how different life will be, for those who are willing to learn the ways of God. They begin (at least in the selections chosen by Matthew and Luke) with a fundamental re-evaluation of life in society:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall eat your fill.  
Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.  
Blessed are you when people hate you and bar you from their meetings and pour abuse on you and publish your name as an enemy of society because of your allegiance to the Son of Man. When that happens be happy and dance for joy, for your reward is great in heaven. This was how their ancestors treated the prophets. (6: 20 – 23)

There were many disciples. We will be told later <sup>1</sup> that there were enough of them well-versed in Jesus' teaching for seventy-two to be sent off on their own to spread the word. And we do not know their background. We know the names of only twelve and something about the background of half of those. But Jesus was able to speak to the mass of his disciples as if poverty, hunger and sorrow were typically their lot. He was speaking to that mass of people for whom revolutionaries claim to speak.

Blessed are you, the poor, because the kingdom of God belongs to you. Be glad and dance for joy when you are persecuted, for your reward is great in heaven. This is the point where, if we are not careful, the gospel of Luke will fall apart in our hands and be replaced by that solid, acceptable heresy I spoke of before. The poor are blessed because the kingdom of heaven (bliss in the sky after you die) is theirs. The hungry and the distressed can take comfort in the fact that they will eat and laugh in heaven. The persecuted will be vindicated and rewarded in heaven.

Now Luke has much to tell us about heaven, but only because he has much to tell us about Jesus, whose coming and presence among us radically changes the whole order of this world in its present time and history. The coming of Jesus opens our universe to the transcendent order of God, engaging it not with abstractions but with a much fuller reality. We must let the gospel tell us what it means by "heaven", and not assume we know. The kingdom is not just the transcendent place of God, somewhere above the sky or after death. It is the realm of God now reaching into this world, the rule of God now being established here, and as such it changes, radically, the way we live here.

So Jesus compares his followers to the prophets, who were rejected and persecuted, some of them hounded to death, not because they spoke of the future but because they challenged the present political, religious and economic order of their society. Elijah, denounced as an enemy of Israel and hounded from the country by the threats of Jezebel.<sup>1</sup> Amos, expelled from Bethel at the king's and the high priest's orders.<sup>2</sup> Micah dismissed as mad by smug citizens of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Isaiah, ridiculed by Jerusalem's wealthy as a dotting babbler.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 18: 17; 19: 1-3   <sup>2</sup> Amos 7: 10-13   <sup>3</sup> Micah 2: 6-7   <sup>4</sup> Isaiah 28: 7-10

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Jeremiah, who was beaten up and imprisoned.<sup>5</sup> Zechariah stoned to death in the temple courts.<sup>6</sup> No one gets themselves hated or killed by foretelling a distant and wonderful future for their people; but to speak of the present will of God, of the choices the people and the nation must make now, to remain in the friendship of God, that is dangerously unpopular. We are to recognise the prophets not just as a revered voice foretelling the future. They themselves are the model for the way that Jesus must go and a sign of the persecution that his disciples must brave.

To accept rejection and persecution is not the way we usually organise our lives. Even those who embrace the role of misunderstood victim (most typically teenagers) do so because it gives them the right to be morose and complaining, not as the celebration of a privilege. And many are glad to be rejected by the establishment only because it establishes their credentials with the rebels. They don't really want to be rejected by their peers.

However much we claim to be independent, it matters to us what people think of us, especially what those people think who "matter" in our circle. We will fit in and go with the crowd, often against our better feelings, rather than be singled out and excluded as a misfit. There is nothing worse than being a loser, and a loser is one who has lost the support of peers or colleagues or people in power.

It's not that we're all conservatives and conformists. Many of us are rebels. We like to demonstrate our independence and to prove precisely that we're not conformists. But even being radical, we do so in a context, within a circle of like-minded peers, shored up by their approval and secure in the knowledge that we have a place in their good opinion. I was at university in the "radical" 1960s. Some of those who were then well in the stream of progressive thinking at the University of Western Australia, denouncing the Vietnam War, proclaiming human rights and pouring scorn on conventional morality, went on in later decades to be members of what seems to have been the most reactionary Labour government ever to have power in Western Australia. I don't think there was any inconsistency in this. To be radical as a teenage student in the 1960s was to move comfortably in the circle of your peers, in much the same way as being reactionary and conservative in the 1980s was to move comfortably in the circle of your then middle-aged peers. What matters consistently is to be "in" – not to be a lone voice or an outsider but to retain the respect of your peers.

Jesus tells his followers to be prepared to be excluded. Exclusion, being banned from the synagogue, being snubbed by neighbors, being

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<sup>5</sup> Jer 37: 11 – 16

<sup>6</sup> II Chronicles 24: 19 - 22

cut off from contact with respectable people, was a powerful wepon of social control in Jesus' community, as it was in Victorian England. Nowadays, society is larger and more fragmented so that it's not so easy to exclude someone from everywhere, but it still hurts when we're excluded from the sector of society where we find our identity, the group or the public whose opinion matters to us.

Jesus warns his followers that society will use this wepon against them. They will encounter their neibors' hostility for the sake of the "Son of Man" and they are to be glad when it happens. For they are blessed, like the poor, the hungry, the sorrowing. Sometimes, we will look forward to that persecution, for it will confirm our status (especially in our own eyes) as independent thinkers. But there will come a time when it hurts, when the people rejecting us are the ones we counted on for affirmation and support. If we really follow Jesus, it will be his blessing when the President points the finger at us and says, "You are the axis of evil." It will be the fulfilment of his word when one day we are shut in prison, with Habeas Corpus torn up and we excluded from the right to know who accuses us, or of what.

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Salvation is the coming of something radically new as the rule of God is established among us. The outcome of John's preaching was not repented souls being welcomed into heven, but a corrupt administration and a brutal police force beginning to respect the people they rule. Jesus' proclamation to the synagogue of Nazareth was of good news to the poor, liberation, healing – not of recompense in the future life.

That is the strength and reality of the new order that is breaking into the world, and when Luke now tells us of Jesus' teaching, that the reward of the persecuted is great in heven, everything else he has told us is only a few pages back. We're probably expected to remember it. The trouble is that we don't. Because we don't read the gospel thru, but hear it in bits given to us from Sunday to Sunday in church "Your reward will be great in heven" probably comes a long time after "He has sent me to set free the oppressed and to announce the cancellation of debts." The blessings in the teaching of Jesus will be separated by several months from any reading of John's preaching and its effect. It was not ment to be so.

Luke, in his gospel, often talks of heven. It is a very important dimension of what he can tell us about Jesus, but we must give him our attention and listen to the whole story or we will end up with nothing more than a warm tale to comfort us in the cold. Like Luke himself, we have to wrestle thoughtfully with the revelation, to understand the dimensions of God, and the world that opens up to us in the events of our salvation. We have to understand more about

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Jesus and the work that God has taken up in him, before we can be confident we know what he means by “heaven” and our place in heaven.

The kingdom of God belongs to the poor, and those who are hungry will be full and those who are grieving will laugh for joy, but we must not assume that this means only in another world after we die. We have already heard too much that is revolutionary to imagine that salvation is all in the sky. Jesus’ coming is not just a promise that there is, in the distant future, an escape from the horrors of this world. Salvation is here, among us, changing the world already in Jesus our Savior, Messiah and Lord.

There is bad news for the rich. Those who now have plenty of the world’s good things will go hungry. Those who can laugh now for security and comfort will find themselves weeping. Something is happening to challenge status and to challenge certainties, especially those certainties that are founded on wealth. And it won’t necessarily wait until the rich and the powerful die. If you are respected and well received in society as it now is, if your opinions are listened to and quoted and praised in the present order, then trouble lies ahead of you. False prophets, the illusion-mongers of the past, were always well-received.<sup>7</sup>

So how are the followers of Jesus to receive his teaching? Are they to sit hugging themselves and gloating over the changes in store, contemplating their own future happiness and the future punishment of those who now oppress them? Jesus’ teaching has begun by describing a new rule for the universe. But this is introductory, setting the scene: what it means for his followers’ behavior is now set out in detail for those who will listen to him.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who are bad-mouthing you and pray for those who treat you badly.(6: 27 – 28)

Tho Jesus has given the sternest warning to the rich, he does not mean that warning to be translated into hatred. Altho he has proclaimed the end of oppression and a time for the powerful to be brought down from their thrones, it is not to be done by the hatred of the oppressed. Here at the very headline of Jesus’ teaching are words that leap the centuries and anticipate the wisdom of modern psychology and sociology and leave that wisdom standing, with much to learn from Jesus’ instruction.

“Love your enemies.” It’s difficult enuf when we make our own context for Jesus’ words, which we usually do. We attribute the teaching to a “Jesus meek and mild” who is much of our own inventing. It’s for

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<sup>7</sup> cf I Kings 22: 1 – 38; Micah 3:5

individuals who, in their private lives, are to be loving and kind even to their enemies. They are to be meek, submitting to injustice rather than putting up resistance. They are to be so other-worldly focused that they offer a patronising love even to those who attack and persecute them. But this is heresy, part of that same heresy I have been talking of, and like the rest, it is half (perhaps more than half) true. Heresies have to be half true, or they don't get started.

Let us hear how Jesus draws out the picture of loving our enemies. He goes on to tell his followers: If someone slaps you on the cheek, turn the other cheek to him; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well; give to everyone who asks you; if someone robs you, don't ask for your property back.

What are we to make of such challenges? What we tend to do is to interpret them as pious recommendations ("counsels of perfection" we called them) for those who want to be saints. Or else we bring in the idea that Jesus is describing behavior for a more perfect world, behavior which will only become possible when he comes again with greater power and glory. We tell ourselves that we have to be practical and realistic, and that, however admirable Jesus' teachings may be for an ideal world, we have to take account of the real world we live in.

Or if we live comfortably in a society that works very well for us, that shelters our lives and protects our property, we make it a recommendation to be observed by all those less fortunate people who mite be tempted to rebel, to turn to violence because of the injustices they suffer. Jesus' teaching becomes a useful maxim against those who mite disturb our peace or reject the oppression that profits us. It's good advice for the oppressed, but it's not necessary for us, who are secure anyway; and we don't allow it to apply to our nations, in whose power to bomb and kill our enemies we hold our security.

But with Jesus, God comes to "guide our feet into the paths of salvation". Salvation is no longer a forlorn hope, but neither is it a fait accompli. It is a path for our feet to take, and we receive it actively, not passively. We learn as we step out. Our faith mite mean accepting Jesus' word without knowing how we will actually carry it out. Perhaps only when the time comes and we are challenged, or when we see others responding to the challenge will we understand what it means.

You have possibly heard the French story of the Bishop's candlesticks.

A provincial bishop, a good man and generous to the poor, took in a vagabond, fed him and gave him lodging overnite. But in the morning the vagabond disappeared with one of the bishop's silver candlesticks. In a nearby town, the police discovered him in possession of the candlestick and arrested him on suspicion. When he told them a

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story that the bishop had given him the candlestick to sell for food, they hauled him back to the bishop for confirmation. The good man, without hesitation, brought him out a second candlestick just like it, saying, "Yes, it's yours. But you forgot to take the other one of the pair."

It's one of those heart-warming stories that remind us of the opportunities that sometimes arise of living by Jesus' teaching, and of the good people who rise to the opportunity. But the reality, when we meet it, can be both more challenging and more inspiring.

I once met a man who did what Jesus sed. He loved his enemies, and when he was robbed he did not demand his property back. His name was Reinato. He has since died, and his grave, his final house, now stands on a hillside at Homé in East Timor within view of the seas from which Indonesian warships bombed and slautered his people as they invaded his country in 1975. The Indonesian military (backed by America, Britain and Australia – so we are the bad guys, the enemies who need to be loved, in this story) occupied East Timor for 25 years and killed more than a hundred thousand Timorese as they tried to force the population to become part of Indonesia.

He joined the resistance, fiting from the jungle, a resistance movement that killed many of their enemies. His family were driven from their homes, split up, killed, imprisoned. (Some were befriended and helped by Indonesian people.) His property was taken and given to settlers from Java. Then, in 1999, victory finally came. The East Timorese people were allowed to hold a referendum, in which they voted overwhelmingly for independence and, after a final, vindictive orgy of destruction, the Indonesian army left.

Many Indonesian settlers left with them, including some of those who had taken Reinato's land. He was able to return, regather his family and build a house. It was a difficult time for the Timorese community. Some of them, especially those who worked for the Indonesian government, had prospered. They had collaborated with the Indonesian authorities, considering the annexation of East Timor to be permanent, and they had been given or allowed to take confiscated land. Now, many of them fled with the army, or if they stayed, lived in fear of denunciation and reprisals.

Two of the families who had built their homes on Reinato's land remained, and he and his wife Joanna had to decide how they would deal with them. Reinato had spoken of the need to rebuild the Timorese community on sound foundations of respect and mutual acceptance. They now approached the families who remained on their property and told them that they should keep their homes and the land they had taken, and pass on to their children the wisdom of co-

operating with their neighbors rather than seizing on opportunities to exploit them.

His family now have something better than land – neighbors who are friends. They believe the teaching of Jesus, though they have a healthy scepticism for a church that believes more in power. They have found what “love your enemies” means in the practical resolution of conflict, and that sometimes it does mean precisely that you do not ask for stolen property to be given back, but give it with a good will to those who have taken it.

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Jesus said, “If someone slaps you on the cheek, turn the other cheek to him.” I think it must be Jesus’ most quoted teaching, quoted either in admiration or mockery: “Turn the other cheek.” We imagine that this means mild compliance with the attacks of those who are hostile to us, whether from an inner strength that accepts passivity or from naïve weakness. But I think we have failed to think through what “turning the other cheek” might really involve. As with many of Jesus’ sayings, it is startling when we think of it literally, but even more challenging when we let it take its true place as a metaphor guiding a whole range of behavior.

I think of someone like Gandhi as an example. Determined non-violent resistance to British rule over India got him beaten and imprisoned. He could have learnt from his experience to organise a more guarded resistance, weapons to fend off the blows of the police, ways of avoiding arrest by striking the forces that came against him. Or he could have learnt to make his protest more cautiously, avoiding outright confrontation with the British authorities and their servants. He did neither, but “turned the other cheek” returning to his protest with the same insistence and determination, as if putting to the oppressors the question, “How long will you keep on striking?”

Far from being weak complicity in your enemy’s violence, turning the other cheek may well be a serious threat to it. When you are struck by a hostile force, especially when that force wants to present itself as legitimate authority, the hope is that you will learn your lesson, that you will avoid being struck again by mending your ways – or, as a second best, that you will retaliate with such violence as will justify stronger, more definitive action against you. And even when the violent don’t pretend to be legitimate, their purpose is, usually, to get their way, to get you conforming to their will without their having to keep on beating you. To stand your ground, to return to your protest though no better protected against their violence, defeats their purpose.

Turning the other cheek is not necessarily as submissive a gesture as we might have thought.

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When the people of East Timor voted for independence in 1999, tho they were nominally under the protection of UN sponsored agreements, their country was still under the control of the very Indonesian army against whom they were voting. A campaign of intimidation had tried to deter people from voting or from supporting independence, but with courage the people had voted against the guns. When it became clear what was their choice, there followed a savage outburst of violence. The army, and militia gangs in their service, went on the rampage, and for days the destruction and killing went on.

East Timorese resistance fighters, under the agreement that had paved the way for the referendum, had been allowed to keep their weapons, but were confined to designated camps. It was part of the agreement that they should not leave those camps or interfere in any way with the process of decision. Now they had to stay put, knowing that their own people – their own families, for the militia were targeting the families of resistance members – were being murdered. Knowing that they had the guns to defend their people, they were under orders not to use them.

It was clearly the intention of the army to provoke the resistance into leaving the camps, into taking up arms, so they could claim the agreement had been broken and that they were acting to restore order. It is always easier for the uniformed army and the government in control to represent its violence as the legitimate maintenance of order, and violence by the Timorese would now be their excuse for negating the referendum and regaining control of the province.

The usual challenge to the teaching of Jesus is to say “What would you do if an armed maniac was attacking your family and you had a gun to kill him with?” To such a question, devoid of any context, the only answer is, equally devoid of context, that of course I would shoot him. But no-one ever faces an actual moral decision without a context, and the teachings of Jesus are not stand-alone laws but the steps of salvation by which we learn how to assess and react in the events that actually come upon us. If we accept them to live by them, we will still have decisions to take, but Jesus’ teaching will guide us to radically different decisions in the most critical contexts.

Yet when the moment comes, heavy and urgent with crisis, even the startling instructions of Jesus may turn out to be the most practical politics. The leader of the Timorese resistance, Xanana Gusmao, who was in contact with his people from exile in Indonesia, urged them to stay in the camps, to hold back from armed resistance in spite of the atrocities being committed. It was a difficult request, contrary to

every instinct to protect their own. But to their great credit, most of the resistance did not take up their arms and the provocation failed.

But “provocation” is far too lite a word, hundreds were butchered in Dili, Liquica and other places before the world took action. The Indonesian army finally left, destroying as they went, and Australian troops came in to help restore order. The East Timorese gained their independence, but at enormous cost, and who can say what is in the hearts and minds of members of the resistance whose family or friends were killed in those last days?

But they, and, in them, the East Timorese people, had turned the other cheek. And they had won.

Jesus’ teaching opens our eyes to a new way of relating to one another and resolving conflicts in society. He gives us neither a law cut in stone nor a pious, other-worldly ideal to be forgotten when we turn to the practical demands of the “real” world. Jesus gives us a teaching, startling, but one which he invites us to accept, with a future ahead of us in which we will be challenged and enabled to implement it. Even those who have accepted his teaching will be surprised at the occasions in which it arises.

To believe in Jesus is to accept that salvation comes with a challenge to faith. When the cavalry comes riding over the hill you don’t have to believe in them any more. The heros have arrived. But when the Ruler comes from God, bringing salvation, it is then that you are challenged to believe. For this is God reaching out to us – the arrival of an alarming new order in the universe, but one that is on our side. If we can accept Jesus with faith, accept that he is our teacher, who shows us the way to live, then the lite has dawned upon us and our steps are guided into the paths of salvation.