

## 15 Salvation and Sin

When I began writing this book, and even when I was some way into it, I thought that, by reflecting on Jesus as the Messiah I would not have to deal with the major themes of sin and salvation as traditionally understood and expounded in Christian teaching. I thought that these could be left for later, when I had more experience, after more time to think. But from Jerusalem onwards I found that Mark's gospel was leading me straight into this central doctrine of Christianity, and I should have expected it.

Mark's gospel (and those of Luke and Matthew) speak of Jesus in the first place as the Messiah, and the Messiah as the one who comes to his people to mend and rescue them. None of the gospel writers leaves it possible to understand about the Messiah without understanding how we are saved by him.

The doctrine of salvation and with it the Christian doctrine of the covenant, defining doctrines of Christianity, are strongly attested in many passages of the Christian scriptures. They were put forward with enthusiasm and conviction by those who first experienced and then realised what God had accomplished in the scandal of the crucifixion: total forgiveness, total freedom, and unrestricted inclusion of the gentiles into the promises of God. These beliefs were the good news with which they inspired their world. But while we have inherited that inspiration and learnt to share their enthusiasm, we haven't always remembered their whole story.

We are saved, from sin, futility and death, by the death of Jesus. By that one event we are rescued and liberated and the deep hostility that separates us from God – our hostility to God – is mended, the gap of separation is crossed and closed: we are brought together with God and God is with us, saving us from the bitter loneliness and negativity that is sin. When the first Christians reflected on this, they sometimes spoke of Jesus' death as a "sacrifice", comparing it with the sacrifices which, in Jewish and other religions, atoned for sin. "The Messiah Jesus, whom God appointed to sacrifice his life," Paul wrote;<sup>1</sup> and John: "Jesus the Messiah is the sacrifice that takes our sins away."<sup>2</sup> And this has led us to interpret the death of Jesus thru the earlier history of sacrifice in the Israelite and Jewish scriptures.

But that is not exactly what the gospels tell us, and not at all what the first of the gospels, Mark's, tells us. The gospels show that Jesus' death is not simply a sacrifice for sins, but the sealing of a covenant, a permanent bond between God and humankind which had been, in the beginning, the bond between God and Israel. Jesus' death is God's commitment to be with us, to be our God, in all that we are. It has its meaning not in a legal connection between death and sin, or some religious connection between sacrifice and sin, but as God's commitment, obediently enacted by the Messiah, to be with God's people. The blood of Jesus the Messiah is shed for many – for the many who are identified at last as Jew and gentile – because in the end he stands with and not against them, committing himself in determined and inexhaustible love to a people who, acting as a social and political body, could only cope with the Messiah by killing him.

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<sup>1</sup>Rom. 3:5   <sup>2</sup>I John 2:2

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Too often we have failed to understand this and have forgotten what the gospel tells us. At its worst extreme, that error causes us to misrepresent God as a savage autocrat whose anger can only be appeased by blood. Jesus' blood is shed for our sins. But it must not be said too quickly that Jesus' death is therefore a sacrifice of atonement. Rushing into that analogy and failing to take notice of the gospel has led sometimes into appalling theologies: the outraged majesty of God, the inflexible demands of justice, a "father" whose anger and will to destroy can only be deflected by bloodshed. Jesus is seen to die at the behest of a savage god, with only an arbitrary connection to forgiveness to justify it. None of these ideas represents the covenant that Jesus showed to be the loving wish of God for his people. Rather they have become a foundation for hardness, coldness, and indifference to cruelty, an invocation of God that justifies only the savage cruelties of our justice.

The death of Jesus is not the successful appeasement of divine anger. Down that road, there are no good answers, only confusion and, at worst, blasphemy. The blood shed by Jesus is the forgiveness of our sins only as it is the blood-shedding of the covenant, inevitable in the commitment God was making to his people. The movement of our thought must be not from sin, thru anger and punishment, to forgiveness – as it all too often has been - but from the liberating love of God, God's covenant faithfully established in the Messiah Jesus, to a more mature understanding of the depth of our sin that rejected him, and the wonder of God's forgiveness. It is a movement, as Luke sensed, from the glory of Magnificat to the sobering but profoundly reassuring insites of the Benedictus.

Not an angry God demanding death as the price for sin, but an angry people demanding death as the price for an affront to their pride, and an angry superpower requiring death as the price of maintaining that power: Jewish pride and the gentiles' defence of their national interests demanded the death of Jesus. In the end, Jew and gentile were of one mind about the Messiah: because he challenged and would overthrow what was most precious to them, he had to be crucified. Jesus' death took place in a corporate and political domain where the reality of God is supremely denied and the powers allowed to prevail are the powers of Satan, because that is the kind of corporate identity that human sinfulness constructs. Jesus was helpless in their hands because he would not destroy them as he destroyed the demons, but was subject to the decision and power of leaders, to the clamouring of a crowd and the political expedients of an imperial power.

He was subject to them as any one person would be, and often is, subject to them. Death is the common lot of those whose conviction for the kingdom of God confronts a humanity hostile to the rule of God even tho it is their healing and liberation. God willed that Jesus should be with us, engaging with Jew and gentile both, in a Messianic love that holds back from nothing, but engages with the whole reality of ourselves, even with the worst that we are. In obedience to God, the Messiah embraced both Jew and gentile alike, even in their will to destroy him.

The meaning of Jesus' death is to be found in his submission to the will of God, which ment his subjection to the will of his people. He had wrestled with this in the garden of Gethsemane, and in the end of his struggle he had accepted the choice of God. His plea was not granted, as the plea of those who suffer is often not granted. He was not spared. No other way was found, and he was handed over to the gentiles

to be tortured and killed. When it came to the crisis of decision, God's will was that the will of the Jewish leaders, and the weak but ruthless will of Roman power, should go its chosen way unhindered and should be able to kill the Messiah as easily as they killed any common and convicted criminal. Tho he had the power of God to heal, to inspire, to drive out the forces of demonic power, and to forgive sin, he did not have at his service the power that crushes enemies or forces people to be other than they are. The Messiah stood like any other arrested prisoner, helpless in the hands of the state and in the power of those who wield its power. That was God's choice, and that was the Messiah's commitment: to be with his people in everything that was really them, even, ultimately, in their corporate and national resistance to his rule, where they had, and would exercise, the power to disgrace and kill him.

The life and the death of Jesus save us from our sins, but they also reveal to us what sin is. For it's not as if we know what sin is and the gospel tells us how we are saved from it. The same events that show us our salvation, expose to us, for the first time clearly, what sin is and from what it is we need to be saved.

For nearly two centuries now, two rival understandings of sin (tho one of them did not use the term "sin") have been at odds in our society. On the one hand there has been the focus on individual actions, responsibility and guilt. Sin is one person doing wrong to others, breaking the law of God, offending him and deserving punishment on an individual basis. It remains within our individual lives and our immediate relations with others. On such a view, the wrong in the world, from which we need to be rescued, is in ourselves individually. It lodges in the individual heart and there must be repented and forgiven. Sin is a personal, conscious act for which a particular individual is responsible, incurring guilt, deserving punishment and receiving, if they turn to God, God's individual forgiveness. That view shapes and defines our response to God and our understanding of the world's need of God. It's the body of some of our strongest preaching, and it's what comes thru in movements of repentance and revival, and in much of our sacramental life and discipline.

On the other hand, there have been the views put forward by liberal thinkers, and those made official in Marxist societies, that the wrong in the world is the product of social structures and of classes, of economic forces and groups acting oppressively in organised self-interest. The class system produces evil; or perhaps, more vaguely and generally "society is at fault", and the remedy is to reform and restructure society: salvation is an economic and political operation. This view has come, most typically but not always, from outside the churches. Within the churches, we mostly have a weak understanding of shared responsibility and of the ways that sin manifests itself in society. Because we fail to recognise Jesus confronting sin at this level, we fail to see that it is sin, and often sin at its worst.

Because the two ideas of sin - of what is wrong with the world - have clashed, we feel that we have to choose one or the other, and that God's view and the Bible's view is necessarily on one side or the other. But that is simply not the case, and it is supremely not the case in the gospel account of Jesus' life and death. That account of sin is much wider and deeper, more seriously challenging than either of these views alone.

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What we should call “sin” and identify as the world’s hostility to God is seen in the gospels at many levels, some of them more problematic for Jesus than others. The demons that plagued the bodies and minds of many vulnerable people were not a problem. He could cast them out with a word. The faults and shortcomings of real people were something more difficult, but he could sometimes teach people and change them. To those who showed themselves aware of the sin in themselves he was quick to assure forgiveness. But the resistance entrenched in social and political structures, in the vested interests of society and those who ruled in it: this was well able to hold out against him, oppose him, arrest him and kill him.

At the level of power and politics sin is at its worst, because there it rules unchecked, with no one feeling they must take responsibility for it, and the main movers appealing to the greater responsibilities which their office lays upon them to excuse their individual actions. When the High Priest speaks, he does so under pressure of and with the power of the whole priesthood, the whole government of Jerusalem and a network of interlocking interests and identities that runs all the way back to the pettiest synagogue leader or small-time landlord in rural Galilee, and to all those ordinary people who just feel secure under strong and assured leadership.

When sin takes the shape of national policy, or social attitudes or an economic decision by a powerful company, it embodies and gives effect to the numberless little fears and greeds and petty selfishness that from all over the population add up to a common will to avoid pain for ourselves, to accumulate goods, to exploit and to control. Ten million ordinary individuals don’t want to see the poor go hungry, would never cause it themselves, and, if they think about it, blame some government for letting it happen. But governments wring their hands, protesting that they would do all they could to improve the lot of the poor, but that economic realities demand ... And those economic realities are the sum total of the little fears, greeds and demands that we all as individuals feed thru to our national and global systems.

It’s not that sin isn’t, after all, rooted in the heart. It is, but it is in action, and most of all in joint and public action, that the thoughts of our hearts become manifest, that they accumulate and bring all their weight to bear; and when they do, they are sin most stubborn against any cure.

There is not normally a connection between sin and killing. All of us are sinners and very few of us are murderers. Our little greeds, selfishness, fear and apathy perhaps make moments of life unhappy for some others, or very occasionally do damage to the vulnerable – but we don’t, with our sins, kill people. At least not if you take our sins one by one, and isolate them as petty daily instances. It’s only when we combine our sins, when we pool our decisions as a tribe or a nation to uphold our interests jointly. Then our sins, our fears, greeds, apathy and selfishness, become a tribal need, a national interest; and then we do kill.

What we choose and what we do is always much more than the individual actions directly attributable to us as our responsibility. There is everything else that we expect to have done for us, the responsibility for which we delegate without even thinking of it. We expect the shops and the whole international structure of agriculture, manufacture and trade to provide us with the things we buy, the needs or luxuries we have got used to. They do provide, and we reward them with our money,

never asking how they do it. Our harmless little selfishness or petty greed has been satisfied; our boredom has been distracted and our caution and our apathy put forward no troublesome questions as to how it has been done. Someone else takes responsibility for the wider consequences.

I have my little nest egg of safely invested shares. Nothing too speculative, nothing too ambitious - and moral, too, for I don't allow it to go to tobacco or arms manufacture. But otherwise I leave the whole portfolio to a competent firm, and all is well as long as the income comes in consistently and there's an increase in the capital. A little security for now and the future is enough to allay anxiety, and my concern for a little untroubled comfort does no harm to anyone, as far as I know. I can't look into all the ways that companies make profit, or who, ultimately, pays for it. The responsibility for that goes higher up, to some one else who actually manages the market, to the people who employ the people whose work makes the profit for my money.

And I don't get very involved in politics. In fact, it's not my scene at all. But I share my opinions and I grumble if the government seems to be running the country badly (which is usually when I feel worse off). I vote, and I vote for whichever party looks most likely to run the country well, to keep the economy moving upward and my income secure. If they can do that, and protect us (that is, my country) they get my vote.

In life we all spend our money; many of us invest our money; and we entrust to others our planning and security. Unless we do this with integrity, taking moral responsibility for our delegation and actively requiring moral responsibility from those to whom we delegate, then we merely extend our petty, comparatively harmless sins, our greed, fear, selfishness and apathy into the wider world of trade and politics, where they flourish, and all the more so because we pool them and abdicate from responsibility. Yet it is we who thereby shape political and economic power as the power of sin, our selfishness there made manifest as a power that now is able to kill, that does torture and kill, in the hands of cynical people who exploit it for their own purposes, or misguided people who believe that because they are now responsible, because they have to deliver the goods and they have to answer the shareholders and the voters, then regrettably, unavoidably, they have to take the practical and realistic decisions. They have the job of finding and employing the people who will torture and kill on our behalf.

The High Priest has the interests of Israel at heart. Pilate believes he is acting not only for all the citizens of Rome, but for the very order that is order, for all the subjects of the empire who live by its civilisation. Jesus must die - as must the peasants of Nicaragua, the workers of Honduras and the trade unionists of Colombia, the thirsty poor of Bolivia, the masses of Indonesia and the population of East Timor, or the helpless people of Angola and the Congo. They are tortured and die so that we can live and be delivered the goods and the security we have come to expect.

We live in the devil's parody of salvation.

But it's not that sin is a one-way flow, from the individual heart to the wider society, in which case it would be right to concentrate on the individual and expect society to

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come right in due course. If that were so, as I have said, Jesus should have kept a low profile and stayed in Galilee. But sin enshrined and sanctioned in society has a way of feeding back to shape and spoil each individual, making them insensitive to wrong, teaching them to accept bad for good and reinforcing their selfishness, greed or pride. We are moulded by society just as surely as we ourselves make and mould society. In order to repent, truly and fully repent, we must urge and agitate for the repentance of our society, the radical change of economic and national structures into the patterns of the Messiah's kingdom. Without that, we have not yet fully repented and changed in our own hearts, and much of the repentance we have achieved will be undone by our sin-structured societies as they turn the pressure back upon us: reaffirming the evil in us and teaching us to see it as no evil at all.

Sin, seen clearly in the rejection of the Messiah, is both individual and shared, private and public. From the malice of demons, thru the misunderstanding and shallowness of the crowds and his family, and the ambiguity, self-interest and ambition of his closest followers, to the personal and official hostility of the people's leaders, and finally the concerted legal and political action against him, there is a continuum in the resistance Jesus met and tried to overcome.

Sin, in our relations with one another, is individual and personal. It is found in a sick man on a stretcher who needs to be forgiven. It is that beam in my own eye that needs to be dealt with before I criticise others. It comes from the heart, whence everything unclean arises.<sup>1</sup> It is the ambition in me, even when I follow Jesus, to put myself forward as his right-hand man. It is a rich man's disappointed refusal to take the way that has been opened up to him. It is the gossiping nosiness of a servant girl, and the weakness of Peter unprepared. It is the soldier exulting in his licence to bully and torture. It is the petty mockery of those who look on at the crucifixion.

But it is also a shared and social responsibility. How much of the sick man's guilt was his own fault, and how much an undeserved sense of guilt, because in his society people identified crippling illness with guilt? When Jesus talks of presumptuous criticism, it's not just individual acts but a social attitude dividing the world into goodies and baddies, clean and unclean, because we're only sure of our own values when we can pass judgement on others. If servant-girls gossip it's because they want to be part of a wider, more exciting field of action and because people respond to and take notice of the gossip. If Peter failed it's because the pointing fingers startled his fear and gave him no time to think and decide where he ment to take his stand. Sin is the shared responsibility of people interacting: reinforcing, encouraging, pressuring one another, setting standards for one another and mesuring or approving according to the cue that is given them. We vote for death because the High Priest has torn his robes; we cry "Crucify" because that's what the loud voice behind us just shouted; we join in the mockery because the leaders of society are setting the tone.

And sin is official and political: an act of the state and the legal system, a function of the structures in which society is built. It is the brake put on enthusiasm and the block to repentance when leaders of the synagogue voice their disapproval. It is the official and authoritative ruling that tells us the healer is himself in league with evil. It is the economic shape of society with its rewards and its sanctions that pull the rich man

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 7: 21 - 23

back to a life outside the kingdom of God. It is the organisation of the High Priest's household, where a low-born Galilean can expect not welcome as a son of Abraham but suspicion and danger. Sin is the Sanhedrin marshalled under the High Priest's leadership; it is the urban dynamics of Jerusalem and the Temple's skill in crowd management. It is the whole weight of Pilate's office, the pressures of policy and national interest, the logic of imperial power. It is the soldier dutifully carrying out his orders as he nails a criminal to the cross.

It is one seamless robe on all humanity, action at many levels, each growing on and feeding back into the others. It is not a question of whether sin is basically personal and individual or basically social and structural, for it is both, in the way that humanity is both, inseparably.

In those towns of Galilee, where Jesus had gone about healing the sick and crippled, teaching and comforting, forgiving sin, dealing with individual needs, he was dealing with them together in households, in synagogues, at parties. His reach into the hearts and minds of his people could never not be a reaching into the life of their communities, and ultimately into the whole social order in which they had their being. His work was in the public domain of leaders, clerks, administrators, of the scribes and the Pharisees, and he went with the dynamic of the kingdom into the heart and the high places of their nation, to Jerusalem itself, because the kingdom of God had to rout sin there, where, by all their traditions, the fullness of Israel was.

If Jesus had avoided the political, as many of our churches do, he would have avoided sin at the very point where it is fullest, strongest and most able to hurt. But he did not. Far from recognising the political as a separate province where God is not concerned to act, he engaged in Jerusalem with the highest institutions of his people, the priesthood and the Jerusalem council, and there confronted sin at its ripest and most obstinate – the determined rejection of God by Israel's national leadership. Human sinfulness reaches its fullness, its ugliest and its most brutal reality, its finest polish and its fairest facade, when it is embodied in the corporate: in tribal and communal pressure, in government policy and national interest, in the exercise of institutional and imperial power. And that is where, in the end, Jesus faced it.

His commitment to his people, like God's, was to them in their entirety. It was never their souls alone, without care for their bodies; or individuals alone without care for their community. It was never a "religious" commitment that allowed the political and national dimensions of their life to operate outside its sphere, but embraced all that they were, forgiving all that they were and challenging all that they were. The gospels, and particularly the gospel according to Mark, show clearly that it was the Messiah's engagement with the official, political order in Israel that incurred his death, and that here he perfectly fulfilled the will of God. He embraced and challenged God's people at this level too, and at this level, when you seriously challenge and don't bring the world's kind of power to back you up, you get yourself killed.

Jesus took on the political order of his society without any of the weapons that people use to impose or change a political order. He did not refuse to tackle the political, but went to face it unarmed. It is when we fail to understand this that we leave a hole in the gospel account and end up with a corresponding hole, a gap of non-sense, in our

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theologies, with sin as a personal and even private concern of the individual soul, and the death of Jesus which somehow atones for it, altho there is no discernable connection between individual sins and his death. We are left with some arbitrary, or even cruel, decision of God's to link the two. But when we allow the gospel to give us its whole account of the events and to speak of the social and political side of Jesus' struggle, we find that there is something to understand, as far as understanding will take us, for we see the very human realities that God embraces and endures in making the choices that are God's will.

Only when we have understood this, that there is a clear and coherent pattern of engagement, a "rationale" of sin tying Jesus' death, thru the political and corporate to the personal and individual dimensions of sin, can we safely turn to metaphors such as "sacrifice" to further explore the depth, the wonder, the challenge and the mystery of God's acceptance of us in Jesus the Messiah.

He died for our sins not because God arbitrarily connected sin and death, or for God's own cruel reasons demanded such a price for forgiveness, but because, thru the corporate, thru the political, which is essentially and inseparably part of ourselves, that is what sin does, always and throughout history: it murders, it tortures and kills. Those who carry out the torture and the killing, because the necessity of their position requires it, enact what our hearts have bred. And in the face of this, Jesus enacts what God's heart has bred.

I think that the reason we fail to make the gospel connections, not recognising the scope and continuity of sin and limiting it to the purely personal and private, is that the complete picture has too many implications for us. We want to escape the embarrassment and pain, the potential hostility and damage, of engaging with social and political structures.

On the one hand we're baffled by anything as large and imponderable as economic systems or state policy; on the other we're afraid of the all too immediate and sharp response if we do get involved: the criticism, the argument, the denigration, even the heavy weight of the law brought down upon us. For our own peace and safety, we want those political issues to be outside the sphere of Jesus' mission and kingdom, and for social, political organisation to go its own way "until Jesus comes again". We don't want to challenge that awesome domain where Chancellors, Prime Ministers or Presidents hold court, where Parliament or Congress rules, however they exercise their power. Tho they take decisions that break the back of the poor, tho they reinforce wealth and prioritise money over principle; tho they spill blood and drop bombs on their enemies: it's easier and safer to think of the political, over which they preside, as simply not involved in the kingdom of Jesus. We prefer to be Christians as followers of the Messiah without any commitment to his dangerous mission of confrontation with power. We want our Christian ministry to be always the ministry of Galilee, the healing of the sick and the forgiveness of sins as Jesus exercised it there; but when he takes the road to Jerusalem we leave him to go alone.

Jesus is not a political activist or a social engineer. Any illusion that by reforming society, by ridding it of class distinctions and economic privilege we will free the individual people to be their unspoilt selves and so rid the world of sin, will soon be disappointed. The Messiah did not see social structures as the unique enemy apart

from the evil drives of the human heart. His ministry was always carefully attentive to people, to their lives, their needs, their hearts: the paralysed man swung down on a stretcher, the one he healed in the synagogue, the rich man, the blind man and the woman who so expensively anointed him at Bethany.

But any illusion that we can deal with sin by concentrating only on the personal and individual, proclaiming Christ's forgiveness, healing and salvation there, and simply expecting the corporate and political to put itself right after Christ has changed our hearts, is also mistaken. To deal with sin, the Messiah went to Jerusalem and there confronted it, enduring the full weight and hostility of its corporate and national expression. Our salvation was accomplished only when sin was confronted at this level, in the whole of its ugly reality. If we are to speak truthfully of that salvation, we too will confront sin as personal, relational, social and political, as individual and shared, declaring that the salvation the Messiah has won for us is to be claimed and affirmed in every dimension of human life.

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I have tried to show, drawing mainly on the gospel according to Mark, where I believe it is most powerfully shown, that the death of Jesus is not some mechanical working out of God's inscrutable and predestined determination, nor is it the appeasement of an otherwise implacable justice, but a political event of a very understandable kind, which Jesus very understandably avoided for as long as he was able to do so, but accepted in the end when it could not be avoided. The gospel shows us that it was the decision of people acting individually and together, the full expression of their wish, in which they exercised the social and political power they had as a body – power enough to put to a shameful death even the one who is the Messiah.

Only as such and not as any kind of divine bloodlust or inflexibility, is it taken up to become much more. Only in its being such, an act of Israel and an act of the gentile world, a mass of individual failings and a shared collective rejection of God's Messiah, is it finally and fully the meeting place of God and humankind, of God's ultimate representative, the Messiah, with the whole of the human world – Jew and gentile alike. Only as such is it God's exposure of and judgement on sin, and God's forgiveness and acceptance of us in faithful determination to be with us without rejecting us, in spite of sin.

I do not mean that we should be able to give a rational explanation for the acts of God and the profound events of our salvation. They will always run far beyond the most searching explanations our reason can find. But I am saying that as far as we can follow with our reason, we should not be discovering mere whim or obstinacy in God. The ways of God will baffle us, but not by presenting us with nonsense. They will baffle us by showing us what makes sense in itself, before leading us on from there into something far deeper, more powerful and alive than anything mere rationality can expound. It is when we have properly understood what visible, tangible history shows us, when we understand what has been enacted there, that we really come to the edge of mystery, where faith, which is believing and living and doing, abandons itself to the truly unfathomable ways of God.

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When we have understood what there is to understand, what the gospel story is able to put within our understanding, beyond that there is a hite and depth of mystery which we will never mesure. We will never be able to define, describe or even observe the whole glory that is enacted here. We will only be able to enter helplessly into it, in the mercy and goodness of God to live it, and there to discover the ineluctable love of God, who embraces us in God's own mystery.