

# That we may dream again

once we were dreams

dreams that would blanket gray skies  
dreams that could bind human cries

dreams danced across our land  
powered by youth, fueled by faith

dreams stumbled  
on the 21st of May

unheralded knocks on doors ...  
coarse shouts ... and  
a coarser interruption of life

they broke the doors of our hearts  
erected steel bars in their place

our imprisoned dreams  
could find no flight

cold water splashed in air-conditioned dinky rooms ...  
shivering bodies in various states of undress ...  
freezing dreams

sudden stinging slaps ...  
snappy heavy blows ...  
fracturing dreams

the heat of our dreams  
could not match the cold of their steel  
in that place where  
even dreams had to die

finally they let us leave  
we took nothing except the shackles in our heart  
and the dregs of dreams barely remembered

do dreams truly ever die?  
family, friends and burning faith  
continue their healing magic  
that we may dream again

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# Foreword

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As one of the people around the world shocked and horrified at the events of 21 May, 1987, in Singapore, I write now, 21 years later, having met a few more of the detainees and seeing the continuing goodness of those who were arrested. The reasons for these events remain a mystery. How could goodness and concern for the disadvantaged be so misunderstood?

When we heard the news in Adelaide, we began a period of symbolic acts of solidarity – we hoped these would comfort the detainees whose names were to become very familiar, although it would be a few years before I met them. We also embarked on a political and educational campaign to gain the release of these detainees.

Across the globe, people of goodwill rallied to provide support. It wasn't difficult to find people surprised and concerned that these detentions had happened, and even more disconcerting, that they were held for so long without charges laid or being brought to trial. It was also these detentions that brought to light the extraordinary plight of the long-time prisoner Chia Thye Poh.

A 'Committee of 100' was formed to fund a large open letter in The Australian newspaper. The letter called on the Australian government to put pressure on the relevant authorities to either release the detainees, or to charge them and bring them to trial. This letter was signed and funded by a wide-ranging cross-section of Australian society. It comprised signatures from lawyers, doctors, political commentators, church leaders and ordinary citizens. Such was the deep concern at the events unfolding in Singapore.

Other public actions, including media coverage and letters to editors, were important too. But for me, more profound was the symbolic acts of solidarity I learnt from those with a deep spirituality and a strong sense of Catholic action.

Every month, a small group would gather outside the Singapore Airlines office, standing in silence, holding a large banner, focusing our energy on those detained, sending them our prayers, willing courage and hope to them

that their ordeal would end. We distributed pamphlets to passers-by and sought signatures for our petitions.

These silent protests held much meaning for us. Years later when I met some of the other detainees, I discovered that our continued concern, action and prayers were also deeply important for them.

Being remembered and supported by those who know you is powerful enough, but I learnt that it is even more powerful when people who do not know you act for your well-being and pray for your freedom because they care for you, about the injustices you suffer. I still feel incredibly humbled that these little actions actually made a difference to those in prison.

Many important people around the globe also acted in much more powerful ways to defend the rights of those detained. They did so out of an unshakable commitment to human rights. Behind all these actions was the faith that seeks justice. For us, our small acts of solidarity came from our faith in God who calls on us to be there for one another.

We know the inviolability of the human person. We also know that the actions of the detainees stemmed from this deep belief in the dignity and value of every person.

I have the freedom to live out my beliefs without fear and repression. I know, from my long friendship with one of the detainees, and what I have discovered about the others, that they are people who cared about the less privileged. It was their concern for the poor that ultimately led to them being imprisoned.

Freedom is a state of being as well as a physical reality. The courage it took to survive those days of darkness, and to rebuild their lives afterwards, is a testament to their strength, the faith in their innocence and the belief that one day the truth would be told.

This 21st anniversary book is not only to remember their experiences, but also a tribute to the families and friends who took risks to support them, provide for them, pray for them and keep the rest of the world informed about what was happening.

This book is also a continuing sign of courage, hope and truth in those

who have waited 21 years to tell their story. Those not represented in these pages may never choose to tell their stories this way, but I also wish to acknowledge, honour and remember them.

I am humbled to have been one tiny part of their journey.

Catherine Whewell  
Adelaide

## *Persecuted for justice's sake*

by Vincent Cheng

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Tacked on one wall of my prison cell was a large poster with these words in bold red:

*“Jesus said: Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice’s sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”*

I took this quotation from Matthew 5:10-12; it was to remind myself of the reason for my detention under the Internal Security Act (ISA). This had begun with my arbitrary arrest at my home on Thursday 21 May, 1987, at 5am by about eight officers from the Internal Security Department (ISD). Being under ISA arrest meant being deprived of my right to a fair and open trial.

*“You acted in a manner prejudicial to the security of Singapore by being the central figure in the Marxist conspiracy, masterminded by Tan Wah Piow, to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore, using communist united front tactics, with a view to establishing a Marxist state ... by violent means, if necessary.”* This and other allegations against me would have been demolished in an open court. But, alas, under the ISA, I, along with 21 detainees, were denied judicial review and subjected to arbitrary treatment in detention. Most of us bear the physical and psychological scars to this day.

For me, the trauma is insidiously lodged in the subconscious, even after the passage of 21 years. I still feel angry at the injustice of the whole incident, and that the perpetrators have not been brought to account. “Operation Spectrum” was political rape.

I cannot forget, nor forgive, the harsh treatment meted out to me in prison to extract information – the freezing room, the slapping and the beatings, including the blow to my abdomen.

That last act which triggered my abject subjugation haunted me for a long time.

within the church's confines. Supporting the opposition opened up other avenues for preaching the gospel values of justice and peace to the masses. For some time before I left for Australia in 2001, I was helping the Workers' Party. That would not have crossed my mind if not for what happened.

Recently, I watched a documentary on Australian TV titled "Who Killed Jesus". The verdict was, Jesus killed himself. As a Christian, I believe that Jesus was sent by God to save man. But the documentary concluded that if the historical Jesus had not spoken up for the poor and oppressed, and challenged the authorities on the issue of unjust rules and laws, He might not have been killed.

Today, looking back, the arrests strike me as being a similar, but much scaled-down, version of the historical Jesus' experience. The prayer He taught us includes the phrase "Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on Earth as in Heaven".

The Kingdom of Heaven is not just about what will happen after we are gone from this earth. It begins with what we do on earth. I believe that if more people work towards a better society, if we are motivated by love, justice, peace and compassion, and cared more about the environment, more people would certainly start to experience heaven on earth.

I hope this event can help younger Singaporeans appreciate how we can all play a part in building a better society, whether we are Christian, Muslim or of other faiths. The spirit behind 21 May may well live on, if we all strive towards building a community based on the gospel values of love, justice and peace for all men and women.

## Two very important persons

by *Theresa Yeo*

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There are two girls I anxiously watch, to see the adult women they will eventually become.

The first is my god-daughter who is now 16 years old, and lives in Singapore. The other is my own daughter, now 11, who emigrated to Australia with us.

My god-daughter is very hard-working, good at academics and ambitious. She will no doubt succeed materially. She is well-behaved and sensible too. So far, so good. She is at the stage where she has started to search for greater meaning in her faith – about growing closer to God, feeling the need for fellowship, exploring other Christian denominations and forms of worship.

I was there too, once upon a time, when I was introduced to the Catholic Students' Society (CSS) in university. That sparked my journey towards learning about social justice issues and the social dimension of our faith.

I hope her journey will also provide greater meaning to her life. Of course, I also hope that her generation will choose the social justice path that still means so much to me. My regret is that, having left Singapore, I no longer actively participate in her life and in directly influencing her.

Now, I come to my daughter, Annabelle. Our family left Singapore, among other reasons, to give Annabelle a chance to get a more balanced education and experience a less pressurising, more family-oriented lifestyle. While we were keen for her to achieve her full potential, we also wanted her to have a childhood, and experience the joy of learning and her own space – in all senses of the word.

Unfortunately, it also meant that we had to leave the vibrant Catholic community we were a part of. While we have made new friends in Melbourne, I am always conscious of replicating the dynamism of the relationships we left behind.

I still worry that life here is too good and easy for her, and that she will become self-indulgent and comfortable in her own material pursuits. I worry that her faith experience would be limited to the rituals, personal goodness and the odd deed of charity.

I am full of hopes and wishes for her. I hope that she will grow up to be a responsible and sensible adult. I hope that our lives and choices have been good role models for her. I hope she absorbs the values of social justice that our church and friends embrace. I have enrolled her in a Catholic high school with a strong social justice programme.

So, it is especially for the two of you I am writing this for.

I hope that by revisiting my faith journey and involvement in the Catholic Students' Society and the Catholic Church in Singapore before and after that incident, I can share an important part of history with you. I hope our stories will inspire and challenge you in your own journey in faith and life.

## 21 May 1987

I remember that day clearly.

I was hurrying to work in Shenton Way when Lucy rushed towards me, in tears, and said that the Kevin had been detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

She wanted to know if I was aware of any of his activities that she didn't know about. Did he do anything untoward to warrant the arrest? Wild thoughts raced through our minds as we tried to figure out why he was arrested. Detentions without trial – allowed for under the ISA – are they not reserved only for communist insurgents, armed revolutionaries and racial instigators who threaten the country's stability? We were really worried that Kevin might have gone overboard.

How little, then, we understood that in Singapore, simple acts of standing up for justice could get one detained. How naïve I was!

As the days and weeks passed, it became clear to us what the ruling party was after. Fear set in as rumours abounded of a second wave of arrests. I remember joking that I was glad I had got involved without realising that

arrest could be one of its consequences. While we were aware of detentions of social activists in other countries, we never imagined that in a “civilised” society like ours, our tame actions and dissenting views could justify such wrath from the authorities. We were undergoing a practical lesson on the politics practised in Singapore.

## Solidarity

After 21 years, I can barely remember all that happened then.

But I will never forget the sense of solidarity and community that resulted from this experience.

Our families, our friends, our church community and leaders – everyone had to decide their stand on the arrests. There were, of course, some who disappointed us greatly. But what mattered most to me were the positive responses, from the small actions taken to the great sacrifices made by various supporters.

My mother, whose personal motto was “family first”, relented, and allowed me to continue my involvement with Kevin. Then there were the dear old aunties, who had always been pro-establishment, suddenly declaring they would no longer vote for the ruling party. I also remember the friend in the office who announced she was one of the detainees' friends, vouched for his integrity, and said that all the allegations against them were propaganda.

Family, significant others and spouses had to leave their comfort zone to publicly state their belief in their loved ones' innocence, and rally local and international support. It was a mammoth task and one requiring much courage, as it was undertaken under the authorities' intimidating and watchful eyes.

There were also the lawyers who risked jeopardising their careers by representing the detainees and their families. Some parish priests defied the official church stand by holding masses to pray for the detainees. These became a show of public support as crowds packed these masses.

In a culture where people are normally apathetic and fearful of expressing their dissent, these actions said and meant a lot. It was a real test of our faith.

## How it all started for me

My starting point was my family.

My mother was a Catholic convert who emphasised the religious rituals. She introduced me to the concept of religious piety which I embraced – the daily rosaries and the services at Novena.

My “unholy” father, however, was less significant in shaping my values and perspectives. He always emphasised doing right and being fair. He was not afraid to be critical and questioning, and take a stand on family, political and religious issues.

After my father was retrenched and could not find regular work, we struggled financially. It taught me early in life what it meant to be deprived. When my father developed cancer, we could only afford the cheapest subsidised medical care for him. The lack of dignity in the way he died impacted me greatly.

Joining the CSS in university helped me widen my view of religion beyond personal faith and rituals. I had always felt disturbed at the narrow way my mother approached her faith. It was limited to endless prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, including repeated confessions for the same sins. Religion was for comfort, not a challenge.

*“Praying and expecting everything to come from God and not doing anything yourself is not praying. This is laziness; this is alienation. This is passivity, conformity. This is not the time, dear brothers and sisters, to say: It is God’s will. Many things happen that are not God’s will. When people can contribute something of themselves to improve the situation and ask God for the courage to do so, then there is prayer.” – Oscar Romero, 1979, El Salvador*

The CSS promoted an active faith that challenged me to live out the values of Jesus Christ and the Bible. The See-Judge-Act method taught that practising faith required one to discern and analyse issues and situations critically, reflect and respond to them.

Suddenly, my father’s values made sense. His critical views, values and actions were equally relevant to the practise of faith. While he did not

embrace religion till towards the end of his life, I felt that he, too, was practising it by living out Jesus’ teachings and values.

Through the CSS, I became interested in learning about the Bible and how it could challenge myself. I also discovered the Vatican II Council documents, the numerous Encyclicals and social justice teachings that I previously was unaware of.

This was what I was searching for – a faith that questions myself, my life and my priorities, a faith that continually challenges me to go beyond my comfort zone and contribute to the betterment of the world. It is also a faith that requires on-going conversion in every decision, action or stand taken in daily life.

I joined Contact Groups in the CSS; we were encouraged to take small positive actions to improve situations around us, such as classroom issues, people problems and so on. These provided the starting point (the mustard seed) for us to practise our faith actively. Even this was not easy, as typical Catholic Singaporeans are generally apathetic and are not used to engaging in change. But for those who were open, it proved an enriching experience.

From small actions, we moved on to larger campus and national issues, such as campaigning against a government scheme that favoured “graduate mothers”, and on voting responsibly during the general elections. Reflection on our faith values and the social teachings of the Catholic Church was key in our actions and activities.

## Impact on my life

I was the only one in my family who made it to university, and I was determined to succeed materially and elevate the status of my family. I did accountancy precisely because I knew of the career opportunities and prospects it offered. I was all geared up to pursue wealth.

That was before my experience with the CSS, which changed my perspective of life, my values and aspirations.

When I completed my degree, instead of embarking on a career, I worked for CSS for 2 years as a full-timer on a relatively frugal allowance.

For the next seven years, I worked and paid my dues to my family. I also joined the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church and was an active volunteer in the Young Christian Workers' Movement. These continued to challenge my understanding and practise of my faith.

Then the incident of 21 May 1987 happened.

## Moving on

Experiences live within us and influence our lives and choices. My husband, Jeff, and I decided we did not need a lavish lifestyle. One income was comfortable enough for us to live on. So I opted to devote my time to more meaningful pursuits instead of building a career.

My friends and I started a trading shop where we provided fair trade for grassroots communities, mainly from Asian countries, and market these to the more affluent in Singapore. It was a not-for-profit venture; we tried to educate our customers about the issues facing these overseas communities. We gave talks in schools and organised sales at churches and fairs. Sadly, this venture ceased when we emigrated to Australia.

When the children came, I got involved in our local church's children's programmes. We emphasised active participation in our children's education in faith. We built up a fabulous collection of Christian books for them. My friends and I were very conscious that developing our children's potential also included their faith formation.

Raising my children without the help of a maid was also a conscious attempt on our part to opt out of a Singaporean lifestyle. People would think, "What a waste of your education!" or "Couldn't you cut it in your career?" It affected my self-esteem, and I never fitted into the social scene with the mothers at the playground or even among my friends.

But moving to Melbourne, where many women do give up their careers to raise the children, has made my choice more mainstream. In Melbourne, I do voluntary work, and now sit on the board of a self-help organisation as its treasurer. At least I cannot be accused of wasting my professional skills! I know there is a lot more I can do. There is still a lot to sort out in our new life in Melbourne, but I hope by revisiting 21 May, 1987, it will nudge me on.

# Chronology Of Events 1987-1990

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## 21 May 1987

16 people arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA):

- i. Vincent Cheng Kim Chuan
- ii. Teo Soh Lung
- iii. Kevin de Souza
- iv. Wong Souk Yee
- v. Tang Lay Lee
- vi. Ng Bee Leng
- vii. Jenny Chin Lai Ching
- viii. Kenneth Tsang Chi Seng
- ix. Chung Lai Mei
- x. Mah Lee Lin
- xi. Low Yit Leng
- xii. Tan Tee Seng
- xiii. Teresa Lim Li Kok
- xiv. Chia Boon Tai
- xv. Tay Hong Seng
- xvi. William Yap Hon Ngian

## 22 May 1987

News of the arrests reported in The Straits Times.

## 27 May 1987

Families allowed to see their loved ones for the first time.

A solidarity mass was held by the Archbishop and 23 priests to pray for the detainees and their families. 2500 attended.