

30 Salvation

The work of God in Jesus is the fulfilment of a promise as old as Israel's history: a binding commitment, or covenant, between God and God's people, by which God was their protector, savior and ruler. Jesus is the one who comes as savior, ruler and protector. So it was heralded by the angels; so it is when Jesus' body is taken from the cross and placed in the tomb.

The promise to Abraham, to which both Miriam and Zechariah looked back rejoicing, had been realised in a covenant that was variously expressed in the history of Israel. First in their rescue from Egypt, ¹ which was celebrated in the Passover, then in the Law given thru Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. Later, in Joshua's time, it was expressed in the assembly of the tribes at Shechem ² where they solemnly undertook and accepted to have Yahweh for their God. Finally, in Judah, it was seen as a covenant with David, ³ giving him and his descendants to be reliable rulers of Israel for ever after.

The promise and the commitment gave Israel identity and wholeness as a society. It defined them and enabled them to affirm a bond that made them a nation. It gave them the security of a people that holds together, knowing themselves and the value of their community in knowing God, their ruler. ⁴ They were God's people, for God had promised their ancestor Abraham land and a future, space and time, for his descendants.

to grant us, rescued from fear of our enemies, to serve him in holiness and justice, safe in his presence for all of our days. (1: 74 – 75)

A promise made to the ancestor of a nation, a covenant for a whole people. There was no provision for private and individual arrangements. The smallest unit that could celebrate its participation in the covenant was a household large enuf to consume a whole lamb or kid in one evening, ⁵ and even such a unit did so in time and in solidarity with its whole tribe and nation.

Miriam had seen its fulfilment in the overthrow of oppression and domination, the evils of misrule. Zechariah had seen it in the victories of an heir to David, a ruler to make them safe from all fear, and free as God's people. How we can imagine that those hopes are met by a purely spiritual

¹ cf The Warrior God ch 1 ² The Warrior God ch 2 ³ The Warrior God ch 10

⁴ The Warrior God ch 12 ⁵ Exodus 12:4

realisation, an escape thru death to another world and salvation there, is a mystery of mental ingenuity. We are helped, as I have often said, by reducing their proclamation to a liturgical chant and dulling it with familiarity, but it is a testimony to the strength of our resistance to the gospel, that we can do so.

The question is whether Jesus, in his life or in his death, repudiated those hopes, to replace them with something more other-worldly. Did he terminate the old covenant, with all its expectations, and replace it with a new and very different covenant? Or did he fulfil what the angel proclaimed, what his mother and the priest hoped for? Did he perfect and fulfil the covenant? Was he the answer, as old Anna declared, for those who were looking for the salvation of Jerusalem? Or does he bring salvation neither to Jerusalem nor to any other city, but only to individuals who go with him to another place?

For Israel, salvation meant the health and well-being of the whole nation, the effect of good government, when the beautiful order of God was upheld by strong, wise and faithful rulers. Whether it was the King they dreamed of, or such home-grown government as they now had thru their local leaders and the priests and chief citizens of Jerusalem, their salvation lay with good rulers whose hearts were firm in the law of God. Luke knew all about Paul's quarrel with Jewish interpretation of the Law, but he also knew that the quarrel was long over and settled, for Christians. When he wrote his gospel, it was time to look again at Jesus the faithful ruler and law-giver, the teacher from Galilee who had talked with the Pharisees, the synagogue leaders and the lawyers about the law and its demands, about its challenge to the rich and about the greatest commandment.

Jesus clarified the Law; he explained it even to the experts; and, when challenged, he claimed authority over its most sacred provisions: "The Son of Man is master of the sabbath." That authority showed in his teaching⁶ for he taut not as an expert appealing to the views of experts, but as one with authority – that is, as a ruler. His teaching had a purpose, not just to win arguments, but to give his people an understanding of the law and the rule of God which would guide them to be the people and the society God wanted. As their teacher, he was already beginning to rule them. His disciples and others called him "kyrios" master.

I mentioned before that those who wish to govern, the holders of power or the makers of revolution, will, if they know their work, recognise the

⁶ Luke 4:32

Jesus Kyrios

importance of teaching. A people to be governed must learn and re-learn their models of behavior. And Jesus came as a teacher. It was the teacher with authority who went about Galilee, and the teacher with a mission who journeyed to Jerusalem. While he approached the city as its King, he claimed his place in the temple as its teacher.

Now it seems to me that we take refuge in the picture of Jesus the teacher, from the challenge of Jesus the king. We let it reinforce for us the idea that Jesus is leading us to another, a spiritual home and that all his demands on us are interior, private, or limited to immediate relationships. Teaching, we tell ourselves, is about individual behavior, moral principles, directions for the spiritual life which leads us to heaven. It shows that Jesus is not concerned with political matters. We fail to see that, as a teacher, Jesus claims to rule his people, that he is reshaping the legal, civic and political order of his country in a way that brings him into conflict with its established leaders: the wealthy citizens who presided at the synagogues and the Pharisees, and the priests in Jerusalem. They did not fail to see it.

The difference between Jesus and his opponents was not that they were interested in this world while he was concerned with the next, but that they taut from a position of power skilfully maintained, while Jesus taut with innate authority, making no bid for wealth or power. For Jesus, teaching, not power, is the way to government. He gathered neither followers nor money, but disciples. But he gathered his disciples not to talk about another world and a distant salvation. He sent them, apostles, to proclaim the coming of the kingdom. He trained them to rule God's estate as God's servants.

The paradox of the King who comes in God's name is not that he renounces rule over this world, but that he renounces all resort to power in the government of his kingdom.

In the early part of Luke's gospel (mostly in what we have marked off as the first two chapters) much is said about salvation and the savior who brings it. Miriam rejoices in God her savior; Zechariah tells of salvation for Israel in the house of David, God's chosen ruler; he speaks of his son's mission to bring God's people the knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins. The angel proclaims to the shepherds that "a savior has been born to you"; and Simeon is content to depart from life, because "mine eyes have seen the salvation that you have prepared for your people". When John is introduced as a grown man, a prophet in the wilderness calling for repentance, it is announced in the words of Isaiah that "All humankind shall

see the salvation of God.”⁷

We are familiar with Luke’s emphasis on salvation from our Christmas celebrations. These are the pieces that get read from his gospel and the theme is taken up by Christmas carols and sermons. When I began to write this book, having previously written “Jesus Messiah”, I was confident I could call it “Jesus Savior”, and that Luke would give me a theological portrait of Jesus the Savior to complement and integrate with that of Jesus the Messiah.

But it has not been like that at all. I soon found that, even before the introduction was complete, the words “savior” and “salvation”⁸ had dropped out of currency. After that, we still hear of people and lives being “saved”⁹ but it refers to physical healing and rescue, with special significance in the phrase “your faith has saved you”,¹⁰ but even this refers to the physical healing of a body, not to salvation as we would understand it.

A suggestion of something more comes from the paradox that “anyone who loses his life for my sake will save it”¹¹ and from the explanation of the parable, that the devil “takes the word away from their hearts so they will not believe and be saved”¹² but it is not developed as we would develop it. I suggested earlier that Luke sometimes uses a significant phrase without spelling out its meaning, as with “eternal life” and the giving of the Spirit. But I don’t think that is what is happening here.

That is because I don’t believe that the idea of a savior and salvation has dropped out of the narrative at all, but that in Luke’s mind it is all of a piece with the fulfilment of God’s covenant in the coming of the King, the Kyrios who is to rule Israel in God’s name. It is in his role as teacher, prophet and king, the role that will lead to his rejection and death in Jerusalem, that Jesus is the savior, and for us salvation is this: to be given our teacher and ruler in the promised heir to David and Son of God, who fulfils both the Law and the prophets and so fulfils the covenant with Abraham.

God’s promise to Abraham was the safety and security of his descendants: not just that he would have descendants, and many of them, but that Godself would be bound to them by promise, to protect and prosper them. Even in their darkest times, God would be with them and would rescue

⁷ Luke 3:6 ⁸ I refer to the Greek words “σωτηρ” and “σωτηριον”.

⁹ σωζειν ¹⁰ 8:48 and 17:19 ¹¹ 9:24 ¹² 8:12

Jesus Kyrios

them from all that is hostile to them.¹ The exodus, the great act of liberation from Egypt, stood pre-eminent as the fulfilment of God's promise and the model of salvation to come. And when it did come, salvation would be the coming of good order, good leadership, good government: it would come in the hands of a Son of David, Lord and Messiah, a king to rule them.

We shrink from talking of salvation in such terms. Dare we say that salvation is to be met here on earth, where disappointment stares us in the face and failure mocks us? The angels thought so: Peace upon earth. The priest Zechariah saw salvation in the mercy of God, coming like the dawn upon a people left helpless in darkness, to guide us into the paths of peace. In Nazareth, Jesus proclaimed freedom, healing and good news for the poor. At the end, when Jesus spoke of the coming of the kingdom, he spoke of it as a liberation. Jerusalem would fall and be trampled by foreigners; there would be fearful signs in the skies and on the earth; and we would see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven: that will be the time to stand up straight and hold our heads high, for liberation is upon us. And all this, Jesus told them, would happen "in this generation".

We cannot make sense of the gospel until we have understood this most challenging of claims: that the shock, the pain and the glory of our salvation all comes about "in this generation". Nothing is left unfulfilled, reserved for a later generation. Jesus, like all the prophets, was speaking to his own generation, not filling their ears with messages that would only apply to a generation two thousand years and more in the future.

They have in fact seen their salvation in the healing, the liberation from evil and the forgiveness that Jesus brought them. They received it in his teaching, and we saw that the climactic episode of the tax-taker Zacchaeus was in fact the proclamation of salvation already come "to this house". In the gospels, and most noticeably in Luke's gospel, we come to salvation, or rather salvation comes to us, not thru an act of atonement, but thru Jesus' life and his work of proclamation and teaching. The faith in which we receive salvation and are set free, is the faith that believes his teaching and obeys him. It is the faith of the centurion, of the tax-taker Zachaeus, and of the blind man who recognised the Son of David.

Not that Jesus' death is out of the picture. His teaching, his claim to rule, his proclamation of the kingdom, were leading to his death, as he told his followers several times; and their faith in him, their obedience to his teaching, will set them too against the powers that take control in the world.

¹ Genesis 15: 12 - 14

They too will lose their lives for his sake and for the sake of the kingdom, and that too is the way of salvation. In Jericho, in the house of Zacchaeus, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

It is like the faith and the salvation of a revolution: the hope, the solidarity, the immediate discovery of new value and purpose in the struggle itself, and the glory of success as success does come, even while there is also danger, pain and defeat. Jesus has stirred up a revolution that cannot be frustrated, even if the part I play in it now turns out to be a lost battle. Faith and salvation are in the acceptance of his teaching; and in that acceptance we will see, however long the struggles of history continue, the fulfilment of Jesus' words, the destruction of Jerusalem and of our own most beloved cities, the terrible signs in the skies and on the earth, and the glorious coming of the Son of Man, the judge and ruler of earth's history.

Perhaps we have already forgotten the revolutions of the twentieth century. Perhaps we are forgetting the sense of hope in struggle, the confidence of victory, the readiness to endure hardship, danger and death for a great cause. Perhaps we are forgetting why the face of Che Guevara is an icon. But we need our experience of revolution, of its hope, struggle and triumph, to appreciate what the gospel is telling us about the coming of the kingdom of God. Salvation for us is not so entirely removed from the salvation sought by revolutionaries. It is not nearly so different as established church and government would have us believe.

Jesus' teaching corrects and rebukes the revolutionaries, for he tells us that salvation will not be achieved by violence; but the same teaching corrects and rebukes our established governments and their armed forces. Their way too is illusion, a denial of the way the Savior shows us. We cannot escape the social and political dimension of salvation. If we refuse it, blinkering ourselves with the doctrines of private and individual salvation that we have inherited, even those that are true, we will only end up seeking our social and political salvation somewhere else.

For we do not really believe, and we are not really content, that salvation should have its impact only in another world. Many of us rejoice in physical, emotional and mental healing and see it as a beginning of salvation, the work of Jesus Christ our Savior among us. And many are in the habit of asking "Have you been saved?" or "When were you saved?" believing that Salvation, however much it has its completion beyond this life and beyond death, is already present, active and evident in our present lives. We only deny that it now has any role in shaping the nations.

Jesus Kyrios

But for all our denials, we need and want, and still look for, salvation in our national life as well, for reassurance of our identity and security in the nations that give us both. Salvation is for us too, as it was for Zechariah and the Jews, freedom from fear of our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us. But because we will not believe that Jesus offers us such salvation, that the way of freedom and security is the way of his teaching, we look for it somewhere else. Even while we reserve its private dimensions for Jesus and his kingdom in heaven, a mindless, pagan patriotism takes over our hopes of salvation in the present world of nations.

Even believing Christians, even “born again” Christians, will put their faith in nationalism and the power of armed forces and nuclear weapons when it comes to that sense of safety and security that we crave in our societies. That is why patriotism is so powerful. We know we must stand together, for our own salvation. That is why governments can win elections by portraying their opponents as soft on defence – and when they do so, it does not appear that they lose the Christian vote.

It is no coincidence that the Bush presidency was strengthened by a combination of belligerence and “evangelical” appeal. Ronald Reagan had shown him the way, and he knew, instinctively, that the popular Christian belief in salvation left a gaping hole precisely where we need to be assured of salvation, and that the toughness of the Commander-in-Chief in the face of enemies would give them that assurance. That’s why it is so easy to sell the egregious nonsense of a missile “shield”: people need so desperately to feel safe, and, whatever they say on Sundays, Jesus does not give them that feeling of safety.

Those who deny the truth do not escape it, but end up bowing to a twisted parody of the truth. When we cannot trust Jesus for the beginnings of salvation that we need in this world and its wars and politics, we excuse ourselves by claiming that salvation is not about this world; but then we still go looking for a very this-worldly salvation in the leadership of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, of Bill Clinton or George Bush.

When the Son of Man comes, will he find anyone believing in him? If we believe that here, where it actually matters to us, salvation is in the hands of strong governments commanding massive armed forces with which to strike our enemies, in the “credible” threat of nuclear weapons, in the hoarding of wealth and control of resources, in treaties dictated by our powerful nations in their selfish national interest, how can we pretend that we believe in a very different way of salvation for our private selves, reserved for us in a domain removed from every domain that matters now?

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Jesus gave his life for our salvation. It had been foreshadowed in the course of his journey to Jerusalem and Jesus himself made it clear that the kingdom in which we would receive our salvation could only come thru his death. But we must not therefore rush in with some explanation like satisfying the anger of God or meeting the requirements of justice, even if these are found elsewhere, in other reflections on his death. We must first understand it in its actual historical context, which is what the gospels tell us, for whatever the death of Jesus means on a doctrinal or mystical level, it is the actual, historically meaningful event itself which has that further meaning.

Jesus gave his life, his body and his blood, for us. That is, his death has a redemptive value, which only begins to appear at the end, at the supper which was the last he shared with his disciples.

This is my body, which is given for you. ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you.

Then, at the moment when his body is given, nailed to a cross, and his blood is being shed in crucifixion, his prayer ensures that the moment is one of forgiveness and redemption for his people.

Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.

It's not because this cruel act fulfils the requirements of the Law (that horrible idea by which we make the whole gospel subject to the Law) but because Jesus, in the very moment of his enemies' triumph, the victory of power, prayed for their forgiveness. He did not look for just vengeance, as the prophet Zechariah had done, but, knowing the depths of the heart of God, he prayed for forgiveness, for the Roman army, the governor, the Sanhedrin, for they did not know what they were doing.

That mity struggle with the powers ruling his people which had shaped his public life now shapes his death, not as defiance willing their death, but as forgiveness, the forgiveness of the compassion of God taken up and asked for in his prayer, willing their life. The moment of his execution is the moment above all in which he can be sed to confront the ruling powers in all his authority. It is the moment in which the ruling powers of the world are ultimately defined by their opposition to him, and brought to judgement, only not for condemnation but for forgiveness.

Jesus Kyrios

Such is the depth of the mystery of the love of God, the Salvation of his people and of all the peoples, revealed in the death of Jesus the Lord. We are forgiven; the ruling powers are forgiven; the nations are forgiven.

It will be the last word for those who, in his name, as his followers, confront the powers of their own governments, of their own national, political and economic institutions, to give witness to the authority of the kingdom of God. In the end, they will meet hostility, even if it kills them, with the forgiveness of God. They too, altho they have defied the claims of their rulers, will respond with a prayer for forgiveness for those who destroy them.

Salvation is for the nations as it is for each one of the people. Making salvation an individual and private transaction misses half of what salvation is. For the human heart that cries out for salvation is at home in its city or nation, and God who promised salvation promised it to the nation of Israel, to the city of Jerusalem. Confronting national evil, as we are called to do, is showing to our very nations the way of salvation that God has shown to us, and only when we have the faith to follow Jesus in that act of challenge do we fully believe in the salvation he brings.

It is not that there are two salvations, one for the individual and one for society, the city or the nation, because our governments – our cities and our nations – are ourselves. They are nothing other than ourselves all together, our identities secured in theirs, as every patriot will witness. Any private faith that seeks salvation in our own soul, excluding our togetherness as city, society and nation, has not heard the gospel of Jesus the Lord, has not understood the wholeness of the compassion of God, has not understood what it is to be a human person.

The struggle for the nations and the struggle for the human heart are not two separate struggles, one to be balanced against the other. It is one and the same struggle, for it is our hearts that make our nations and our nations form our hearts. We are who we are together, and if my city, my nation is not repentant, there are only two possibilities: I limit my own repentance to fit in with it; or all the energy of my heart, my love for my people, strives to win their repentance.

And the activist, the revolutionary who seeks to change society by overthrowing its powers, will discover the same thing. Unless their own heart is changed, the overthrow of governments will be ineffective. Their own heart will only bring into the new order for which they struggled the same evils that they saw in the old.

Salvation has come because Jesus confronts with love the whole human heart. The teacher who touched people in Galilee to heal and forgive reaches the highest and fullest authority in the land, and invites them, as the very nation itself, to repentance.

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We were told how, at Jesus' crucifixion, the rulers, parading before the people, mocked him for his helplessness: "He saved others, now let's see him save himself, if he's the Messiah and God's chosen." And we recognized that we were ment to see thru that mockery, as thru all the mockery in Jesus' trial and execution, the truth of who he is: that he is a prophet, King and Messiah, and, finally, that he is the Savior. The irony of ridicule unwittingly pointing to the truth is part of the total reversal of expectations in which the helplessness of the cross is Jesus' entry into the rule of God and his exercise of the authority of God.

There have been those who were able to believe it, even in the twentieth century. What is sad, is that the outstanding examples were not Christians. Mahatma Ghandi showed that an Indian, bred in India's traditional religion, could recognise and honor the example of Jesus; that even when you stand against an empire and seek the liberation of millions you can do so without resort to violence. Perhaps the greatest achievement of all the twentieth century was this, that so great a nation came to independence thru peaceful resistance.

We do not know who the other example was, but we have seen him, or them, on our television screens: in Beijing, a frail human body standing in the path of tanks, to protest, to ask for freedom, to call for the liberty of human beings in a democratic society. That revolution was crushed by ruthless power, but I believe the day will come when the nation of China will acknowledge with pride the heroism of those few who stood against the tanks, and witnessed to a vision of peace, honor and freedom worthy of a great people. In the meantime, from Gandhi's India and from Beijing and Tiananmen Square in 1989, the question still comes to confront us who say we are Christians: "Do you believe?"

When we Christians fail to acknowledge the rule of Christ, telling ourselves that it is impractical for the world we presently live in, the Lord himself raises up examples to shame us into repentance.

Jesus Kyrios

Luke has shown us the Savior who saves by ruling us, the Son of David. That salvation is peace upon earth, the rule of one who comes with all authority, but without power, the one in whom the call and the energy of God, goes out to us in healing, liberation, forgiveness, in the gift of God's Spirit, to walk in the world as the children of God, and servants and rulers in the pattern of the master who taut us. That rule of God is our salvation, and it will not be excluded from the politics, the economics, the making of nations or the relations between nations, in our present world and its history. It can be derided and rejected, but it will not be excluded, for it is the promise of God.

It's not that Luke is unaware of any other way of describing salvation. In his sequel to the Gospel, the "Acts of the Apostles" we can see in the preaching of Peter and the earliest Christians,² as well as in that of Paul,³ the beginning of new implications for our understanding of salvation. But whatever we learn from other Christian writings, the gospels have priority, the writings of those who deliberately looked back to the teaching and acts of Jesus in Galilee and in Jerusalem. Any other reflection, whether deeper or wider, must integrate with what we find there: salvation in the fulfilment of the covenant, in the rule of Jesus as Kyrios over all our affairs. It is that rule and that authority, claiming the world we already know, that justifies our belief in a world, and relms of salvation, which transcend the present.

The gospel points first to the rule of the Christ, the Son of God, and the triumph of the Son of Man, to the salvation of those who in faith and courage accept this, his rule over us and our nations. There is no safe way thru to other insites and teaching, unless we begin here.

² e.g. Acts 5: 31, 11: 14

³ Acts 16:21, 28:28