

“What does salvation mean?” a sermon based on Ephesians 2:1-10 and John 3:14-21 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 15 March 2015.

I cannot cover in a few minutes such a major Christian theme ... so I want to introduce the theme and introduce one approach as an example of the exploration that occurs today.

Salvation is a central Christian theme ... highlighted by being taught two verses to memorise from two of today's readings:

John 3:16 ... “For God so loved the world, that God gave God's own son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Ephesians ... “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

The name Jesus means – Yahweh or God saves.

It is a topic of significance ... whole courses on soteriology, the study of salvation.

Here is part of what Karl Barth wrote about salvation – two of his 13 volumes.

A six month course on the topic at Princeton, hardly scratched the surface.

So a few minutes will scratch the scratch on the scratch of the surface.

Salvation is easily caricatured.

Driving from Raetihi to Hamilton ... a large rock on the side of the road .. someone had written Jesus saves ... coming back someone had added ‘stamps’ – Jesus saves stamps.

And there is the inclination to relegate salvation to dramatic personal rescues.

When I was a student I met a missionary. Many years before, he had been a non-recovering alcoholic. He was walking up the top of Queen Street in Auckland desperate for a cigarette. It was Sunday night and the only building open was the Baptist Tabernacle. He went in and was transfixed by the organ pipes which reminded him of cigarettes. He also listened to the sermon and he said, “that night I was saved”.

I have met people in places of poverty who state that God saved them through the work of agencies that gave them safe water and good sanitation and seeds to plant and power to act.

Salvation has to do with real people in real life.

There are theories of salvation, each highlighting a dimension, each trying to make sense of what God did in Christ within the culture of the time.

One is of Christ as Victor, of Christ as the victor in a cosmic struggle between God and the forces of evil in the world. Today, we know how strong are large companies, commercial interests, the entrenchment of their money-making power, their determination to hold on to that power ... so for me the idea of Christ as victor has relevance.

In a time of lords and serfs, a second theory is that any act of disobedience dishonours the Lord, for which there must be satisfaction, and that God offers Christ as satisfaction. Dorothy Solle speaks of the work of Christ as an act of personal representation, not to satisfy God's wrath, but to represent us before God, not to remove our responsibility, but to enable us to receive from God all that God has for us, on our behalf, and we enter into the gifts of God when we are in union with Christ.

A third approach is to see the work of Christ as one of moral influence. So Christ saves by showing us how we are meant to live, to respect God, to honour the earth. We are saved when we follow his example. Our relationships, our planet is saved when we follow his example.

Richard Niebuhr highlighted a danger of the last theory wrongly understood - "A God without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Daniel Migliore – "Through the ministry and cross of Christ, God does something decisive on behalf of oppressed humanity, liberating us from evil forces that enslave us (Christ as victor), freeing us from our burden of guilt (Christ as satisfaction), and restoring moral order in a disordered world (Christ as moral influence), setting us free from the illusions and self-deceptions that bring destruction on our neighbours as well as ourselves."

So we sing three hymns - "A mighty fortress is our God" - Christ as victor; "O sacred head sore wounded" - Christ as representative; "God of grace and God of glory" - Christ as moral influence.

We are trying to describe the fullness of what God did in Christ - each theory offers a dimension.

Let's look at another dimension.

Violence is everywhere and extremely confronting. Once you have experienced it or seen its consequences, it is impossible to forget.

- The ovens of Dachau;
- The malnourished children escaping Pol Pot in Cambodia;
- The desolation of north east Sri Lanka;
- The hundreds of thousands dying in Syria;
- The hundreds of thousands killed or displaced in South Sudan;
- The thousands of women subject to domestic violence.

God in Christ enters into a world saturated with violence, a world in which people are victimised again and again and again. Jesus comes to disturb that order – through announcing the forgiveness of sinners, promising a future for people who are poor, welcoming outcasts and strangers, calling people to turn to God and the people of God.

Jesus does this in a world depending on violence.

So it is inevitable that Jesus must suffer. The radical way of peace comes into direct conflict with systems of violence.

It is inevitable the violent system would want to silence him, to put him to death.

And we are all caught up in the violence of the system of this world.

Jesus refused to give into that violence. To the moment of death, he refused to respond violently.

It was not for himself. If he had lived for himself, he would have wanted to preserve his own life. He could see that what would save him, would do nothing for us, for our world, for the future of our world.

He was determined to open out a new world, a new way, a different future.

So how then are we saved by Christ?

1. Christ died for us to expose our world of violence for what it is – a world that stands under the judgement of God, a world based on coercion and leading to death. The cross is a sign of God's nonviolent love, of God's grace, of God's determination that we would know the way of peace and live the way of peace.
2. Christ died for us in solidarity with the victims of violence, God's solidarity with the victims of violence. Salvation through solidarity, that God is not untouched, remote, impervious to what is happening in the toughest part of our living, but experiences it, knows it, absorbs it, takes it into God's own self.
3. Christ died for us to open a new future for a new humanity in the midst of our violent world. The resurrection of Christ is God's opening out of that future, possibilities for peace we would not otherwise know. Leonardo Boff – "God has assumed the cross because God means to put an end to all the crosses of history." The cross and resurrection are God's exclamation point – that the compassion of God is greater than the passions of our world, that the peace of God is greater than the violence of this world, that the forgiveness of God is greater than the savage retribution of this world.

I have never been asked whether I have been saved. But I was told what I should say if I was ever asked:

I was saved when Christ died on the cross for me, for you, for us, when God absorbed into God's own self the violence of this world.

I am being saved through the work of God's Spirit now, turning people from violence to peace, and me too.

And I will be saved when the way of Jesus Christ, the way of peace, of nonviolence, of forgiveness and restoration, when the way of Jesus Christ pervades the world.

"For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life."