

CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR

A few weeks ago I spoke to you about sin and the enormous damage it causes. Our sinfulness could well have led God to abandon the plan to become part of human life so that we may become part of God's own life. Had God done so, that sinfulness would probably have destroyed us completely. All we would be experiencing would be quite literally hell with no relief whatsoever. But God was so determined to give us a share in his own love life that he went ahead with his plan for Jesus to become a human being and the Spirit of Love to be poured out into our hearts, thus welding the divine community and the human community into one.

The view that Jesus would have come anyway, even if humanity had not sinned, is now widely accepted. But sin meant that he now had to wage war against it and its effects on humanity, even if it meant dying in the process. The one who came as our brother had to also become our saviour. That is why he was given the name of Jesus, which means "God saves".

If I were to ask you what Jesus has saved us from, you would no doubt say "from sin". The answer is correct but not as precise as it could be. For to be more precise we should say that Jesus has saved us from the *effects* of sin. In my talk on sin I pointed out that these effects were separation from God and the power of God's love, division between human beings, a division within our very souls and bodies making our faculties serve our own desires rather than love and a division between ourselves and the environments we create, which are often testimonies to human selfishness. So to be saved involves restoring our unity with God, promoting our ability to love neighbour, to channel our faculties into the service of love and, finally, to work for a more humanising environment. Salvation is much more than simply getting your soul into heaven.

So Jesus our brother became also Jesus our saviour. But how did he save us? What did he do to save us?

If you were to ask any Catholic that question, the answer would almost certainly be: By dying for us on the cross. This answer, however, is only part of the truth. If you were to ask one of the early fathers of the church, especially the eastern church, their answer would be this: Jesus saved us by his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. Everything that Jesus did was salvific. His very presence was a saving act.

Let us now look at that fuller answer and see how each of the items mentioned contributed to our salvation.

To begin with the *Incarnation*, it perfected and sealed God's unity with humanity. To use the beautiful biblical image of marriage to describe the relationship God wants with us, the incarnation was the consummation of God's marriage with humanity.

The incarnation therefore overcame the first effect of sin, division between God and humanity, in the most radical way imaginable. Moreover, the very fact that Jesus went ahead with the divine plan to become a human being was a sign of God's forgiveness of humanity's sinfulness. That is why Jesus told people that their sins were forgiven – there and then: he didn't say “well you will have to wait until I die on the cross before your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus' *life* contributed to our salvation by his living out and preaching the good news of God's love for us, forgiveness of us and asking only in return that we love God and love our neighbour. His life and teachings showed us the way along which we must travel if we want to benefit from that forgiveness. They also showed us how costly the path of love for God and neighbour can be.

The contribution of Jesus' *death* is so important and has played such a central role in reflections on our salvation that it would take another two talks to do justice to it. But the following comments will have to do.

If we turn to the New Testament, we will find many images to make the point *that* Jesus' death saved us but very little on *how* it did so. For example, a favourite image was that of *ransom*. Jesus himself describes his death as being a ransom for many. A ransom is a price paid to free someone from captivity. Here the picture being painted is one of humanity as the captive of Satan and Jesus paying for its release with his blood. Its a very moving portrayal of what our salvation cost Jesus. But of course there was no transaction between Jesus and the devil in which Jesus hands his blood over to Satan. Another favourite image is that of atonement. The purpose of atonement is clear from its name: at-one-ment. Atonement was a ceremony or process which aimed at reconciling people with God through purifying them. The process of purification could take many forms but one important symbolic way of achieving purification was by the shedding of the blood of a sacrificial animal. Jesus' shedding of his blood on the cross was seen as the definitive act of atonement for our sins since it was the shedding of the blood of God's own son. Very moving and within the context of the time a very enlightening explanation of the saving character of Jesus' death. But everyone knew that blood had no purifying power in itself. The whole ceremony was a symbol of sorrow by an offender and of forgiveness by the offended.

The first real attempts at an explanation of how Jesus' death has saved us came centuries later .They revolved around the idea that the divine sense of justice prevented God from simply forgiving us. Humanity or its representative had to first undergo the required amount of punishment – or make satisfaction by restoring the divine honour which had been dishonoured by sin. The former route was taken by Protestant theologians while the latter became the typical Catholic standpoint: Jesus

made satisfaction for our sins by honouring God through the gift to the Father of the one thing that even God had no right to: Jesus' death. Since the gravity of dishonouring someone is measured by the status of that person, sin has offended God, the infinite one, infinitely. And since the value of honour shown to someone is measured by the status of the person paying that honour, to do ample satisfaction for the dishonour given to God by sin required a man of infinite status. Only Jesus fitted that requirement. But he still had to offer God something in satisfaction, something to which God is not already entitled to. And the only thing in creation to which God is not entitled is Jesus' death, since his sinlessness meant that he was not subject to the law of death that was the result of sin. (This was the theory of St Anselm in his famous book "Why a God-Man").

This explanation is better than a mere appeal to suffering since any human being could in principle have gone through the suffering required. But this then faces the objection that God's love is demonstrated through the fact that he placed the whole burden of suffering on his own son, rather than sinful humanity itself, which poses serious questions about God's love for his son.

Both theories sought and offered a logical explanation as to why killing Jesus should save us. However, I believe there was and remains a serious flaw in them: they both presume that God is locked into a divine system of justice that prevents God from forgiving without first exacting punishment or satisfaction. That was not the God that Jesus preached. God's forgiveness came with no strings attached either to the sinner or to the Jesus who forgave them. I therefore developed my own pet theory, which had the advantage of also taking into account the historical reasons for Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus preached and did things that deeply offended the religious leaders of his day. He called them hypocrites and whitened tombs: nice on the outside but rotting on the

inside. His main criticism was about the way they treated the poor, whom he said would get into the Kingdom of God before the Pharisees did. In short he preached a love that seemed too demanding to them. Indeed his forgiveness of sins, eating and drinking with sinners and the socially marginalised made them see the title of “prophet” that he was given as blasphemy. What sort of a representative of God can this man be who even has the nerve to say that God’s holy Sabbath was made for human beings and not the other way around (when he was criticised for healing on a Sabbath day). There were many other factors that led to a situation arising where Jesus had to choose if he was to avoid death: he had to choose what many of the religious leaders of his day taught and practiced about love and God’s Law, attitudes to the poor, and so on - or face the consequences. Towards the end of his life these consequences were clear to him: being arrested and the demand that he be sentenced to death. If he chose to abandon his teaching the unthinkable would have happened: sin would have destroyed the love that bound the divinity together. Jesus chose to die rather than be untrue to the love he preached. And because he did, he, his love and the fulfilment of God’s plan for humanity remained intact and his promise that some of his hearers would see him in his glory was fulfilled when he began to appear to his disciples after his resurrection.

The *resurrection*, therefore, contributed this to our salvation: (a) it ensured that Jesus and his unity with God are part of our world forever; (b) with the resurrection the promised new heavens and new earth came into being in all its fullness on the other side of the grave. We already are citizens of it and benefit from its power and the love that binds its members to each other.

So, with the *resurrection* the unity between God and humanity that began in the *incarnation*, was lived out in *Jesus’ life* and for which *he died on the cross* has arrived at the point at which it has already started transforming humanity and its world.