

Saviour (John 11. 47-53)

Sarah Bachelard

This Advent season at Benedictus, we're exploring the meaning of Jesus. The readings on Christmas Day will claim that in him God has become human and that through him the salvation of the world is wrought. Tonight, we're going to focus on this last piece – on Jesus as Saviour, whose life, death and resurrection liberates us from bondage, heals our wounds, and redeems us. This is the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus has come down from heaven, so the Creed says, for our salvation – Jesus has *saved* us. But what do we think we mean by this? What are we saved from, exactly, and how does Jesus save?

Well – there are many theologies of redemption which offer different accounts of the working of salvation. Tonight, I want to share what I believe are profoundly significant insights about these questions made available by the work of Rene Girard and James Alison.

We're going to start a couple of steps back. Over the past two weeks, I've focused on Girard's insight that we human beings learn language, gesture and even what to desire by imitating one another. This means we're radically dependent on others, not simply for our bodily needs but also for becoming selves, for our very identities. We don't start out as self-sufficient, pre-formed individuals, but rather we negotiate our selfhood in relation to the social world; we receive ourselves to a great extent according to the regard of others. The more we know ourselves loved, the more we receive a sense of our own 'being' and place without having to grasp at it. Nevertheless, most of us suffer some sense of lack – some deficit in being assured of our identity and belonging. As Alison expresses it, our need for 'being' is never fully met. This means we have a built in tendency to seek to build or shore up our identity. How?

For most of us, our strategy is to pursue those things which promise us the 'being' we lack. We spend our energies trying to acquire the approval of our parents, the right pair of jeans, a spunky partner, a prestigious job, the esteem of our peers. In other words, we seek to construct our identities both as individuals and as social groups by comparison with, and over against others. There are only two problems with this strategy. The first is that it never works. No matter what goods and success we achieve, we continue to experience a sense of lack, of threatened or insufficient selfhood. The second is that it makes us predisposed to conflict. The 'goods' we seek are often in limited supply. Our pursuit of them puts us in rivalry with others to attain them. We compete with siblings for attention, school mates for belonging, and colleagues for success. How human beings and societies attempt to deal with these two problems brings us, then, to the next plank of Girard's theory.

Girard noticed that in the mythological stories of every human society, it's possible to discern the traces of a mechanism which both shores up fragile identity and displaces the violence of intra-group rivalry. The mechanism is the sacrifice of a scapegoat – the sacrifice of someone who's suddenly seen to be the cause of everyone's difficulties, whose difference or behavior or marginal status apparently threatens the well-being, if not the very existence, of the rest of us. This mechanism often runs us even now.

'As if by magic', writes Alison, 'we know, as small children, how to strengthen our group; by finding someone weak to cast out, someone against whom we can all be'.¹ And similarly, when there's conflict or tension within a group: 'Mysteriously there occurs a spontaneous movement which unites everybody against someone who is easy to victimize ... That person is killed, and immediately peace is restored'.² So it goes in workplaces – where a threatened boss mobilizes against a colleague who has suddenly become a 'problem' or a 'disruptive influence'; when an unstable

¹ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p.33.

² James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of an Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p.21.

national identity is fortified over against an ethnic or religious other; when a church constructs its sense of its own righteousness over against – well – you name it ... Jews, pagans, witches, heretics, gays, women and so on. On Girard's anthropological account, this mechanism of scapegoating, expulsion and murder is at the foundation of every human culture. Early hominid groups, he claims, generated a shared identity, dealt with intra-group conflict and restored their peace, over against those who were cast out, their proto-societies founded on the graves of their victims – victims who supposedly deserved what happened to them because of how they had offended the gods, because of how dangerous or contaminating they had become.

Well, with this in mind, let's listen again to tonight's reading. 'The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council [the in-group], and said, "What are we to do? This man [not one of us] is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation"'. A potent cocktail here of internal division and supposed external threat, though the real threat seems to be to the power of the Council itself. Always handy, of course, to be able to blame the Romans. 'What are we to do?' they ask each other. Then 'one of them, Caiaphas', who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed".

What's extraordinary about this passage is the way it makes explicit the mechanism that's normally hidden from view. In this sense, it is *revelation*. 'The New Testament', writes Alison, 'is exactly the same as all the myths of our planet: a time of crisis, an attempt to save the situation by producing the unanimous expulsion of a victim, and then the semi-legalized lynching of that victim. The structure is identical to that of the very many myths and stories of foundation which we could examine. There is one single difference'. Normally these stories are told from the perspective of the 'in group', the lynch mob, those who are justified in expelling this dangerous, contaminating outsider. But here, 'the same story is being told from the inverse perspective. It is the story from the perspective of the victim. The victim is

proclaimed innocent'.³ And this, for the first time, begins to make possible the realization of how the mechanism works, and so to unravel our entanglement in it.

This account makes possible a powerful recasting of the gospel of salvation. Many of us have grown up with or inherited a version that goes something like this. God created the world and human beings, and it was all very good. Then there was a 'fall' caused by human disobedience and we lost our primal communion with God, with one another and the natural world. We are alienated, exiles from our true home. We're even collectively deserving of punishment, subject to the wrath of God. This is where Jesus comes in. He dies sacrificially – somehow substituting or atoning for our transgressions. He ransoms us from captivity, giving himself as 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world'.⁴ That background story conditions how we hear words like these: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3.16). In this version of events, salvation is about us being restored to God by means, somehow, of a sacrifice to God – a sacrifice which Jesus makes on our behalf.

But what if it's not God who demands sacrifice to restore peace and order, but us? What if Jesus is handed over, not to placate some supposed divine wrath, but into a human lynch mob hiding its real dynamic under a patina of 'sacred', godly necessity and the convenient charge of blasphemy. What if Jesus is just one more scapegoat, one more grave on which a human group tries to generate its identity and security? Except – here's the difference. This grave did not stay closed; this corpse did not remain silent. And from that moment, the apostles started to see the mechanism from the viewpoint of its victim; from that moment the *innocence* of the victim became visible and the mechanism laid bare. Nothing noble or necessary, nothing to do with God – just a nasty means of human identity formation in which all

³ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.23.

⁴ The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, *Book of Common Prayer (1928)*, [accessed <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/HC.htm>, 9 December 2015].

of us have participated in some form or another, and for which all of us yearn to be forgiven. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Gradually, it begins to dawn on the apostles that the risen Jesus offers them identity, place, belovedness – freely, graciously, without their having to earn or grasp at them. Gradually, they begin to imagine the formation of human identity and community without victims, and over against nothing at all. And this is salvation, healing, liberation. Jesus redeems, not by rescuing us from God’s wrath, but by releasing us from our own, setting us free to be. Hear again these words: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’

Now that’s a story of salvation that really does seem like good news. How we make it our own is our theme next week.