

Sermon for Sunday 14th April 2019

1 John 1: 5-2:2 and Luke 19: 28-40

‘I believe in salvation’

We’ve been working our way through the statement of our faith that we call the creed and which we say every Sunday, looking at some fundamental Christian beliefs.

Today our topic is ‘I believe in salvation’. Now I have really struggled with this – not because I don’t believe in salvation – I certainly do - but because I am struggling to find much about it explicitly in the creeds. It doesn’t mention salvation directly in the earlier Apostles Creed; and in the Nicene Creed, which is the longer one we say more often, it’s only in passing, saying that we believe Jesus came ‘for us and for our salvation.’ It doesn’t help us with why or how it happened, or what we are saved from or saved for. Possibly because that was not the concern of those who wrote the creeds. But at the end it does talk about the church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection, and the life everlasting. Last week we looked at the church, next week - Easter day – we,

very appropriately, will be looking at the resurrection and life everlasting, so today let’s look at the forgiveness of sins and see how that links to the idea of salvation.

Why is forgiveness of sins in the creed? Why is it important? Well when we have done something hurtful or wrong it is good to say sorry, though it’s not always easy to admit you were wrong, and to be forgiven by the one you have hurt, it restores the relationship and allows us to heal and move forward. That is a pretty universal human experience I suspect. But the reason it is important for Christians is to do with our relationship with God. John in his letter uses the analogy of dark and light to explain it. He says: ‘God is light; in him there is no darkness at all’ – in other words God is perfect and without any sin. ‘If we claim to have fellowship with him but walk in darkness, we lie’. We cannot have a good relationship with God if we are sinful, in the same way darkness and light cannot be in the same place at the same time.

Sometimes people think of sin as doing the really bad things that we know we shouldn’t. Like stealing or

murder. But I'm afraid it is much more than that. Sin is anything that mars our relationship with God and with one another and it seems to be an unavoidable part of being human. We all fail to put God first all the time, to follow him 100% of the time, to obey him absolutely, and we all fail to love others completely – all of them, all the time, no matter how annoying they are! Sin is anything that builds a barrier between us and God, that takes us away from God; – it damages our life here and now, leads to suffering and pain and stops us living life 'in all its fullness' as Jesus put it. We might try to be good, to live godly lives, but we will never be perfect, we will always fail somehow. 'If we claim to be without sin' says John – 'we deceive ourselves, the truth is not in us'. The truth is we all sin, pretty much all the time.

The story of Adam and Eve is I think a symbolic representation of that failure to be the people God made us to be; of the way each one of us chooses to do things our own way, wants to be in charge of our own life and so turns away from God and damages the relationship with God and ends up living a life that is just a poor reflection of what it was meant to be. Like the story Jesus told of the young man leaving his

father and going off to spend his inheritance. We are all prodigal sons and daughters.

And the concern is not just for this life. To live this life separated from God is bad enough but the problem is that it goes on into eternity. We, as imperfect, less than holy people, cannot coexist with a God who is perfect and holy. If we want to spend eternity with God then the problem of our sinfulness really has to be dealt with. And that is what we call salvation – we are saved from our sin, both for now and for eternity and the consequences of that sin, which would be eternal separation from God.

Thankfully we have a God who loves us more than we can ever love him, who longs for our relationship with him to be restored and who is willing to forgive us our rebellion against him if we turn back to him, and ask for forgiveness. It's what we call repentance.

The story of the Bible is the story of God reaching out again and again to his people, trying to rebuild the relationship they keep breaking and how he forgives them again and again. We turn back to God when we first become Christians, and it's embodied by baptism; we do it again and again, as we try to follow Jesus as

closely as we can and realise we need forgiveness all the time. We begin almost every service with an act of repentance and amazingly God keeps on forgiving us. We can never be good enough through our own efforts. We sin and we need God's forgiveness both for this life and for eternity.

But if God forgives us where does Jesus fit in? Why do we say he needed to come for us and for our salvation? Why did he need to die? The simple answer is that we can be sure of God's forgiveness precisely because Jesus died. Somehow it takes Jesus dying on the cross to ensure our salvation, our forgiveness. We are so used to the idea, we hear words repeating it every week that we may never have thought it through and tried to understand it.

Over the centuries the church has tried to explain what Jesus did on the cross and why it is central to our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins and has come up with a number of images – all of which I suspect are partial and many of which overlap. But today we'll look at just three.

1. Atoning Sacrifice. The early church saw what Jesus did as making the ultimate, once and for all sacrifice.

They lived in a world in which sacrifice was a daily part of their religious ritual. Men and women related to God through sacrifice. Offering the life of an animal to God was a way of saying thank you to God in times of joy and a way of saying sorry to God for their failures. Sacrifices purified those who made them, wiping out their uncleanness, their sin. There was something in here about the spilling of blood as way of putting right a broken relationship with God. So the early Christians saw Jesus' death in that way– the sacrificial lamb of God. John says: 'the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.'

I remember singing rather gruesome Victorian hymns that talked about 'wash me in the blood of the lamb and I shall be whiter than snow'. Not something I thought made a lot of sense as a child. But the idea is that because Jesus was sacrificed, we no longer need to make sacrifices. As long as we confess our sins God now accepts us and sees us as purified. Look out for language like that in our communion services, especially in the old BCP version. It talks of Jesus making 'a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.'

2. Penal substitution. It uses the image of the courtroom. Here the idea of rightful punishment is important and seeing God as a God of justice as well as a God of mercy. If we have done wrong then we deserve to be punished. I'm sure you'll have seen those frightening images on the walls of ancient churches of the separation of people at the last judgement and the condemned being dragged off to hell. We say in the creed that we believe 'that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead'. We can be rather uncomfortable with the idea of judgement. We would rather everyone was just welcomed in regardless – but justice is important.

I have been struck by how those who lost loved ones in various awful tragedies – like Hillsborough or recently the helicopter crash in Glasgow – want justice. Not necessarily out of a sense of the desire to punish those responsible but to have some kind of verdict on what happened, who was responsible and for that person to acknowledge their responsibility. If you have been wronged justice is very important. So, using the image of the courtroom, if we stand condemned by our own sins and deserving death, eternal death, we should by rights be punished. But

Jesus dies in our place – the only truly innocent person takes on voluntarily the punishment that should have been ours. This is not the Father making the son take our punishment – but rather the judge himself being willing to take the punishment that he has handed out, to ensure that justice is done, but we can be forgiven, and doing this because of the depth of his love for us.

3. Redemption. The last image comes from the slave market. Again a very common sight in the world of the New Testament, but maybe less helpful today. Here we are seen as slaves, slaves to sin, trapped in our old lives, ruled by evil, but we are redeemed, our ransom is paid and we are bought by Jesus, set free to a new life, both now and for eternity. Jesus himself talks of giving his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10) Paul talks in his letter to the Romans about our 'slavery to sin' and our being 'set free in Christ'.

Slavery may not be an everyday experience for us, but this is a powerful image of salvation that speaks of freedom and new life and new beginnings. A powerful image for those held prisoner or enslaved by addictions or health problems. Jesus through his

death paid the price of our freedom and has set us free to live a new and better life now and for ever.

These three images of atoning sacrifice, of penal substitution and of redemption, and there are others too, have variously been particularly popular at different times in the church's history and in different traditions of the church and are all valuable in their different ways helping us to grasp such an awe-inspiring idea as our salvation and what Jesus did for us on the cross. Maybe you find it fascinating and want to explore further the saving work of Jesus - it's an area of study called soteriology - or maybe it is enough just to be able to say, as we do in the creed week by week, that we believe Jesus came for us and for our salvation and that he suffered and died and rose again - and therefore we can be certain of the forgiveness of our sins and the life everlasting. And that's where we go next week.