

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
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Religions are often described as either 'religions of salvation' (which means that they are essentially other-worldly oriented) or as 'religions of nature' (which means that they are concerned with life here on this planet.) The obvious – and wrong – conclusion which we may jump to is to assume that all theistic religions – all religions which have some sort of a God at their centre – are religions of the first type. But this is not necessarily so. Consider the religion of the Israelites. Their religion certainly was not simply and narrowly a 'religion of salvation'. Throughout the Old Testament we see that God – Yahweh – often saved both individuals and the nation from various calamities: danger, the violence of the enemy, pestilence, disease. But more often, even usually, this salvation was rather earthbound, and by no means was life with God after death in some kind of heaven an idea held by the Israelites. In the context of the Old Testament salvation is something which happens here and now, on earth.

To the early Christian community, however, the concept of salvation was concerned not about being saved among the vicissitudes of this world, but about the destiny of the faithful after death. This focus on the life to come has dominated Christian thought for most of our history, one of the results being the classic doctrine which states that there is no salvation outside the church.

But what of redemption? If salvation is, for those in the Church, an event, something which each Christian is journeying toward, then redemption is the action of Jesus Christ, the work and purpose of Jesus, by which and through which that salvation comes. This idea is drawn from the image, peppered throughout the Old Testament, of the *go'al*, who is a person who buys back someone who has been sold into slavery and who then gives that person his freedom. In the New Testament Jesus is never called 'Redeemer' but simply 'our redemption'.

The writer of Ephesians – probably not Paul, I must hasten to add – writes in the verse I took for my text that we have redemption through Jesus' blood. He is quite simply saying that Christ, in his death on Calvary was, in some mystical and cosmic sense, the *go'al* of humanity, and that by his death he bought us from the bondage of sin and gave us freedom. In a lurid later development, mediaeval theologians took the metaphor too far, claiming that a ransom was literally paid to God, or even more incredibly, that Christ's blood served as the ransom paid to the devil who had rights of ownership over humanity. Even Biblical metaphors have limits.

Thus we can see that redemption and salvation are two sides of the same coin. Let me offer you this brief summary: the life and death of Christ is the means of our redemption from a life of sin and an irrevocable death, and this act of redemption is our salvation, that by which we are pointed to our final journey, our ultimate end. The work

of Christ, the work of redemption, is indeed salvation history. It is the act by which and through which we know ourselves saved.

And here we enter what is often a sore point for both critics and followers of the gospel of Christ. Does this saving work of Christ apply to those outside the Christian Church or is it only for Christian believers? In the letters we can unequivocally ascribe to Paul he says that Christ died for all and that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The writer of the epistles of John says that Jesus is the expiation for the sins of the whole world. Some Christians maybe don't want to believe this, or can't, preferring an exclusive Christ. But these claims are also troubling for those outside the Church who say that it is triumphalistic of us to claim that Christ is the means of redemption not only for all of humanity, but also for the universe.

Earlier I said that the old theological assertion was that there is no salvation outside the Church. In recent decades, however, even among the Roman church which we so often find it easy to demonize, this position has more and more been subject to theological fine-tuning. So now we might hear something claiming that those who neither know the gospel nor the Church, but who nonetheless seek God with a sincere heart, may achieve eternal salvation.

The consequences of such a recalibration are far reaching. If we can't assume that heaven is for Christians only, or that once there *we* will enjoy positions of privilege, and if the Christian way isn't the only beaten path to heaven, is not the whole Christian venture a sham, and pointless? If men and women can be redeemed without Christ, if salvation *can* exist outside the Christ and his church, is our faith nullified?

There is an old concept, beloved of the painters of the mediaeval age, called the 'Harrowing of Hell.' Between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning, Christ was believed to have gone among those who had died and preached to them, and they, in turn, not having had a chance to hear his gospel in life, acknowledged him. And so Christ returned with a great train of the departed, led by Adam and Eve, who were sent to Paradise to enjoy eternal bliss. The point of the story is this: that those who died before Christ were saved through him. And if those who died before Christ lived can thus be saved, can it not be that those who die in these latter days who have not heard the gospel can also be saved? For even at the end of the age, when Christ will come to judge the sheep and the goats, will those who fed the hungry and clothed the naked and visited the prisoners, who had no knowledge they were ministering to Christ, be received into glory?

If this is so, isn't our being here a sham and pointless? Of course it isn't. In these first few verses of Ephesians we are told that we have been destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world, so that we might live for the praise of his glory. Our being here – our calling ourselves Christians, our confession of Christ crucified – isn't because we have received something no others may ever share. We don't rejoice that we are the elect and others are damned. No: we are here and we call ourselves Christians because we of all people on this earth are most fortunate to have been called at this present moment God's sons and daughters, as surely as Christ

was his Son. We enjoy a particular relationship here and now with God through and by Christ.

For us, the story of redemption – salvation history – isn't wrought only in some future dimension, but is told and lived even here and now. And yet we are not to boast, for we also have had made known to us the mystery of God's will – which is to gather up all things in Christ. If Christ could die for and redeem sinners like you and me, can he not do the same for the whole world? And what of those who, having come to know Christ in this present world, complain of those who gain heaven in another way, the multitudes who will one day be made equal with us? We know what Christ thinks of this attitude; it was one of his themes when he walked in Galilee and taught his companions by parables.