

Exploring the meanings of 'Salvation'

In a grudging concession to the world cup final tonight, I will share my one and only football joke – here it is: “Jesus saves but Salah scores off the rebound” (TBH I had to look up who Mohammed Salah was – apparently, he plays for Liverpool).

What does it mean to say that ‘Jesus saves’? In our Gospel reading this morning Joseph hears in a dream that Jesus will ‘save’ people – and indeed the very name ‘Jesus’ is simply a short form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means ‘God saves’. I wonder if you’ve ever had the experience of being mid-way through writing a really common word and then stumbling over how to spell it because normally you never really have to think about it – but suddenly the word looks strange on the page.

Common Christian doctrines can be like that too: we might not normally give them much thought, but sometimes if we were to stop and think about them we might find that they seem momentarily strange to us. When it comes to Jesus ‘saving’ us, our hymns are saturated with such language, but I suspect if we were seriously quizzed about what we meant when we said Jesus ‘saves us’ we might pretty quickly be reduced to burbling around for a bit and talking about the cross - but what might it actually mean to speak of Jesus saving? And how does Jesus do this?

Each week in church we recite some form of the Creed after the sermon, I guess as a sort of safety check against any heresy in the sermon. But, curiously, there is nothing in any of the creeds that we use that explicitly pins salvation down. The most detailed creed, the Nicene, simply says ‘for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit and was made man...’.

Every week in the Chaplaincy I run a study session for students exploring the creeds. It’s called *Theology and Doughnuts*, and once a year in a workshop we look at the topic of salvation. This morning I’d like to share with you a little of the exercise we do – and if you like it, you might wish to carry it on at home. We begin our session on salvation with a bit of unpacking. Like a wool jumper that’s got too small, theological words like ‘salvation’ also occasionally need stretching. So, first of all we make a list of all the words we can think of that are related to the word ‘save’ and we put them in a column. Here are some: *Save* (rescue or stop a goal); *Salve* (heal); *Make safe* (a bomb); *Salvage* (a wreck); *Catch* (something falling); *Store up* (savings in a bank); *Record* (computer – have you saved your document?)

Next, we add some new columns: From what? For what? What is it about Jesus’s life and story that describes this? And, finally, how does this reach me/our community?

But let’s just take one particular meaning of the word ‘save’. I’ve chosen an unusual one: the idea of salvation as in ‘to make something safe’, like defusing a bomb. I was conducting a funeral a few years back and I was told the story of how the deceased, as a young lad in war-time London, had approached a bomb – fortunately the detonator had been removed and inside was a note which read ‘you still have friends in Germany’. The bomb had been made safe. If we approach the topic of salvation as Jesus making us safe what might we discover? Let’s use our grid:

First of all: what might we be being made safe *from*? Here are some suggestions we came up with: perhaps our propensity to explode, or to cause hurt to others or ourselves. Salvation could be about how angry people are calmed; or how wealthy people who might use their resources in ways that don’t harm others or the planet; or perhaps we are in the domain of Heather’s charity Circles UK that supports former sex offenders – in that case being ‘made safe’ is about how things that are unhealthy about us are dealt with. Maybe you can think of other examples of things that you might need to be made safe from, either in yourself or around you?

Let's shift to our second column; if there are things we need to be made safe from, what are we being made safe for? Perhaps, it is to become more patient people; people who are more cautious with their boundaries; people who are more generous, more forgiving, or more careful in how we use wealth and our gifts. If what we need to be made safe from is some other harmful thing or person, then what we might be made safe for could be a freer life, a fuller life, a healthier life. What might you be being made safe *for*?

If we shift now to the third column, we can now ask: what things are there in the story of Jesus that inspire or inform this idea of 'making safe'? Perhaps we might revisit the story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness – a story about how Jesus refuses to abuse his powers, how they are 'made safe' for others; perhaps we might focus on how he chooses to lavish his attention on those who are outcast or vulnerable, making them safe; or maybe we revisit how in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus makes Peter safe when he tells him to put away his sword and his anger reminding him that it has no place; or, perhaps *our* being 'made safe' might be influenced by the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet: the way Jesus puts away his pride and his status might make us relax about putting ours to one side, too. Or, perhaps what inspires us is the account of Jesus bearing the cross without vengeance or hatred, followed by the story of the resurrection, where Jesus returns to the ones who fled, without telling them off: he doesn't explode, he is safe to be with and his safety makes others safe, too. If we stop to think about it, there may be a multitude of ways that Jesus incarnates a certain form of human life that speaks to being 'made safe'. Perhaps you can think of others.

And then, what happens if we shift to the final column? Remember, there we explore how this is kind of Jesus-inspired 'being-made-safe' is actually made present in us individuals and in our communities. And here the answers might include: dwelling with certain stories, writing about them, painting them, having a picture of them on our desktop or on our wall to slowly re-mind us; or it might that 'being made safe' occurs through deeply engaging with certain rituals: like taking the confession part of the Sunday service especially seriously, or even making a private confession to someone. Or, perhaps being made safe involves joining some kind of circle of accountability where we're really honest about who we are, and where others lovingly and truthfully respond to us. For me, one habit I find that makes me safe is to take a day out a month in a monastery, and the first thing I do there is to write down all the people that have annoyed me, and to spend a while reflecting on why and then praying for them (it's a habit I learnt from the AA tradition). The saving power of Jesus, the being-made-safe power of Jesus can be channelled by many routes.

'Being made safe' is just one thread in the larger tapestry of what it means to say 'Jesus saves'. And we could similarly explore other threads. For example, if we were to take another meaning, like salvation as 'salvage', we might be led to explore themes of wreckage. We might find ourselves asking, how have we been sunk? Or, do we feel on the scrap-heap? And what happens to salvaged material? It is remade: so, we might then ask, what are we being remade, re-forged for? And then we could explore what stories are there about salvage in the Gospels: and it turns out that there are plenty of stories of Jesus pulling people off life's scrapheap, of recommissioning people who have been written-off as damaged and un-worthy (just think of Mary Magdalene). And, finally, we might spend some time exploring how this salvaging might actually occur in and among us? And that might lead us to think about being embedded in a community of affirmation and reformation where we can discover our worth again; it might involve coming to a table and holding your hands out and finding that you're worthy enough after all to be allowed to take God's presence into you. This could be a salvaging, a saving moment.

Well, if any of this curious sermon sparks any thoughts, you might like to continue that exercise. The old Dog's Trust motto was 'A dog is for life, not just for Christmas'. Salvation, too, is for every part of life, not just the bits that get mentioned at Christmas or for Easter. If we spend a while unwrapping what we mean when we say 'Jesus saves us', we might find inside a surprisingly rich gift.