

# TO SAVE FROM FEAR

by  
**John Macmurray**



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*John Macmurray*

## **Fear and Faith**

Many years ago, just after the First World War, when I had been released from military service and had entered upon my first post as a lecturer, I was invited to talk to a group of students in the University of Manchester about faith. I knew, of course, that faith was one of the key words of the Christian tradition; but I noticed that it was used in different ways, and I wanted to know what was its real meaning—or at least what was its original meaning. So I decided to go back to the source and find out how Jesus used it and what he meant by it. I read through the synoptic gospels, noting every case in which Jesus used the word, and I made two discoveries. Both of them were unexpected and surprising; and I still think that they provide an important clue to understanding his mission.

The first thing I discovered was that Jesus habitually used the word ‘faith’ without reference to an object. He would say, ‘Why have you no faith?’ or ‘Your faith has saved you’. There was no suggestion anywhere that faith referred to things that people believed or did not believe. It clearly had nothing to do with doctrines or creeds. Even references to a personal object were not usual. He rarely said: ‘Have faith in God’, or ‘Believe in me’, though this did not seem to be ruled out.

Now I found this surprising. I myself habitually thought of faith as referring to what Christians believed. One’s faith, I thought, was expressed in a creed. I was accustomed to contrast *faith* with *reason*. In this contrast ‘faith’ seemed to be a way of knowing religious truths which lay beyond the reach of unaided reason. But however familiar and ancient and legitimate these uses of the word ‘faith’ might be, one thing was crystal clear. They were not what Jesus meant. So what did he mean?

I found the clue to the answer in the second discovery I made. The contrast between 'faith' and 'reason' was quite foreign to his teaching. But there was, I discovered, another contrast which was so characteristic that it must be significant. It was his continual contrast between *faith* and *fear*. 'Why are you so fearful?' he would say. 'Why is it that you have no faith?' or, on another occasion, 'Fear not, only believe'. This can mean only one thing. For Jesus, 'faith' is the opposite of fear. To 'believe', or to 'have faith', means not to be frightened. In that case, faith must mean something like courage, or confidence, or trust. Fear is an attitude of mind; so faith must also be an attitude of mind. Then I remembered how Jesus liked to talk about 'faith' without mentioning an object of faith, and noticed that the same is true about his use of fear. It is not fear of this or that, not any special fear, but just fear in general. So in contrasting fear and faith, Jesus, it seems, is contrasting two persisting and general attitudes of mind. Either of these two attitudes may characterize a man's way of life. If he lives in fear, he will constantly act as if the world is a dangerous place; he will live on the defensive. If, on the contrary, he lives by faith, his behavior will be the opposite of this. He will be confident and uninhibited; acting as though he trusted life, as though he trusted other people, and was aware, in the world, not of endless danger but rather of endless opportunity. His personality will exhibit not constraint, but spontaneity. Jesus himself expressed this in an unusual but compelling metaphor. 'Out of him', he said, 'shall flow rivers of living water.'

It looks as though, if we are to understand what Jesus meant by 'faith', we shall have to begin by understanding fear. 'Oh!' you may say, 'we all know what fear is.' On the contrary, our common understanding of fear is superficial. I am not concerned now with those surface fears which are our natural reaction to an open and obvious danger. If you wake up at night and smell smoke and think that the house is on fire you will feel a spasm of fear. It will act as a spur to action. If you find you were wrong, or if you manage to deal with the fire, the fear disappears. This sort of fear is natural and beneficial. It relates to a momentary emergency, and helps us to deal with it. But what is characteristic of human beings is that we do not live in the moment. We look before and after. We carry our past experience with us and project it on the future. And if the past has frightened us, we carry that with us and project it ahead. So the fears that matter are the deep fears which we have suppressed so that we are unconscious of them, yet which persist and become part of us and determine our behavior secretly. I won-

der if you ever catch yourself, as I do sometimes, feeling anxious, and looking for something to be anxious about? But mostly we don't catch these fears at work. They have become habits and we are quite unaware of them. They show themselves only in the structure of our behavior. The man who is fear-determined is always on the defensive. You will recognize him when you meet him because either he hides himself from you behind a facade of pretense or formality, or else he tries to dominate you. He is either submissive or aggressive. Poor fellow! What he cannot do is to trust you; so he must wear a mask. He can never be himself. He has lost his freedom; and losing his freedom he has lost his life. Faith is the opposite of all this.

It is in the field of personal relations that fear reveals its most sinister characteristic. It tends to create what we are afraid of. Any intimate relation with another person depends on mutual trust. If I fear to lose the relationship I have already diminished the trust. If I go on the defensive for fear of losing my friend; if I do something to prevent what I fear, then I poison the friendship and make its loss more likely. What we seek in friendship and love is to be wholly ourselves, in equality and freedom, with another person. And there is nothing we can do about this except to trust, to have faith, and to set our friend free of us. Think this out for yourself, and you will discover quickly how fear destroys human life.

With this in mind I can come to my main point...For Jesus, the mortal sickness from which men suffer is fear. It is from fear that we need to be saved. 'Indeed!' you may say, 'don't you mean *from sin*?' No; I think not. Sin doesn't seem to trouble Jesus so much. He dealt with sin by forgiving it. His judgment of fear was much more drastic. Do you remember the man in the parable of the talents—the one who had one talent only? You remember, when he came to give his account to his master, he said: 'I was afraid, and hid my talent in the earth.' And for that he was cast into the outer darkness.

Does this surprise you? It certainly surprised me when I first discovered it. Then I remembered that all religions deal with fear. They promise security and protection to their followers. In effect they say: 'There is nothing to be afraid of.' But usually when they say this they mean that if you believe in God and perform your religious duties, God will protect you from the things you are afraid of. And this is an idealistic illusion. Jesus was a realist. He knew that it was the fear itself that had to be dealt with. What he said to his disciples was that they would have it worse than other people. 'If any man follow me', he said, 'let

him take up his cross', or again, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation, but fear not.' In a word, he said that the worst that can happen to you is nothing to be afraid of.

So this was the mission of Jesus as he saw it. To conquer fear in the hearts of men and replace it by confidence and trust: to relieve us from life on the defensive, and replace it by a life of freedom and spontaneity: to make life rich and full in place of the thin and anxious existence to which our fears condemn us. If you doubt my interpretation, then listen to his own statement of his mission: 'I am come, says the record, 'I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly.'

How wonderful, if it were possible! But is it possible? And how is it possible?

### **Faith and Love**

A few days ago a friend called to see me. We had a little matter of business to discuss; but he was in a hurry and wouldn't sit down. There was a little girl of four in the room with us. She had never seen my friend before. But as we stood talking she came over to join us, and without saying a word she slipped her hand into his. The little gesture reminded me of a similar incident from my boyhood. I was about fifteen, standing at the garden gate, watching a policeman on his beat coming down the street towards me. Suddenly I saw my small brother, who was about five years old, come out of a side road, walk up to meet the policeman and take his hand. I watched them walk together hand in hand until they came to the gate where I was standing; and then I heard the little boy say to the big policeman: 'I live here, so I'll have to go now. Goodbye!' In both these incidents we recognize the naturalness of trust between two human beings; and we recognize also, I think, the reason why Jesus said to those around him: 'Except ye be converted and become like little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

Jesus diagnosed the mortal sickness from which people suffer as fear. His name for the opposite condition, the healthy state, is faith. By faith he meant trustfulness, or confidence—not being on the defensive. He thought that trust was the natural state of mind in our relations with one another, and noticed how you see it in children. Adults have learned to be afraid in the process of growing up; and these fears poison our capacity for living. Fear means constraint and repression. Faith means freedom and spontaneity. So we can define the mission of Jesus

in these terms. Men need to be saved from their fear, and liberated into faith. The task is to re-establish a universal trustfulness in human relations, in the place of the fear that distorts and destroys life. And this has to be taken and undertaken with complete realism, looking all the facts in the face.

But how can it be done? That is the question. We may agree with the diagnosis, and indeed the medical psychologists in our own time have come laboriously to a similar conclusion. But a diagnosis is not a cure: it may show only that the case is hopeless. In fact, we are full of fear. We don't trust life, or only within narrow limits. We don't trust other people, or at most only a few of them, and even these with reservations. What prevents us getting rid of our fear is just—our fear. Many people would say that there *is* nothing to be done about it. We are made like that, and must make the best of it. Jesus did not think so. Indeed he was interested in diagnosis only for the sake of the cure. And he was convinced that the cure for fear is love. His first rule for the abundant life was 'Fear not, only have faith'. Beside it he set a second rule, which he called his 'new commandment': 'Love one another.'

Now I can imagine your retort, if you are a realist—as I hope you are. 'This doesn't help', you say, 'it leaves us just where we were. No doubt if we had enough love in us, we would forget to be afraid. Perfect love casts out fear. But we can no more make ourselves love than we can stop ourselves being frightened.' This might be so if his 'Love one another' stood alone. Though even then there would be a difference. Love *is* stronger than fear; because it is a positive force. It is life-enhancing. Fear is negative; it interrupts and limits life. But the new commandment doesn't stand alone. Listen to the full statement from which it is taken. 'A new commandment I give unto you', he said, 'that ye love one another: as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.'

These additional words make all the difference. One of his followers, writing in another part of the New Testament, put it the other way round. 'We love', he said, 'because he first loved us.' Jesus was putting his trust in the natural reciprocity of love. This is something that we all recognize. You expect children to love their parents, do you not? Why? Because their parents loved them first. So if you come across a child who dislikes or hates his parents or even one who is just indifferent to them, and shows no affection, you feel that this is strange and unnatural, and you begin to wonder what the cause can be. I myself would be inclined at once to suspect the parents. I would begin to imagine that they couldn't have loved the child enough, or not in the right way, or

only in a selfish or self-interested fashion. I expect you would do the same. I am quite sure that people who have had much to do with difficult children would. So it seems that we have a right to expect that love should beget love. This, we might say, is the natural logic of love. We should recognize, of course, that it is not inevitable, because the response to love has to be a free response. Love does not deal in compulsion. But where the love is disinterested and unselfish, and yet meets with no response, for no reason that can be found, we feel that we are up against something strange and unnatural, even something monstrous or sinister. Perhaps you think I am overstating the case. Never mind. It will at least help you to understand what I mean when I say that Jesus rested his hope for the success of his mission, for the salvation of the world from fear, upon the power of love to call forth a free response in its own kind.

But this does not take us all the way. His love for his disciples will perhaps explain their reciprocal love for him. But does it provide a sufficient ground for the disciples to love one another? Well! look again at the natural family and ask yourself whether the natural love of children for their parents does tend or does not tend to produce a result that we should expect, a love between brothers and sisters that binds them together into a unity. Perhaps this is not so easy. There are lots of grounds for dissension and mutual distrust within the family. Brothers and sisters are often rivals, and jealousy is hardly to be altogether avoided. Love between them has to struggle with obstacles, and we all know cases where the obstacles have proved too strong and the family has broken. On the other hand we have to remember that we are living in a society and through a time in which the artificial obstacles with which the family has to grapple have been magnified out of all reason. We have to recognize that the love that holds the family together depends greatly upon the quality of the parents' love for one another and for their children. But when all is said, we have only to look at history to recognize the almost miraculous power of the family to overcome all obstacles and maintain itself from generation to generation. The bond of the family is love; and the family is the origin and the pattern for all other social bonds. So in choosing love as the bond of unity for his disciples Jesus was undoubtedly choosing the strongest and most lasting force known to social history.

This account, however, is still incomplete. The final and no doubt the most significant step still has to be taken. Jesus linked the love which he manifested, and which was to bind his disciples in a society of mu-



tual affection, with the hidden reality of the world; with the creative center of all things. 'As the Father hath loved me', he told his disciples, 'so have I loved you.' This claim has tremendous implications, as you can well guess. But at the moment most of these do not concern the argument. What does concern it is this. The disciples are the small group of people who have been with him throughout the duration of his mission. By this personal relation to him, by the impact of his personality upon them, they have become convinced that his claim is valid; that his mission is a divine mission; that he is sent by God. Jesus has become for them the revelation of the Father. The love which he manifests, which binds them to him and to one another, is thus an expression of the power that created and that sustains the world. So they knew that in sharing his mission they were not just following another religious leader, but entering into the final truth about themselves and about the human race and about the whole world. They were anchored in reality.

### **The New Society**

When Jesus discovered that he was to be rejected and killed, his own faith in his mission was not altered. Instead, he realized that it was only through his death that his mission could be completed. Only by dying for his disciples could he completely manifest his love for them, fully overcome their fear and confirm their faith. 'Greater love hath no man than this,' he said, 'that a man lay down his life for his friends.' Only by being crucified could he unite the religious leadership with the secular power in his legal assassination; take the full tragedy of human life into his own experience and give his mission a universal meaning and effect. 'I, if I be lifted up,' he said, 'will draw all men unto me.'

This realization set him a practical task. He had to prepare his disciples to meet the shock of his death, and to take up their task in the world when he had gone. He had to create a new society in the world which would complete what he had begun; and the small group of followers who had remained faithful to him in his rejection were the only material available for its making. From any human point of view they were not very promising—a group of very ordinary people, from various professions, with Simon Peter, the fisherman, as their natural leader. If we are to judge from the difficulty they had in understanding their master, they were not outstandingly intelligent. All they could offer—and for Jesus, no doubt, it was enough—was that they loved him and believed in him. There was a day when many who had followed him were offended and left. Jesus had turned to the little band that remained

and asked them 'Will you also go away?' And Peter had replied 'Lord! to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.' Up to a point, at least, their natural fear had been overcome, and they had learned to trust. Later, when Jesus challenged them to say what their opinion of him was, Peter, acting as spokesman for the group, confessed their faith in him as the Messiah, sent by God for the salvation of his people. It was then that Jesus began to explain to them that he must die. But in the end, when he was arrested, and their test came, they all forsook him and fled; and Peter denied him with oaths and curses.

These were the people out of whom the new society—the Christian Church—was to be made. What, then, was the task that they were to undertake? They were to be witnesses for Jesus after he was gone. They were to carry his good tidings—his gospel—to the whole world. These are familiar phrases, and they are correct answers so far as they go. But much depends upon what the 'good tidings' is taken to be and what it is about. There is, however, another side to the answer. The disciples would witness to their Master not merely by talking, but by being a new kind of society in the world—by the quality of its life. What the church would say to the world would depend, for its effect, upon the character of the society which it is. If there should be a conflict between what it preaches and its practice, the world will convict it of hypocrisy, and will disregard its witness. It is this aspect of the new society which I want to talk about.

First, however, let us come back for a moment to the disciples, as we left them at the arrest and trial of Jesus, at the time of his death. They all forsook him and fled. Fear gripped them, their faith broke and they scattered and left him to face his accusers alone. A short while later we find them together again, full of confidence, bearing witness with astonishing fearlessness before an assembled multitude. We find Peter, who had denied Jesus, telling the crowd that 'God has made that same Jesus whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ'.

What had happened to transform these men? Their own account of the matter was that after his crucifixion and burial Jesus had appeared to them and talked with them, not once but several times, until one day when he had left the earth before them and disappeared from their sight. They had stayed together, in a room in Jerusalem, as he had told them to do, until Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost had come upon them like a rushing wind, and they had begun to speak with tongues. That was what they said; and that they firmly believed; there can be no doubt

of this. Something had happened to them which transformed them; this also, it seems to me, cannot be doubted. What happened they could only describe in terms of the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And on what happened to them rests the history of the Christian Church from that day to this. I leave it there with you. I can find no other explanation.

How then did Jesus think of the new society which he was setting up? As sharing his vision of the coming, on earth, of the kingdom of heaven. So he taught his disciples to pray—'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. He thought of them as manifesting in the world the way of life and the style of living that he had shown them; he thought of them as a candle that he had lit to shine in a dark night; as a ferment in the world for its transformation, like the leaven hid in the meal. Bound together in love, delivered from fear and established in the confidence of faith, they would live, as he had lived, not for themselves, but for the world. So he said, 'If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.'

Was this to expect too much of human nature? We are more apt to fail, I believe, by asking too little. He asked everything. But it would be a mistake to write him down as an idealist. I remember asking a well-known Berlin psychiatrist what he meant by a normal man, and he replied, 'The only normal man is the ideal man.' And the norm of the new society must equally be its ideal. Jesus was a realist. He knew also that what mattered was the purpose and the effort and the refusal to give up. He provided for failure and for the canceling of failure by making forgiveness one of the great principles of the new society. These disciples of his were to live in an atmosphere of forgiveness both towards one another and towards the world outside. In this way their failure would not disrupt the society. They could rise up and try again.

There is so much more that might be said, because a great deal of what we sometimes call the 'ethical teaching' of Jesus can best be understood as instruction to his disciples about the task that he laid upon them and the spirit and method through which that task must be accomplished. In the parable of the Good Samaritan he taught them the unlimited character of their enterprise, and the principle upon which the new society is to be based. We might sum it up in the kind of formula which appeals to our intellectual tradition as 'common humanity expressed in caring for the needs of others'. And when he bids them love their enemies he is showing them the method which must guide their

efforts. It is the principle that love tends to beget love, which is the rule for reconciliation.

I should like to stress finally one principle which is given special prominence in the record—the principle of unity. The most telling expression of it, perhaps, is to be found in the Gospel according to St. John. We read there that in his last prayer for his disciples—and it is extended to cover those who shall believe in him through their word—Jesus asks the Father ‘that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may know that Thou hast sent me and hast loved them as Thou has loved me.’ So the success of their witness to the world is grounded explicitly on their unity amongst themselves.

### **The World Today**

In this field of unity the church has failed greatly. But perhaps the most significant fact in our own time is the growing awareness of disunity as failure and the movement to put an end to it.... Fear has been, from the beginning, one of the major forces in human society. In the long, slow climb to the position of power and possibility which we have reached, it has dogged our steps. It has exiled the visionaries, killed the prophets and blocked the roads of advance. And in our own time, when opportunity is at a maximum, we have maximized fear and concentrated it, until unless we can overcome it we are likely to be driven to the final insanity of racial suicide.

There can be little doubt of what has concentrated and maximized fear in this way. It is the invention and mass construction of thermonuclear weapons. It is not the bomb itself, of course, that we are afraid of. One can't really be afraid of a canister of chemicals. It is what the nations which have these weapons have done and keep doing to prepare for their use. It is war as it now is that frightens us. Whether we live in the West or the East we know that these weapons, any day, might be thrown at us, and we should have only a few minutes warning. The lucky ones would be killed on the spot, in millions. The courage with which we accept these facts and go on living a civilized life is admirable in its way. We suppress our fear. But, of course, this doesn't do away with it. It works in the unconscious. It tends, if we are adults, to make us conservative, clinging for safety to what is familiar. If we are young, it tends to make us grab at a good time now, because we have no future. And all with cool and admirable fortitude; with the kind of

courage that is married to stupidity, like the courage that inspired the charge of the Light Brigade!

This is the last of four talks in Lent, in which we have been considering the mission of Jesus, and the combination of fear and stupidity that put him to death. We have been thinking of it, so far as possible, as a human story, however much more it may be. The natural theme of this final talk is set by the question whether what Jesus was and what he did so many centuries ago has any relevance to us and to our situation today. To this question I must answer that I can see nothing else that is fundamentally relevant.

What prevents us from entering into our heritage is fear. So our basic problem is how to conquer fear and to replace it by faith—that is, by confidence in our world and trust in our fellows, however different may be the form of their politics or the color of their skins. There is no other fundamental problem; for if this problem were solved, the others would be easily soluble by means of the knowledge and resources we possess. But the problem of fear cannot be resolved by any scientific technology; nor yet by any political organization. For it is a problem in personal relations, and such problems are religious problems, and can only be solved by religious means.

Now I have tried to show you that Jesus diagnosed the disorder of human life as fear. His mission, he believed, was to release men from fear and to replace it by trust and confidence, or, in the traditional language, by faith. To achieve this would be to save the world by making life abundant, spontaneous and free. 'Fear not,' he said, 'simply have faith' and 'to the man with faith, all things are possible'. He proposed to overcome fear by love—by love exhibited in himself and mirroring the nature of the Father, as he called the personal ground of existence. The principle upon which he worked was that love tends to beget love, and that mutual love creates trust and conquers fear. On this basis he united his band of disciples; and when it became clear that he must complete his mission by dying for the world he came to save, he taught them how to be a society in the world which could expand 'till it filled the earth'. So he founded his church and died for it and for all men; as the Son of Man, the symbol of their humanity. His church is still here, and its members now belong to every major human group, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. And the function of his church, even when it is forgotten, is to solve the problem of fear, and so to save the world.

'But surely', I hear some of you say, 'you can't believe that the church can solve our problem. Just look at it!' Well now, I hope you

*have* looked at it, and recently, and long and carefully. If you have, and if your judgment of it still stands, I must regretfully agree with you. The Christian organizations are in no condition to tackle the problem that faces us. I sometimes get depressed about them and think that they have forgotten their terms of reference; that they have forgotten the kingdom of heaven on earth in a quite unnecessary effort to establish it in heaven. Nevertheless, the task of universal human reconciliation is the task of the Church. Such depression, however, is itself fear and [lack of faith]. So may I, in conclusion, ask *you* a question? If the church cannot deal with the problem of fear, what alternative instrument and method have you to suggest? Any I can think of is ludicrously less capable of achieving a solution, and the problem is a religious one.

In the past, the Christian Church has shown great powers of recuperation; and there is working within it today a ferment of change. Only those who are in touch with it from within, or are watching carefully and sympathetically from without, know how fast and how radical that change is. Its most obvious sign is the movement towards a reunion of the churches, and unity, we saw, is one of the basic conditions of success. How can a church which cannot reconcile its members think of reconciling the peoples of the world! *Any* unity, however, will not do. It must be a free unity in a bond of trust and affection, through which fear is overcome. It must give us a church which is not on the defensive and has learned how to exist not for its members, but for the world.



*John Macmurray, author of many books, was a member of the Religious Society of Friends. He taught philosophy at colleges and universities in South Africa, England, and Scotland during a long and distinguished career. To Save From Fear was originally delivered as four Lenten talks on BBC Radio in 1964, later appearing as an article in Quaker Monthly, and first reprinted by the Wider Quaker Fellowship in 1979—three years following his death.*

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