

TO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY A SAVIOUR

Isaiah 62. 6-12

Titus 3. 4-7

Luke 2. 1-14

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

'In those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all should be registered.' We have, I am sure, heard these words many, many times. They are like an overture to the great drama of the Christmas story. I have no doubt that the Emperor Augustus would have been delighted to be told that his name would still be recalled after twenty centuries – but I am also sure that he would have been rather dismayed to learn that this is simply because he happened to be around at the time of Christ's birth. There were all sorts of things for which he would have wanted to be remembered, including the fact that he was the great-nephew and adopted heir of Julius Caesar. In all fairness, he had a good claim to fame: he had, after all, restored order to the Roman state and consolidated its global influence as never before. For many decades, a kind of peace prevailed from what is now known as Germany to Syria – enforced, of course, by typical Roman brutality when any signs of dissent appeared, but still probably better than the chaos of the Roman civil war that had been going on before. To many people, it made sense to hail Emperor Augustus as the restorer of peace; under his rule, they looked forward to a long period of stability and prosperity.

It didn't turn out quite like that, of course; but Augustus's reign was considered by some to be a sort of golden age. In later generations, new emperors set themselves the goal of bringing back the stability and confidence that his rule had accomplished; and they would describe themselves on their coins and statues as the rescuers of the

world's good order – as 'saviours': something that had already been common among the kings of the Middle East in earlier centuries.

So if you asked people of Jesus's day what the word 'saviour' meant, the answer would be pretty plain. It was someone who would bring back the golden age, and who would put an end to conflict. You could almost say that it was someone who would stop things happening. Salvation would be brought about by a 'saviour', one unique charismatic leader.

All these years later, it is interesting that the same language about a golden age still survives. In 1905, H. G. Wells wrote *A Modern Utopia*; and twenty-five years later, Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World*, followed by *Brave New World Revisited* (1958). Twentieth century totalitarian systems looked forward to a time when all conflict would be over; and when change and struggle would stop. When the Cold War ended in 1989, some scholars called it 'the end of history'; and an American President spoke of a 'new world order'. As human beings, we have not grown out of our fascination with saviours who will restore the good times. But wait a moment: as we just heard in our text from Isaiah, "The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: "...See, your salvation comes." Can we dare to believe that real salvation has come?

Yes, we can. *The Saviour* (and there is no other) has come to us; but when he did, many people did not recognise him. He did not come as an Emperor or as a mighty political figure. Rather, he was born in poverty. Instead of restoring peace and the golden age, his coming was followed by conflict, a trial, a cross and then a mysterious new dawn that broke unlike any other dawn had broken before. *The Saviour* was in the world; but the world did not know him. Yet (and this is the incredible news) to those who recognise him and trust him, he gives authority and power to become something of what he is – and to share in the spreading of his saving work.

So what is happening here to the world's idea of a saviour? The gospel tells us that there is not going to be a single charismatic leader, or a dedicated political campaign, or a war to end all wars that will bring the golden age. It tells us that history will end when God decides that it will end, and not when we think we have sorted all our problems out. It tells us that we cannot turn the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of God, and that we cannot reverse what has happened and restore a golden age. But the gospel does tell us something that suddenly explodes all of our pessimism and weariness with the world as we know it. It tells us that there is a saviour – *the* Saviour – who was born so that all may have life in abundance; and whose authority does not come from popularity, problem-solving or anything else in the human world. This Saviour is the presence of the power of creation itself. He is the indestructible divine life, and the light that he gives cannot be shrouded or defeated by darkness.

The amazing thing is that this Saviour has become flesh. He came to live in a world where conflict surfaces again and again, and history does not stop; a world where change continues apace. And not only did our Saviour come into the world; he promised to change the world, and indeed even to overcome it. How did he accomplish that? By simply pouring out his perfect, sinless life in love and self-sacrifice. In coming to the world and in overcoming the world, our Saviour did not restore a golden age. Nor did he orchestrate a supernatural return to the Garden of Eden. Actually, he did much more than that: he inaugurated a new creation for humanity and a new horizon for us all.

And this new creation and this new horizon were brought about neither by material force nor by brilliant negotiation. They were made possible as our Saviour showed the depth of his divine life and love to the world, and as he joyfully and freely gave himself for our sakes. This new creation that we Christians share in God – this new horizon – cannot (and should not) be said to be engineered by earthly power and

worldly success. This new creation and this new horizon are nothing less than ‘the salvation of our God’, to borrow Isaiah’s words. Our salvation is from him alone, and from no-one or anything else.

For those of us who accept this revelation of God in Christ; for those of us who (as the New Testament puts it) are ‘new creations in Christ’;¹ for those of us who have received the power to become the sons and daughters of God;² how can we show and reflect his glory this Christmas?

The prophet Isaiah looked forward to the day when the sentinels who were posted on the city walls of deserted Jerusalem would see the Lord return ‘face-to-face’ (52. 7-10). At that moment, he foretold that they would break forth together into singing with all those who found themselves in the ruins of Jerusalem, as they rejoiced in the fact that the Lord had finally redeemed his people.

This Christmas – and indeed this year – you and I who know our Lord are called to continue to seek him who has redeemed us and to seek time with him ‘face-to-face’. As we do this, and as we grow in our relationship with him, we will find that our Saviour will invite us to accompany him in his saving work. As we follow the Word made flesh, Christ will lead us to make myriad (and perhaps unexpected) ‘face-to-face’ encounters with other people. In these encounters with family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and (who knows?) absolute strangers, we will have the opportunity to speak of him who has given our lives a completely new horizon; to demonstrate his love to those who so desperately need it; and to joyfully show others that we have indeed been made new creatures in Christ – men and women who see and reflect his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.

Amen.

¹ Cf. 2 Cor 5. 17.

² Cf. Jn 1. 12.