



SECURITY AT ALL COSTS

A Christian Reflection

Every human being, from the time they are born, has a need to feel secure. This need drives a great deal of our behaviour. It impacts on our lives at every level, influencing the decisions we make for ourselves as individuals and as members of a family. It influences the decisions we make as members of particular communities and as citizens of a nation. It affects how nations relate to each other and how we, as humans, relate to our natural environment. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bible and the traditions of Christian thought have some significant things to say about the human need for security.

As Christians, our understanding of security must begin from our understanding of the nature of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are a number of key concepts that are core to Christian faith. These concepts are creation, salvation and incarnation. They can be summed up in the following way: God created and sustains the whole world (creation); God's love and grace extends to all humankind, as demonstrated in Jesus Christ (salvation); and in Jesus Christ, God entered into human life and showed solidarity with all humankind (incarnation).

The Biblical story is the story of people stepping out into an unknown future, finding their security in God. That is the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story of Moses leading Israel out of Egypt, and the story of the early church. There is a sense in which, for the Christian, our security is found only in God and the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ, and anything else is illusion, a form of idolatry. We are called to a life of faith, not a life of predictability.

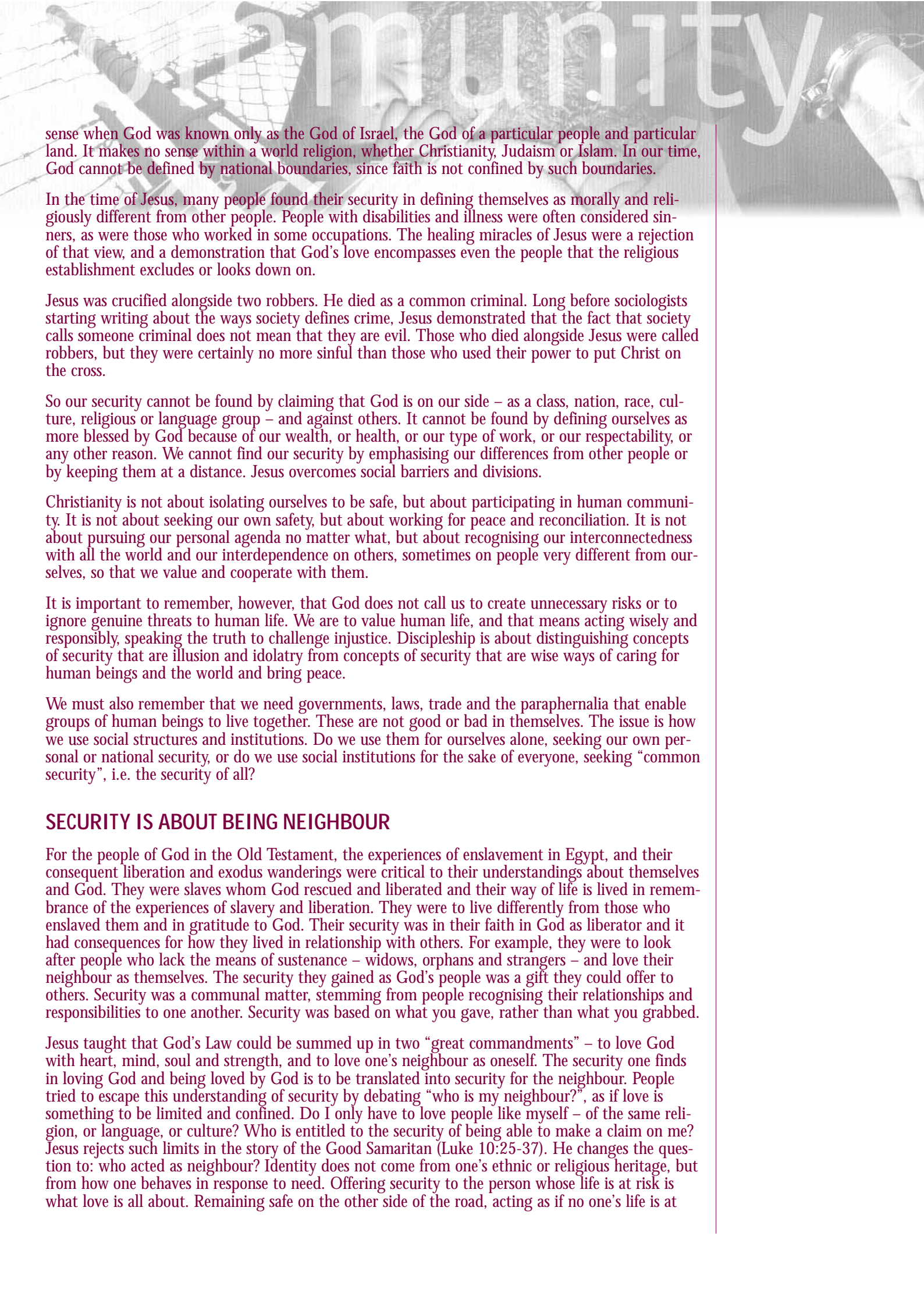
The Christian reflection on security begins with creation. Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world and everything in it. God created humans in the image of God, and God created the world and all its living creatures, and declared everything good. All that God created is connected by the life-giving breath of God's Spirit. The *Truth* of creation is that we live and work as part of the whole creation, recognising the human dignity of all people and the interconnectedness of humans with each other and the natural world.

Christians put their faith in Jesus Christ, who died so that the world might be reconciled with God – through God's *Mercy* we are forgiven. Jesus told people to find their security in God alone. Jesus continued the Old Testament teaching that God shows special concern for the poor and needy, and holds the rich accountable for their use of wealth. Security is to be found not in wealth, but in faith and social justice. As Jesus said: consider the lilies of the field, that neither sow nor reap...those who live by the sword will die by the sword...it is harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Yet even here, we need to be wary, as our section about Christianity, *An Insurance Policy?* explains. Too often we confuse putting trust in God with putting trust in religious institutions and traditions, undermining the very faith that we confess.

Sometimes Christians are tempted to find their security in their religious observance, in worship, or in prayer and fasting. These things are important ways of expressing our faith and opening our lives to God. But they are not the basis of security. In Isaiah 1, God rejects Israel's worship and religious observances because the people do not practice social justice, do not show honesty, and do not provide for the poor. In Isaiah 58, God says that the fasting required is to liberate those who are oppressed, to share what one has with the poor, shelter the homeless and clothe the naked. If we want religious renewal, then *Justice* is what we must do.

Jesus' work was not and is not confined by any human boundaries. As Colossians 1 says, Christ brings everything in heaven and on earth into unity. His work is about uniting people, not dividing them. In Ephesians 2, Jesus is described as breaking down the walls that separate. Christianity recognises the value not only of Christian community within the Church, but of human *Community*.

In the Old Testament, there are times when the Israelites waged war and believed that God fought on their side. God was for their nation, and against other nations. Such an understanding made



sense when God was known only as the God of Israel, the God of a particular people and particular land. It makes no sense within a world religion, whether Christianity, Judaism or Islam. In our time, God cannot be defined by national boundaries, since faith is not confined by such boundaries.

In the time of Jesus, many people found their security in defining themselves as morally and religiously different from other people. People with disabilities and illness were often considered sinners, as were those who worked in some occupations. The healing miracles of Jesus were a rejection of that view, and a demonstration that God's love encompasses even the people that the religious establishment excludes or looks down on.

Jesus was crucified alongside two robbers. He died as a common criminal. Long before sociologists starting writing about the ways society defines crime, Jesus demonstrated that the fact that society calls someone criminal does not mean that they are evil. Those who died alongside Jesus were called robbers, but they were certainly no more sinful than those who used their power to put Christ on the cross.

So our security cannot be found by claiming that God is on our side – as a class, nation, race, culture, religious or language group – and against others. It cannot be found by defining ourselves as more blessed by God because of our wealth, or health, or our type of work, or our respectability, or any other reason. We cannot find our security by emphasising our differences from other people or by keeping them at a distance. Jesus overcomes social barriers and divisions.

Christianity is not about isolating ourselves to be safe, but about participating in human community. It is not about seeking our own safety, but about working for peace and reconciliation. It is not about pursuing our personal agenda no matter what, but about recognising our interconnectedness with all the world and our interdependence on others, sometimes on people very different from ourselves, so that we value and cooperate with them.

It is important to remember, however, that God does not call us to create unnecessary risks or to ignore genuine threats to human life. We are to value human life, and that means acting wisely and responsibly, speaking the truth to challenge injustice. Discipleship is about distinguishing concepts of security that are illusion and idolatry from concepts of security that are wise ways of caring for human beings and the world and bring peace.

We must also remember that we need governments, laws, trade and the paraphernalia that enable groups of human beings to live together. These are not good or bad in themselves. The issue is how we use social structures and institutions. Do we use them for ourselves alone, seeking our own personal or national security, or do we use social institutions for the sake of everyone, seeking “common security”, i.e. the security of all?

SECURITY IS ABOUT BEING NEIGHBOUR

For the people of God in the Old Testament, the experiences of enslavement in Egypt, and their consequent liberation and exodus wanderings were critical to their understandings about themselves and God. They were slaves whom God rescued and liberated and their way of life is lived in remembrance of the experiences of slavery and liberation. They were to live differently from those who enslaved them and in gratitude to God. Their security was in their faith in God as liberator and it had consequences for how they lived in relationship with others. For example, they were to look after people who lack the means of sustenance – widows, orphans and strangers – and love their neighbour as themselves. The security they gained as God's people was a gift they could offer to others. Security was a communal matter, stemming from people recognising their relationships and responsibilities to one another. Security was based on what you gave, rather than what you grabbed.

Jesus taught that God's Law could be summed up in two “great commandments” – to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself. The security one finds in loving God and being loved by God is to be translated into security for the neighbour. People tried to escape this understanding of security by debating “who is my neighbour?”, as if love is something to be limited and confined. Do I only have to love people like myself – of the same religion, or language, or culture? Who is entitled to the security of being able to make a claim on me? Jesus rejects such limits in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). He changes the question to: who acted as neighbour? Identity does not come from one's ethnic or religious heritage, but from how one behaves in response to need. Offering security to the person whose life is at risk is what love is all about. Remaining safe on the other side of the road, acting as if no one's life is at

stake, is not love of neighbour and is not what God desires. Only as we act as neighbour can we hope for security, whether in our local community or internationally.

Another helpful perspective on these issues comes from the story of the Temptations of Jesus. This can be understood in several ways. On the surface, it is a simple set of temptations. Jesus is hungry – should he use his power to feed himself? Is power for one's own use, or for the sake of others? Will he worship the devil, as a way of gaining power over the whole world? Will he give a demonstration of his power, by requiring God to rescue him as he throws himself from the temple? What is his identity? Is security to be found in immediate satisfaction of needs and ambition? Is it to be found in demanding invulnerability? Satan tempts Jesus with "silky" words, as one commentator has described them. Jesus does not give in to those words and their offer of security. His needs and his ambition can wait. His identity is not to be seized, not to be used against the earth or its people or God. That is not the path to security.

This story also connects with a basic theme of Luke's Gospel. Much of Luke's Gospel is about Jesus making the journey to Jerusalem, where he will be tried and crucified. Here, in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted as to whether he will make the journey. Will he take on all the uncertainty and suffering that it will involve? Or will he instead use his power to make that journey unnecessary – to assert his power not in death, but in miracles and control of people? Will he seek his own security, or take the journey that will give the world a different sort of security, through his ministry, death and resurrection?

On both levels, the temptation is for Jesus to distort his identity as the Son of God. He is not tempted to be something totally different, but to use his identity in a selfish manner that would give him security, without regard to the human community of which he is a part and for whose sake he came into the world.

The story also illuminates for us some life issues facing Luke's community of Christians. By telling this story, Luke is reflecting their own struggles for identity and security, their own temptations to misuse power. Jesus becomes their example. He entered into human life, with all its uncertainty and suffering. Leadership can be selfish, based on satisfying the needs and ambition of the leader. Impressive leadership – even the performing of miracles – is not necessarily Christian. Luke is telling his own Christian community that Christian discipleship and Christian leadership are not about avoiding life and its struggles, but about entering into life, taking the risks, being vulnerable. To follow Christ is to follow him down the path of insecurity, for the sake of others.

From all these perspectives, the message of the story of the Temptations of Jesus is this: if you would find security as a Christian, as a child loved by God, then embrace life with all its risks. Don't ask for the smooth ride; take the journey with all its risks, demands, bumps and problems. In doing so, you will find God and your true identity.

To be Christian means finding our security in God. Life is a gift to be treasured and lived in the presence of God. When we live by illusion, we rely on false means of security and isolate ourselves from the community of God's creation. When we live in the presence of God, we seek true security – the security of all humankind, whom God loves and nourishes, and the security of the whole creation, all living things that together form the web of life.

ILLUSION AND PRAYER

Henry Nouwen, in his book *Reaching Out*¹, describes three movements in developing our personal spirituality: from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality and from illusion to prayer. These are about becoming comfortable with ourselves, creating space for others, and being open to the presence of God. The contrast between illusion and prayer is fundamental to thinking about security. In the affluent Western nations like Australia, with education, science and technology, resources, and wealth, we are tempted to believe that we can be in control – that we can turn stones to bread. We are tempted to substitute our own power and activity for God. Our understanding of the good life is to be in control, to define problems, set goals, and achieve success. We are told that life can be whatever we want it to be. We are tempted to act as if we no longer need God, as if security is something we are entitled to as individuals and as a nation, and as if we can create it for ourselves without regard to either God or other people. We live with an illusion about life that cuts us off from God and neighbour, indeed, cuts us off from ourselves. We seek a false security.

¹ Published by Random House, 1986

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