

# THE FREEDOM OF THE SONS OF GOD

Alex Reichel

*"Like clay in the hands of the potter  
to mould as it pleases him,  
so are men in the hands of their Maker,  
to reward as he judges right"*

In a letter to the Editor of the Catholic Weekly, Helen Cramer asked for help with a question of Christian education. The question arose from an enquiring and perceptive student in Helen's catechetics class. The question which Helen asks must be the most important question that can be asked in Christian education, particularly today when many thousands of young people feel themselves caught up in inexorable processes of uncertainty and live in situations over which they seem to have no control whatsoever. The fatalist mentality is extremely widespread; senseless war and indiscriminate bombing, terrorism, fear, violence, prejudice, family breakdown, unemployment, drugs, social disease, hopelessness, despair and inevitably death. Nothing can be done about it, nothing matters!

The current moral breakdown is largely due to erroneous answers given in the past to the sort of question Helen Cramer asks. It is due to the gradual erosion of decent moral values since the so-called Enlightenment. It is largely the legacy of that monstrous predestining picture of God, in which the Creator moved his creatures about like pawns on a chessboard, purely for his own pleasure. It is the legacy of studying scripture in a fundamentalist sense, without reference to the whole revealed Word, mothered by the Magisterium of the Church. It is also the legacy of the notion that men are governed by fundamental natural laws of the sort discussed by scientists; laws which they think they discover but which are really the product of a particular view of reality which scientists adopt. None can escape the elemental forces of the universe which determine everything, including human lives. The universe is not a home for men, but a trap from which there is no escape. The current abundance of extremely ignorant atheistic writing springs from this source.

Now all of these claims are keynotes of that paganism from which Christ has freed us. Fatalism is endemic in paganism. Christianity on the other hand is characterised by freedom, the freedom of the sons of God, (*Romans 8:20,21*) In this Christianity is utterly unique. On this point Christianity parts company with every other faith, including Judaism and Islam.

The Christian is free of every bondage, every elemental force, or, if he is not, the power is available to him to be so.

*"The reason therefore, why those who are in Christ  
Jesus are not condemned is that the law of the spirit  
of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law  
on sin and death" (Romans 8:1)*

*"...for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation,  
the old creation has gone, and the new one is here"  
(2 Cor. 5:17)*

The Christian is subject to no person, place or thing separate from his

Lord, Jesus Christ.

*"To the Jews who believed in him Jesus said:  
'If you make my word your home you will  
indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth  
and the truth will make you free' " (John 8:31,32)*

*"So if the Son makes you free you will be free  
indeed" (John 8:36).*

Many other texts may be used. In the present context of Christian education, St. Paul's instruction to Timothy is of the utmost importance:

*"All scripture is inspired by God and can profitably  
be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding  
peoples lives and teaching them to be holy. This is  
how the man who is dedicated to God becomes fully  
equipped and ready for any good work"  
(2 Timothy 3: 16,17)*

One important corollary of Christian freedom (and this is a somewhat subtle point) is that the Christian is free even of the word of scripture taken in the sense of "It is written"; that is in any sense bespeaking fatalism. It was this sense of scripture precisely that Christ became freely joined to in order to free us from it. The "It is written" syndrome of Old Testament times was completely transformed by Christ's Crucifixion, and lifted up into the new covenant of freedom. There is only one example in history where the scriptures of one world religion, Judaism, were taken over in their entirety by another world religion, Christianity. The Old Testament was given an entirely new meaning and purpose, not destroyed but fulfilled. There is now only one Word of God in scripture, the marriage of Old and New Testaments. Along with St. Augustine we can say that "The New is in the Old contained, the Old is in the New explained". We can truly say that Judaism does not use the same Old Testament as that used by Christians, although they are word for word the same. The meaning of those words, however, is completely changed by the New Covenant, This does not mean, however, that for anthropological purposes they cannot be studied as separate documents. We are concerned here only with the light of Christian faith. It is in this area that most of the confusion arises when questions of the kind Helen Cramer was asked by her catechumen occur.

Helen's pupil's case is the following:

God ordained that Jesus die on the Cross. He chose Herod, Pilate, Judas and the soldiers to be instrumental in this. These then had no say in what happened. It was what God wanted and therefore there should be no sin or blame placed on those who brought about the Crucifixion of Christ. There is the implication that Judas et al. were moved fatalistically.

This is the first problem. It is pointless to argue by way of rebuttal that 'man has free will' for this is precisely the issue at stake. One could argue, indeed, that if every man has free will (a thesis which is by no means easy to establish) then holy scripture is in error, and this is a far more serious educational problem. We are in an area of theology which has done severe damage to Christendom since the Reformation and whose influence is still to be discerned in the current crop of atheists, I refer to Calvinism. Let us recall briefly the salient features of this fearsome, anti-human doctrine.

1. No human faculty remains uncorrupted by sin- total human depravity.

2. The inscrutable will of God elects or predestines men unconditionally.
3. Christ died for the sins of the elect- limited atonement.
4. God's grace is irresistible- no human capacity is involved.
5. God's irresistible grace secures his elect against the probability of apostasy and guarantees their final salvation.

Perhaps we can see the source from which Helen's pupils case is coming. There is also the thought that Jesus' sacrifice was not a free act but he was acting on orders from His Father.

The second problem is as follows: If God (or anyone else for that matter knows with certainty that our actions will be done in precisely the way they are done before they *are* done, how can our actions be done freely? Surely it would be *necessary* that such actions be done?

This second problem is usually tackled in philosophical theology. We treat the first problem first.

Now the first problem, which has arisen from scripture, can be answered from scripture. There are indeed many scriptures which invite a fatalistic conclusion. For example , at the Last Supper, when Jesus said:

*"Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man is going to his fate, as the scriptures say he will, but alas for that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! Better for that man if he had never been born! Judas, who was to betray him, asked in his turn, 'Not I, Rabbi, surely?'"*

*"They are your own words' answered Jesus."  
(Mt.26:23-25)*

Clearly if Judas was capable of using his own words, he is obviously capable of doing his own deeds. The fact that Jesus could see that Judas loved money above all and that he would be punished for his unrepentant sin in no way compromises Judas' responsibility, as we shall see presently. It does show, however, that Jesus could see things that only God could see.

In another scripture we read:

*"He then opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'So you see how IT IS WRITTEN that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name , repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'"*

*(Luke 24:45-47)*

So, everything points to the fact that Jesus was subject to a master plan that someone had already worked out before he was born and that he would involve his disciples in it. He was also capable of illuminating the understanding of men.

We have , of course, the teaching of Jesus himself, apparently in regard to Judas:

*"I have watched over them (ie. his disciples) and not one is lost except the one who chose to be lost, and this was to fulfill the scriptures"*

*(John 17:12, Jerusalem)*

This verse, however , the translation of very competent scripture scholars, does not read so confidently in some other versions ( which speak of 'the son of perdition') that the crucial part of God's plan was accomplished through Judas' free

choice. Some of Jesus' sayings about this are somewhat ambivalent, for example:

*"Have I not chosen you, you Twelve?  
Yet one of you is a devil"  
(John 6:69)*

*"I know the ones I have chosen, but what  
scripture says must be fulfilled: Someone  
who shares my table has lifted up his heel  
against me (rebels against me)"  
(John 13:18)*

Nevertheless, there is clear evidence from scripture that Judas' ultimate action was the culmination of a progressive moral degradation. The love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim.6:10) and Judas started there (John 12:6) , then allowed the temptation to betray Christ to be entertained in his mind (John 13:2) until finally

*"Judas reached out and took the piece of bread  
offered him by Jesus and Satan entered him"  
(John 13:27)*

This is thought by many scholars to be connected with Judas' refusal to believe that Christ's body was being offered him in this first Eucharist. (I have a thought that in the context of the Passover meal Judas did not partake of the children's bread.)

Judas' choice was no different from the moral choices we are continually challenged by: Jesus or Money, Jesus or Power and Position (Herod), Jesus or Violence and Greed (the soldiers); Jesus or Fear of Losing Authority and Control (Pilate). Presumably from the moment he made his momentous choice, Jesus was no longer free; Satan had taken over. Satan thought he had won the day. But one very strong theme in scripture is that Satan, in putting Jesus to death, brought about the destruction of his own kingdom.

#### GOD'S MASTER PLAN

*"What on earth, is God doing, for Heaven's sake?"*

Helen Cramer's catechumens are certainly not the first to ask questions about this all important theme. In fact, what God has done, is doing and will do, is to accomplish his Master Plan of salvation, to build the everlasting kingdom over which Jesus will reign forever.

God never changes his mind (cf. James 1:17, Mal. 3:6) His plan is inexorable. To speak of an unfolding of *this* plan is to take a man's eye view of it rather than a God's eye view. God sees it all in the *now* of eternity.

*"Before the world was made, he chose us,  
chose us in Christ..."  
(Ephesians 1:4)*

*"...and it is in him that we were claimed as God's own,  
chosen from the beginning, under the predetermined  
plan of the one who guides all things as he decides  
by his own will, chosen to be, for his greater glory,  
the people who would put their hopes in Christ  
before he came"*

*(Ephesians 1: 11,12)*

We can have no choice about the plan; we can only be free about the choice for Christ or against him (Matt. 12:30). But note that there is no other predetermined plan except for the life of glory. God began (in our terms) to unfold this plan from the moment he lost Adam's friendship through the success of Satan:

*"I will put enmity between you and the Woman,  
between your offspring and her offspring. He/she  
will crush your head and you will strike his/her heel."  
(Genesis 3:15)*

The Old Testament is the story of the deliberate unfolding of this plan. The plan culminates in the Crucifixion of Jesus, in the sense that 'it is all over bar the shouting'. To accomplish this plan, the Father required the complete but freely given obedience of his Son. Indeed it was freely and joyfully given, even with great desire. The same invitation is open to us all:

*"In your minds you must be the same as Christ  
Jesus; His state was divine yet he did not cling  
to his equality with God but emptied himself  
to assume the condition of a slave and became  
as men are; and being as men are, he was humbler yet, even  
to accepting death, death on a cross.  
But God raised him high and gave him the name  
which is above all other names, so that all beings  
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld  
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that  
every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord  
to the glory of God the Father."  
(Philippians 2: 5-11)*

Since the Crucifixion the accomplishment of God's plan is carried out on an entirely different basis, viz. the victory of the Cross. By the power of the Holy Spirit which Jesus won for men, God works directly with his free sons who have given the obedience of faith freely to his Son, Jesus Christ.

## ARGUMENTS FROM REASON

The Church not only insists that one's submission to God in faith must be absolutely free, but also she insists that one's obedience in faith is consonant (harmonious) with the light of reason. There will be miracles and prophecies, signs and wonders available within the Christian community to reinforce this consonance with the rational world, (See Vatican 1, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chapter III ). She quotes several scriptures in support of these things. We can expect then that the norms of reason will never be violated by any position the Church takes and that rational arguments will clearly support her, without however rationalising the light of faith. (In this respect I love to argue that even though the Resurrection of Jesus from death is a matter of faith, to my mind it is a fact of history since it is the inference to the best explanation of all the facts which are available. We are not stark staring mad in believing the Resurrection. As a fact of history it has far reaching consequences as to how we understand the nature of the universe.)

Thus, if we are constrained to rational thinking in the matter of issue of human freedom in relation to God's foreknowledge of our actions and in relation to the inevitability of God's plan we will be faced with some deficiencies. It is ultimately impossible to encapsulate the mystery of divine things in the thought patterns available to men, (Romans 11:33-36).

There is a simple answer if we can imagine ourselves taking a God's eye view of things; unfortunately a privilege not available to mere mortals. Everything is *present* to God. He does not foresee, he sees. But seeing does not determine. By analogy, if I see a child run in front of a speeding bus, I am not determining that it will

be 'run over'.

The difficulty with this view of the problem is that God appears as a non-involved, passive observer of the passing scene, uncaring and distant---the very opposite of *our* God who disposes every moment of our lives in accordance with his great love for us and who wishes to speed us to glory according to his great plan.

It is a deficiency of human reason that it cannot give us a vision of God of sufficient depth to enable one to live the Christian life. Many great thinkers of the past, for example Socrates and Aristotle, obtained through human reason profound pre-Christian insights, so deep that one wonders why God withheld from them the fact that Truth is a Person. Human reason can lead us to know that God exists, but it cannot involve us intimately in God's own life. For this, God's gifts are necessary. The Christian life cannot be lived without knowing Jesus and loving him and living in the experienced knowledge that he loves us. Jesus and His Holy Spirit are closer to us than breath. We must go beyond reason to that intimacy with Jesus Christ our Lord. Arguments from reason give inadequate answers.

That is why we must let ourselves be led by God's Word into the fullness of truth.

## GOD'S WORK OF ART

We come closer to an understanding of Christian freedom if we reflect on St. Paul's inspiration:

*"We are God's work of art, created in Christ  
Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning  
he had meant us to live it."*

(Ephesians 2:10)

*And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a  
new creation; the old" creation has gone, and  
the new one is here. It is all God's work."*

(2 Cor.5:17)

We are God's work of art! God is an artist who works in the medium, not of clay or oils, but in the 'stuff' from which Jesus is 'made', that is, Spirit, water and blood, (1 John 5:6-8). Spirit, water and blood were the three realities which 'came out' from Jesus when he died on Calvary, (John 19:30-34); the water arising within him from the disintegration of his own flesh. We can argue that this is the same stuff from which creation is made, but this all requires a separate thesis to express adequately, so it will be left to another occasion. For the moment we ought to accept simply that the medium of God's art is 'mystery stuff'.

But we are jumping too far ahead!

We pass over quickly God's work of Creation of the universe from nothing, with man--man and womb-man--as its pinnacle and crown. This is not art, it is Creation, even if it is poetically called art. We speak of human creative art, but this is an analogy, more unlike Creation than like it. Art is 'creative' in as much as something which previously was not manifest in existence is brought into existence by the artist and is valued. It is made of previously existing 'bits' which are brought together by the artist to form a new 'whole' which is in some sense greater than the 'bits' which compose it. It is 'creative like the Creator's work, but it is more unlike the Creator's work than like it. It is much less than the Creator's work. So human artists

do not 'create' in the same sense that God creates.

There is, of course, a profound sense in which man was created from 'bits', as explained in Genesis 2, where we read that Yahweh moulded Adam's body from the dust of the ground but the essential 'ingredient' for life came from a wholly uncreated source, the breath of God. We shall see that once having created his man, God continues to create in him (and in womb-man) from the same uncreated source, Himself.

So, recognising that God's creative art is something which utterly transcends any human conception of it, we can begin to contemplate the entirely new creation which God accomplishes for his creatures *in Christ*. The beautiful theme of God as artist of man's life in Christ appears first of all, by way of a symbolic action, in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah the prophet is told by Yahweh to go down to the potter's house (Jeremiah 18) where he watched the potter at work. Whenever the vessel he was making came out wrong, the potter would thump the clay into a lump and rethrow it on the wheel so as to fashion a new vessel. The Lord then explained to Jeremiah:

*"House of Israel, can I not do to you what this potter does?- it is Yahweh who speaks. Yes, as clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in mine, House of Israel... "*

and so on. But Yahweh makes it perfectly clear to Jeremiah that he only destroys 'pots' (technically he allows them to destroy themselves) who refuse to abandon their wickedness, refuse to listen to his voice, refuse to amend their conduct and actions and who prefer to do as they please.

It is interesting that this story of the potter is used in Christian ministry to give meaning to the phenomenon in human life of 'brokenness', which may happen through physical, mental, emotional, moral, financial or spiritual breakdown. This could be brought about through no fault of the person's own, through the inscrutable providence of God. or, as is usually the case, by a failure to live the kind of lives which are demanded by the truth God has built into man's make-up. It could be caused by the loss of a loved one in death or separation, and there is a failure to surrender that person to God. One is left with an 'attachment' to the departed one, and the 'possessor' often remains physiologically as well as cognitively involved with his 'possession'. Brokenness ought to be seen as a mighty blessing in disguise, making it possible for Yahweh to rebuild the broken one in joy. I have heard many Christians praise the Lord for allowing their breakdown to occur, so that a new and abundant life could emerge by a 'conscious' appreciation of Yahweh's healing gifts. Yahweh sculpts freely in freely submitted 'materials'. Yahweh recreates freely in and through surrendered lives. For we Christians to whom Jesus is the fullness of Yahweh manifest to men (cf. John 1:16), we can say with St. Paul,

*"I live, not I, but Christ lives in me"*  
(Galatians 2:20)

and

*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*  
(Philippians 4:13)

HINTS FOR ANSWERS WITHIN THE MYSTERY

But what of the man who is not freely surrendered to Christ? How can he or she be a 'free' and autonomous agent if God knows his or her every action even before it is done? How can Judas, Pilate, Herod, the soldiers and even we sinners be held responsible for their actions in putting Jesus on the Cross? (Actually there is some Christian tradition that at least one of the soldiers became a Christian and some even think that Pilate became a follower after he left Jerusalem.) It seems that everyone, except a few faithful women, were caught up in the frenzy of mob violence against an innocent victim, so may have surrendered their freedom, but that is another story. However let us assume they were free agents and not make excuses for them. The question remains: How can they have been free if God knew everything before it happened?

The answers lie in the nature of God's creative work. We can never fully 'understand' the mystery but we can 'experience' it in the faith life.

We are God's works of art. Every artist is aware that when he is creating a new art product there comes a time when the product has 'a life of its own'; it becomes an autonomous object and the artist is at its service, not the other way around. Think for example of the beautiful plays of Shakespeare. Quite remarkable and clearly defined characters are created by the playwright. We follow their actions as if they were real people. We can give them character assessments; we rejoice when they get their 'come-uppance' for wrong doing and admire their acts of heroism. Once the character is created he moves through the play as a real person with complete consistency of moral character, personality, individuality, psychology and philosophy. He is in every way 'real' and 'human'. And yet, even when we feel we know Julius Caesar, King Lear or Portia as real people, it rarely occurs to us that every detail of their lives has come from the creative work of the playwright; from the mind of the creator.

William Makepeace Thackeray, the renowned English author once said: "I don't control my characters; I am in their hands and they take me where they please". Honore Balzac, the French playwright was once criticised for producing heroes who went through tragedy after tragedy. He answered the criticism by saying: "Don't bother me..... these people have no backbone. What happens to them is inevitable".

Created characters in literature, then, 'have a life of their own'. Note however that such characters are completely defined by the play or the novel. When the play stops, they stop. The critic does not go beyond the play or the novel to assess the characters or produce the mountain of articles written about them after the work is published. One cannot get further information about the persons in the play by visiting them in their homes or studying their lives as they live on after the play finishes. They may be 'real' to us but they are essentially figments of the imagination.

Real people in the flesh, on the other hand, are not figments of any imagination. God does not have an imagination in any human sense, although we can say that they existed in some sense, from all eternity, in the mind of their very real Creator. For myself, I do not incline to the view that God's choice of us 'from the beginning' ((Ephesians 1: 4,11,12) involved his creativity. Such a view seems to imply a blueprint for each person; but a genuine creative artist does not work to a blueprint already in his mind which he proceeds to 'make happen' exteriorly. Perhaps

architects work in this way (except for geniuses like Gaudi with his famous cathedral facade in Barcelona) but genuine creativity involves being at the service of 'unknown outcomes' which emerge in the process of the creative act and then begin to have a 'life of their own'. The blueprint notion of God's creativity, indeed, seems to go beyond the revelation of scripture. Thus we read in Isaiah:

*"Thus says Yahweh who made you, who formed you from the womb, who is your help"*

(Isaiah 44:2)

*"Thus says Yahweh your redeemer who formed you in the womb"*

(Isaiah 44:24)

*"And now Yahweh has spoken, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to him"*

(Isaiah 49:5)

Also from the Psalms:

*"Yet you drew me out of the womb,  
you entrusted me to my mother's breasts;  
placed on your lap from my birth;  
from my mother's womb you have been my God"*  
(Psalm 22:9)

Imagine then a single fertilised human cell in its mother's womb having all the genetic endowment linking it to the whole past of mankind, in an environment through which it is linked to the whole accumulated disorder of human sin, but having all the potential to be everything that a fully developed person can be, a glorious diadem in the crown of glory. Then imagine our divine artist touching it here and touching it there, touching its whole environment here and there, enticing it here and enticing it there, throughout its entire life. At some stage it becomes a fully mature autonomous person in a world, which for that person, is utterly unique.

During the process perhaps God asks himself, and sees the answer immediately, "Will my creature be my servant, freely submitted to my continuing touch, or will he flee from my continuing touch? Or will he use my continuing touch for his own ends, not mine? Perhaps I can see that he will, but that choice is available to every one of my autonomous creatures. I will even make his sins serve my plan for him. When he rebels by using me rather than letting me use him (Haven't we all done this?) I will send my Son to rescue him. I will never cease to love him in and through Him.

No human artist can create products which are continually growing and changing. No playwright or author can create characters whose character is never complete until they die. God is the only true artist!

One of the corollaries of seeing God as the artist of our lives is that sin is seen as a kind of blasphemy, using God for our own ends and using his creation to serve us rather than Him.

## CONCLUSION

The poet, Francis Thompson, has given us a superb chronicle of his own autonomous life as he tried to relish the purely natural things of creation independently of their Creator and Redeemer:

*"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;*

*I fled Him, down the labarinthine ways  
Of my own mind , and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed hopes I sped,  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms and chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
But with unhurrying chase  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat- and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet--  
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me".*

*(Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven")*

Alas for Judas! He did not let those Feet catch up with him!  
*"Better for that man had he not been born"*

*(Matthew 26:24)*