

For Us and For Our Salvation (Eph. 2. 1-10)**Emmanuel Series III**

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At the heart of the Christian mystery is the proclamation that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are 'saved'. 'For us and for our salvation', says the Nicene Creed, Jesus came down from heaven, was born, suffered death and was buried, and on the third day was raised to new life. Nothing is more insisted upon in the church's testimony to Christ, and yet nothing is surrounded by more difficulty and confusion, controversy and sheer incomprehension. Saved from what? And who says we need saving anyway? Saved how? How does Jesus dying and allegedly 'rising' make a difference to my life over 2000 years later? Unsurprisingly, the history of theology is replete with attempts at explanatory schemas, which have often themselves become the focus of radical disagreement in the Christian community. In my own life, finding a way to relate to all this has been a critical element of my journey of faith – and for a long time, the lack of a way of relating to it that made any sense to me was my biggest stumbling block. And maybe that is true for some of you as well, or maybe a way you have related to it in the past is shifting even now.

So, where to start with all this, for the purposes of our series on Christology at Benedictus? We could begin by looking at the different theological accounts of the doctrine of salvation – the attempts across the centuries to talk about the necessity of our being saved, how we are saved, and the picture of God implied by these various options. A strength of that approach would be to remind us that the church has never endorsed any particular scheme as the only possible or legitimate way of understanding salvation. It remains, when all is said and done, a mystery.

A problem with that approach, however, is not only that it would have us here for hours, but that it encourages us remain at the level of theory – at the level of theological speculation. Some accounts of salvation begin from the premise that we are such miserable, rotten sinners that God required someone to pay the price for our transgression by his blood. Some speak of us as so captive to Satan that God was forced to give Jesus as ‘ransom’ for us. But unless we have some experience of how expressions like these might connect to our lives, then all this remains just words – religious theory which doesn’t really touch the ground or transform us. And if we can’t make any sense of speaking of our captivity (say) or our utter depravity, then the whole story just doesn’t get off the ground. If I don’t experience there being a ‘problem’, then I don’t need Jesus as a ‘solution’. The question ‘are you saved?’ is of no interest to me, if I can’t take seriously that I am in need of salvation.

When you think about it, though, that is not where the disciples start. Jesus doesn’t begin by trying to convince them they need salvation, and then offering to give it to them. He simply says ‘Follow me’. In the course of their following, their listening to his words and being in his presence, they come to see differences between his way of being in the world and theirs; they experience him living with a freedom, power, compassion and truthfulness that is qualitatively different from theirs. Before they knew him, spent time in his company, they perhaps had no idea that it was possible to live as he did. He reveals something new – and something profoundly attractive and liberating. They want what he’s got.

Something of this discovery of a formerly undreamt of possibility, is being spoken of by the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians: ‘You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived ...’. We were dead, we were enslaved, we were ‘children of wrath’ – and we didn’t even know it. It is God who has made visible, in Christ, what human life can really be. As with someone who has been blind, or someone who has spent their whole life in a violent home, we know the extent to which we have been limited and oppressed only as we are set free and can look back

from a new place. Something like that is the dynamic of salvation – which is known truly only in its undergoing, rather than in theological theory.

So the first thing I want to say is that the doctrine of salvation is a way of talking about an experience, undergone first by the disciples in the company of Jesus before and after his death, of discovering a new set of possibilities for living, which includes a new way of seeing who they have been up till now and how they have lived. If we want to know what salvation means, then we too must undergo something, must make the passage from our limited way life to the unlimited life of communion with God. Or as the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, we must undergo the transition from death to life, from wrath to peace, from flesh to spirit.

But how do I undergo that transition and how do you? And what does it have to do with Jesus? The first step is repentance, so it's traditionally called. This is not (in my view) most helpfully done merely by signing up to the proposition that you are a miserable, rotten sinner – in fact, such self-abasement will probably conceal what really needs to be repented in your life. You need to uncover for yourself what that is.

Alcoholics Anonymous knows that addicts need to reach the very end of the destructive way they have been doing life, to experience its bankruptcy and its impact on themselves and others, before they can truly begin to leave it behind. They need to realise in their bones and not just in the abstract their poverty and need. For those of us who are 'good' girls and boys it can be much harder to reach and return to this place – which is why true and continuous conversion is (I think) much more difficult in the church! For me, repentance became possible when I finally got exhausted by my attempts to be better than everyone else, more good and holy, when I finally glimpsed in fact how nasty and nauseating and therefore how futile and oppressive my 'niceness' really was. Maybe for some of you, repentance means (or has meant) getting to the end of being a doormat, or giving up trying to 'make it' – the experience of catastrophic failure is often a help here!

Because, as St Paul (who knew that kind of failure exactly) knew, sin is essentially 'self-dependence', 'works' – and self-dependence can take many forms, from compulsive compliance to bullying, from self-denial to self-assertion. Whatever its form, if you are trying secure your own place in the world, to deny or protect your vulnerability, then you are living in untruth and blocking communion with God. Repentance is recognising that, experiencing your essential poverty, the futility and smallness and oppressiveness of all your self-making.

How does Jesus help us to this place? Well he himself dwells in poverty of spirit – utterly dependent on the Father; and if we truly begin to follow him, he will lead us into that same poverty, just as he led the disciples beyond the security and belonging they had known as good sons and daughters of Israel into radically uncharted territory, where their old strategies for surviving life no longer worked. This is where contemplative practice takes us, beyond the self-reinforcing security of our personas, into the silent abyss of God. Here we may be confronted by what is really running us for the first time.

What happens then? If you entrust yourself to the emptiness, if you refuse to fill up the space with more 'works', more self-making, you encounter grace. And grace is the experience of being OK just as you are, loved, held, set free from compulsion and so paradoxically open to true transformation and healing. Grace is the experience of no longer having to flog yourself or flog other people to survive your life. It is the revelation that you belong, that everyone belongs, that your life is given to you as gift, and that your task is simply to receive it, to enjoy it, to let it be a gift for the whole world by learning to let go of all the ways it has been distorted and stunted.

Why do we resist this so fiercely? Why, when Jesus seeks to show us, give us this grace, does he end up crucified? How does he know, in advance, that his willingness to undergo death itself will be needed if he is to witness to this truth and break down the walls we put up between ourselves and God, ourselves and each

other, and if he is to create in us the faith we need to entrust ourselves to this reality? At one level, I don't know why it is like that. But at another level, I do. Grace just seems too good to be true – we don't really believe that God is like that – it feels weird. So we settle for trying to conform, or be good, or succeed or be safe – and if you get in the way of my or someone else's project for survival, then watch out – 'it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation perish' (John 11.50). Grace, salvation means being set free from relating to ourselves and each other in ways that deal death, shame, bondage. The extraordinary proclamation of the gospel is that God has done this, for us. 'But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved ...'.