

A Prologue to a Theology of the Atonement

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God loved the world so much
that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not be lost
but may have eternal life.
For God sent his Son into the world
not to condemn the world
but so that through him the world might be saved.

(John 3.16–17)

Watch any of the world's great sporting events and you are likely to see carefully placed placards with the simple message 'John 3.16', drawing our attention to the heart of God's good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. That God's own Son became a human being, died a human death on the cross and was raised from the dead 'for us and for our salvation' is the core of any truly Christian faith. But what does it mean to be 'saved', and how was — and is — that salvation achieved?

'Save' and 'salvation' are increasingly common words. A goalkeeper who makes 'great saves' is seen as the 'salvation' of a soccer club facing relegation. There are even governments of 'National Salvation'. We are persistently urged to save the whale, our planet — and our money! It is not too difficult to grasp this use of the words, but it is often another matter altogether when it comes to salvation in its deepest, richest and ultimate sense.

In theological circles 'salvation' is but one of many different words for what God is offering humanity, each with its own nuance of meaning. Some prefer 'redemption', 'justification', 'liberation', 'divinisation' or another. But for ordinary English-speaking Christians, 'save' and 'salvation' are still the usual words for expressing something which we recognise lies at the very heart of our faith. There is little problem about the negative side of salvation, what

we are saved from: the ball is saved from going into the net, the whale is saved from extinction and the planet from further environmental disaster. Jesus saves us from sin, darkness, evil and hell. To be saved often means simply to be rescued or preserved. This can be good news in itself, but it leaves aside the deepest meaning of being 'saved'.

Think positive!

What are we saved *for*? What is the positive content of 'salvation'? Saving our planet, for example, is not simply a matter of stopping humanity's mindless abuse of everything around us; it is ultimately about restoring harmony to creation. God's great saving act of leading his people out of Egypt was not just a matter of setting them free from slavery; its purpose and climax was the new bond of friendship between the people and their God (the covenant) and entry into the promised land. In much the same way, salvation in its fullest sense is not simply freedom from darkness, sin and death but above all a new and deeper communion with God and entrance into eternal light, happiness and life.

The Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ is the foundation of the rest of the Christian faith. It should be the doctrine which touches most directly our present life and our future hopes. The early Councils of the Church concentrated on the 'person' rather than the 'work' of Jesus, but they did so precisely to ensure belief in a Saviour who could really save! Our whole understanding of the Church — what it is and what it is for — rests on what we mean by salvation and how God makes this gift present and available to us today. The same is true of the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, and our attitude towards involvement in 'the world'. Many of the differences between Christians, strongly divergent emphases as well as real doctrinal conflicts, are rooted in the way we answer key questions about how we are saved, who can be saved and what it means to be saved.

After years of discussing topics such as the eucharist, ministry and authority in the Church, ecumenical groups are recognising the need to look together at the much more fundamental topic of salvation. The 1990s have been set aside by some Christian communions as a special decade for proclaiming the Gospel, the Good News of salvation. It is vital that we have a clear grasp of what this means, that we present it in a way which touches people today, and that we announce it as truly good news — for ourselves and for others.

Any questions?

It is hardly surprising that we find reaching a short and snappy summary of 'salvation' near to impossible. Any simple presentation is bound to be an impoverished one which misses out or neglects vital and enriching aspects of the great mystery of what God has done for us. There are so many questions involved, and so many possible answers:

- What do we mean by 'being saved', 'salvation'?
- How did Jesus' life, death and resurrection save us?
- How is this salvation shared with us today?
- What is our part in our salvation?
- Who can be saved?

I encourage students at our seminary to read C.S.Lewis's classic tale of Narnia, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a brilliant attempt at a parable of salvation. Then I invite them to write their own brief parable or allegorical story, answering as many of the questions above as possible. Some say it is the most difficult exercise I ever set them; it certainly challenges them to think seriously about the heart of the matter.

What then does it mean to be saved?

There are so many different ways of presenting what salvation offers us: forgiveness of sin, victory over evil and total liberation from everything that oppresses us, renewing God's image and likeness deep within us, eternity as a real sharing in the inner life of God, restoring humanity and the whole of creation here and now. There is often a tension between salvation as something *already* achieved and somehow present in 'this world', and as something *not yet* completed, awaiting final fulfilment in the 'next world' of heaven.

Is salvation primarily a great deed of love carried out once-for-all by God in the past, radically and *objectively* changing humanity's situation? Or is it mainly something to be brought about in us *subjectively*, God enabling and inspiring us to respond to the wonder of his merciful love revealed above all on the cross? So much stress can be put on God's saving work that no room is left for any personal human response; salvation becomes something imposed 'from above' on whomever God chooses. On the other hand, we can put so much emphasis on our free participation that salvation becomes a process of self-salvation, with human beings fulfilling their human potential through better knowing and asserting themselves, with or without heavenly help.

How are we saved?

If God saves us in Jesus Christ, how is salvation brought about in him? Is it mainly by God's Son becoming human so that God is now truly Emmanuel, 'God-with-us' in a powerfully new way? Is it above all through his death on the cross, and if so, why should this one particular crucifixion among thousands have such a world-shattering effect on the human condition? There are many different interpretations of the saving power of Christ's death. It can be seen as a lovingly obedient sacrifice offered to the Father as a 'ransom' for sinners, paying the 'debt' for us or providing a superabundance of 'merit' as Jesus makes 'satisfaction' for our sins. Some even see the crucifixion as the Father's wrathful punishment of his Son who freely and lovingly stands in our stead, accepting the punishment that should have been ours. It is presented as a triumphant 'cosmic victory' over Satan and the forces of evil, or as the great unveiling of God's love which moves us to renounce ourselves and follow Christ. And what is the place of Easter in this story of salvation? Is the resurrection simply a powerful sign of who Jesus is for us, or is it above all the great climax of the Saviour's work?

Who is Jesus Christ?

One final question needs to be asked, a question at the very heart of the Good News: it is Jesus' own question to his disciples and to us today: 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16.15). The early Creeds of the Church affirmed Jesus as one person who is both 'true God from true God' (Nicaea, A.D. 325) and 'a man like us in all things but sin' (Chalcedon, A.D. 451). Only someone who is both fully God and fully human could bring about the salvation proclaimed by the New Testament and by the living heritage of the Christian community through the ages. But if the 'saving help' we need as human beings is simply to have our eyes of faith opened to what we already are and can become, to be shown the path of true fulfilment so that a 'new age' of humanity can dawn upon us, then we do not need a Saviour whom we affirm as 'My Lord and my God' (John 20.28). If all we need is someone to teach us the way to heaven, to give us a powerful example of what we can become, and to inspire us by a life of selfless love, then Jesus is but one of many such 'saviours', albeit perhaps a 'supreme instance' and an especially chosen and 'graced' instrument and agent of God. In other words, as we seek to announce to the world the 'good news' of salvation in Jesus Christ, our answers to the questions 'what is salvation?' and 'who is Jesus Christ?' are intimately bound up with each other.

Towards a theology of salvation

Our answers to these many questions will always be faltering and impoverished. Salvation is the reaching out to us of the great mystery of the living God, and any human language falls short of such uncapturable richness. No human words can ever express exactly and fully what salvation means or how it is achieved. There have been attempts in the past to build a complete and self-contained theory of salvation on the basis of one or two key images from the New Testament, but the most satisfactory presentations weave together a rich tapestry of different threads.

If we are to proclaim to people of this decade and beyond into the 21st century the joyful message of salvation, we must ensure that our announcement is the same as that of the angelic messengers that first Christmas, 'news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people' (Luke 2.10) and that first Easter (Luke 24.5). It must be the message of Mary of Magdala and of the apostles, of the saints and of the whole Church through the ages and across the world. It must speak directly and joyfully to people today and tomorrow, and yet be rooted firmly in the living past of the community of faith. This is our Spirit-given task of 'handing on' the same good news of Jesus Christ and his saving work afresh to each generation.

There is much symbolic language used in the Church's traditional announcement of salvation. We must take care how we understand it, lest we impoverish its content by interpreting it too literally, but without such language we have no way of expressing what we believe God is revealing to us about himself and us, and without it we will say less than we need to say!

Keystones

The keystones of any truly Christian theology of salvation are the twin doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the personal divinity of Jesus Christ. God in person has lived a human life, and experienced human suffering and death. God himself has come into the depths of human existence so as to share with us his own divine life.

Another key doctrine is that of original sin. There has been much rethinking of this since the 19th century, responding partly to the challenge of an evolutionary theory of humanity's origins but also to a general move away from any real sense of sin and evil. Some writers have tried to balance the rather over-negative and gloomy view of the world which was once dominant with a more positive and optimistic assessment, highlighting the blessed nature of all creation as something which God made and saw was good (Genesis ch. 1). There

is much to be said for such an approach, but not if we conclude that all is therefore 'sweetness and light', or that it could be so with a bit more effort from ourselves.

Without God, we are nothing, and can become nothing. Humanity cut off from God is a people walking in darkness and living in a land of deep shadow (Isaiah 9.1). The doctrine of original sin declares above all that the human community desperately needed to be rescued from darkness and brought into the light, as 'night still covered the earth and darkness the peoples' (Isaiah 60.2). Salvation means the coming into our darkness of 'a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower' (John 1.5).

Darkness and light

We will not accept the need for a Saviour if we see nothing from which we long to be saved and nothing greater to which we yearn to be led. This is not a matter of showing everyone how dreadfully sinful they are, arousing deep feelings of guilt so as to convince them of their need for rescue; some cults work like that, and some Christian groups as well, especially those which emphasise individual — almost private — salvation with little reference to the human community as a whole. On the other hand there can be far too much talk of affirming people where they are and helping them to accept themselves as they are; the fundamental point that God loves and values us unconditionally is crucial, but we must take care not to close our eyes to the need for saving light in our darkness.

Salvation is a gift offered to individuals as members of a people, not in isolation. Awareness of the need for a Saviour comes not just from examining our personal areas of darkness under a spiritual microscope, but by looking with God's gift of true discernment at the past, present and future of the human community. It is so easy to be washed away by waves of optimism or to be drowned in the depths of despair. Over the last thirty years very different moods have swept the world; gloom in the Seventies at the threat of nuclear destruction; optimism in the late Eighties as the Berlin Wall came down and Communism crumbled; a return of doubt in the Nineties as long-suppressed nationalist and ethnic rivalries flare up again and the threat of AIDS increases.

There is no sign of any steady progress towards a restored Paradise on earth! And yet there is so much goodness and selfless love in the world, rarely reported as it is not the stuff of headlines. All is not despondency and gloom, and signs of God's saving power abound. There is as much a 'problem of good' as there is a 'problem of evil'!

Once the eyes of the soul are opened wide, we see both the presence of the Saviour and our desperate need — as individuals, families, groups, communities, nations, the human race and as God's whole creation — for the saving gift he brings.

Eternal Summer

Narnia in C.S.Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is a land where it is 'always winter and never Christmas'. Those who live there know that there can be something better, but their hopes have been dampened and numbed by the cold. It is only when the great Lion, Aslan, appears that the thaw begins and spring comes. A flicker of hope is fanned into a flame as 'eternal Summer' is promised. Life in a state of almost 'perpetual winter' is experienced by many individuals and peoples across the world. Tracy Hansen in her book *Seven for a Secret* about her gradual healing from child sexual abuse, describes how her world fell apart: 'My world was grey and lifeless, and I was only half-alive in it' (p.44). Tracy Hansen's life then was a parable of the human condition, desperately needing healing and wholeness (salvation) and to be led from darkness to light, from winter to summer. Humanity lives in a kind of half-light, finding fleeting moments of festival but so often wintry, grey and far from fully alive. There is a lack of real harmony, of inner peace, and this pervades every aspect of life: my personal existence, my relationships, my unity with the human race and with the rest of creation. It is as though the tapestry of creation has been torn apart, bringing a strong sense of *being alone, of not really being at peace with all that is. We are 'at odds' rather than 'at one'*.

Humanity yearns for happiness, for peace, for love. This is a yearning placed in the human heart by our Creator, a thirst which can be quenched only in him (Psalm 42.1-2; 63.1-5).

At-one-ment

Humanity longs for oneness, for the weaving together afresh of creation, for all to be made 'at-one'. We wish to be at peace with ourselves, with others, with nature and with whatever or Whoever is 'Beyond'. In other words, humanity yearns for the joy of salvation. Behind all the different ideas of salvation lies that of *atonement*. This is one of the very few theological words rooted in the English language! It has come to mean primarily making amends for wrongdoing, but its original meaning in late medieval English was simply 'at-one-ment', the putting 'at one' of those who had been estranged. Some early translations of the Bible into English used 'atonement' to

mean 'reconciliation'. God became at one with us so that we might become truly at one with him, and with one another and all creation in him. It is a word which takes us to the heart of God's saving plan: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19). By Jesus' life, death and resurrection we are claimed back by God (redemption), and put into a right relationship with him (justification); a healing wholeness is bestowed upon us, mending the brokenness of human life (salvation), and we are given an intimate 'nuptial' sharing in the inner life of God himself (divinisation). Because Jesus unites in himself God and humanity, both are made truly 'at one' in him and a deep communion between God and us is made possible. That great Easter hymn, the *Exultet*, proclaims of salvation: 'Night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth and humanity is reconciled with God'.

The Christian doctrine of atonement touches every aspect of life, including the great questions of the ages: who am I? what is the meaning of life? what does the future hold in store? is there any hope for humanity? is death the end of everything? surely there is more to life than this? how can we find true happiness, true peace, true love? We all seek at-one-ment, and God — the source of life — is the only One who can bring such unity. It is he who 'knit us together in our mother's womb' (Psalm 139.13), and only he can knit together afresh all that has become torn or tangled within us. Only God can weave together the tapestry of creation, pulling together again all that has come apart. Only God, who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, can tie together the past, the present and the future. Humanity's desire for 'oneness' is a hidden yearning for the God who is truly One, the God who makes 'at one', and the God who becomes at one with us so that we might be for ever at one with him.

All of our thirsting for true happiness, peace and love is really a thirst for the God who is Joy, Peace and Love. In whatever way we announce the joy of our salvation in Christ, whatever theory or theology of salvation we prefer, our proclamation should make people's hearts burn within them (Luke 24.32) and raise up their hopes and lives as winter gives way to spring and God's Eternal Summer dawns.