



THE HOPE OF OUR SALVATION

A Pastoral Letter for October from the Bishop of St Asaph for the faithful of the diocese

It does us good sometimes to look at the big picture – to stand back and remember our basic orientation as the people of God. When talking about the Christian message, the Church often says that it commissioned to proclaim “Good News”, and we do need to be good news for the people whom we encounter and serve. Part of that good news – the core of it in fact – is the belief that God is on our side, and enters into this world to bring us salvation. But what is salvation, and how does it speak into our present times?

I’ve often thought that Christianity is a very realistic religion because it begins with the fact that human beings mess things up. We do well on many things, of course - art and science and civilization. However, we also give in to darker impulses, greed and hatred and prejudice and sin. This operates on two levels – we fail as a society, and we fail as individuals, to live up to what God desires of us. This might be rather gloomy were it not for what comes next – God loves us, and is committed to our salvation. “Herein is love,” says the scriptures, “not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4.10)

There can be said to be a double giving by God in Jesus – first, comes the Incarnation, celebrated at Christmas, when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1.14). By becoming human, God in Christ sanctifies creation, and unites heaven and earth. Yet Jesus’ life finds its climax in the crucifixion, at Easter, when God in Christ gives himself up to death on the cross: “God forgave us all our sins; he cancelled the unfavourable record of our debts with its binding rules and did away with it completely by nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2.14). To be a Christian is to enter into the mystery of Christ, to be baptised into his body, to share in the incarnation, and in his death and resurrection, to become inheritors of salvation and eternal life. I might just as well reference the whole of the Letter to the Romans here, as the opening chapters go into great depth about this, but let me choose one verse: “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6.23). God wants all of us to grow into fullness of life. He tackles the mess we make of things by taking on the whole of human life in Jesus, and winning the battle for us. This is all gift: “... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” (John 1.12). To sum it up in one word that I used last month: it is atonement, God and humanity through Christ are brought together to be “at one”.

In the same way that “sin” (what I’ve described as “humans messing up”) operates on two levels, the individual and the societal, so does salvation: individuals are invited into eternal life; while together we are invited, under God, to build His Kingdom, and to be bearers of peace and justice.

“If God is on our side, who can be against us?” (Romans 8.31). To know Christ is therefore to know eternal life and to receive the hope of salvation, when we will be made whole, and when society is brought into the reality of God’s vocation of a redeemed, just and whole society – the Kingdom of God. This should give us hope in every situation, because if we know the destination, life – with all its troubles and challenges – is the process of journeying there. “For I am sure,” wrote Paul, “that he who began this good work in you will bring it to completion.” (Philippians 1.6). Even Covid cannot stop it; even death cannot defeat it.

How does this speak into our present situation? It means that putting our hands into the hand of God, of walking with him, makes the hope of salvation the context in which everything else takes place. In Covid, we struggle, we fear, we are forced into new ways. We face bereavement, and illness, and the opportunity to love. Yet “... I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29.11). Can we be people of hope and joy at this time? Can we be people who truly believe, and embrace God’s gift in Christ? And if you want some homework, take the opportunity perhaps, to sit down this week, and to read, in one sitting, Romans Chapters 1 to 8. Whether it is new or familiar – it speaks of Christian hope. May God bless you,

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