

WHY WE NEED SAVING

Exodus 32. 7-14

1 Timothy 1. 12-17

Luke 1. 1-10

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many years ago there was a wonderful Vicar who was known for his excellent preaching. Each week, he made a special effort to ensure that his congregation knew that salvation and grace are obtained through Jesus Christ our Lord; and that this salvation and grace are available to everyone, no matter who you are. One Sunday morning a long-time church member memorably confronted the Vicar at the door after the service. ‘Why do you guys keep going on about salvation?’ he asked; and then he said in a slightly self-satisfied tone, ‘I’ve lived a pretty good life. I don’t need to be saved.’ We’ll stop there.

Of course the Church is about salvation, no matter who we are. It is about salvation because it is about Jesus, whose very name means Saviour. Today’s gospel text from St Luke presents the same spiritual issue that I just recounted at the church door. Tax collectors and sinners drew near to Christ to hear him. The Pharisees and scribes criticised our Lord, murmuring that he welcomed sinners and even ate with them. In response to this Jesus tells some parables, two of which we hear in today’s reading: The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin. There is good news for sinners in these parables.

To liken a person, a sinner, to a lost sheep or a lost coin is good news, because it means that we are precious in the sight of God; and that God cares enough about us to go looking for us. A lost sheep cannot, with its limited faculties, find its way back when it wanders off far away. Its life is in danger. Christ’s shepherd goes off to seek it, to find it, to pick it up and put it on his shoulders, and to bring it back safely. He even calls his friends and neighbours, rejoicing that he has found his lost sheep. Just

so, says our Lord, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, who turns back to God, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Similarly, a lost coin has value. Jesus's woman lights a lamp and sweeps the house until she finds it (perhaps Christ saw his mother do the very same thing). She invites her neighbours to share her relief and joy at recovering it. Just so, says our Lord, there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents. A sheep and a coin (probably the denarius, a day's wage) were things of value to their owners; they were things that Jesus's hearers could appreciate.

God, says Christ, is persistent in searching for what is his that has been lost, and he is also jubilant upon recovering it. This contrasts sharply with the religion of the scribes and Pharisees, who stayed clear of tax collectors and sinners as though they feared pollution from them. This attitude exposes the superficiality of the supposed holiness of such religious practice, as though contact with the poor, the sick, the weak and the sinful would bring it down.

Our Lord, who really was pure and holy, had no such fear at all. He could come in close contact with those who had fallen low without ever being contaminated; far from it, like the shepherd and the woman in today's parables, he sought them out and received them. Sinners didn't taint Jesus; rather, he befriended and blessed them. He spoke to them, taught them, and showed the way to life and peace in both time and eternity. He wasn't simply being humanitarian; he was literally God incarnate, their maker and redeemer, on mission. And what attracted sinners to Christ was their finding in him not that hard, cold righteousness, full of pride and contempt, by which the Pharisees condemned them; but goodness associated with tender love and mercy.

Furthermore, surely there is more to being a child of God than 'living a pretty good life'. Anyone with insight and honesty will recognise that this is a hollow phrase. Did you notice that in our Epistle reading St Paul says that Pharisees need salvation as much as tax collectors and other obvious sinners? In his opposition to the good news, just like the scribes and Pharisees in today's gospel text, Paul (who was also a Pharisee¹ and known as Saul of Tarsus) blasphemed, persecuted and insulted our Lord in the persons of his disciples. Then he was knocked off his high horse of self-confidence and made this extraordinary confession: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners.' Paul had come to see that his religious pride was his most dangerous sin of all; and that it had brought about terrible things. But there is good news: even a Pharisee of Pharisees can be saved! Yet first there must be honesty.

If you think about the Sermon on the Mount for a moment, you will remember that the first Beatitude pronounced by Jesus is that the poor in spirit are blessed, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven. The blessedness comes from our awareness of our need for God; our knowledge of our poverty; our recognising that we are totally lost without his love, forgiveness, grace and power. We are far better off and much nearer to God if we recognise ourselves in the position of the tax collectors and sinners, than if we have the complacency of the proud and the self-righteous.

That confrontation at the church door years ago between the Vicar and the church member reveals a perennial issue. In actual fact, the Pharisees have not gone away; they have taken up membership and positions in the Church, and they resist the purposes of Christ as much as ever. And let us make no mistake: we might be they! The Pharisee spirit can take root in our hearts and lead to a hardening.

¹ Cf. Acts 23. 6.

When this happens, we forget who and what we are. We lose sight of the fact that we are every bit as needy as ever. In order to be genuine, the Church must always be the place where sinners draw near to hear our Lord. May we at St Stephen's see our place *with them* in order to hear clearly what Jesus has to say.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

Amen.