

“NOW IS THE DAY OF SALVATION”

Sermon preached at Christ’s Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario, on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 10 March 2024, by Bishop Terry Brown. Texts: Numbers 21: 4-9, Ephesians 2: 1-10, and John 3: 14-21.

In the name of God: Creator, Saviour and Giver of Life.

All three lessons today speak of salvation in Jesus Christ, particularly here and now, what theologians call “realized eschatology,” that the reign of God has come, and salvation is happening here and now.

The Hebrews complain in the wilderness, they are punished with a plague of snakes, they repent, and a pole with a bronze snake is erected to supply immediate relief. Healing and salvation are provided here and now, even to fickle sinners.

Paul (or his followers on his behalf), writing towards the end of his life, far away from the apocalyptic teaching of 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, declares, “by grace you have been saved,” enabling us to do good works. There is a striking description of our ministries in this passage, which recalls the prayer shawl ministries of this and many other parishes: those who knit, who use a handicraft for the glory of God, distributing the shawls for encouragement and healing. Yet Paul reminds us here that *our very selves* are “God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Do we think of ourselves as “God’s handiwork,” reaching out to those in need in one way or another? We don’t need to know how to knit; *we ourselves* are that completed knitting, to be shared with others.

And then there is our Gospel passage from John chapter 3, which I shall mostly reflect on. I am sure that many of us as children memorized John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (*A show of hands...*) Interestingly, John 3 begins with a concrete story, like the other Gospels, Nicodemus encountering Jesus and trying to understand the source of his power. Jesus replies, “You must be born [Greek] ἀνωθεν, *anōthen*, from above.” (We are used to the translation “born again” from this passage’s use in the baptismal liturgy, and possibly our Protestant heritage, but I would go with the literal translation, “born from above”, especially considering what follows in the rest of the chapter.) Nicodemus must be reborn in the Spirit, and the Spirit is from above.

John then quickly moves from Nicodemus to us, his readers. Salvation is not something external out there, one theological theory of the Atonement or another to be argued over and accepted or rejected, but the result of our deep and simple faith in Christ, to whom God has been calling us. We say “yes” to Christ and enter the process of salvation, of being freed from sin and entering a new life. God’s love, the utter and complete divine grace, comes first; we recognize and accept it, and Christ’s salvation enters our lives. We thereby have, here and now,

eternal life. Like Christ, we are now “from above,” and the world cannot harm us. That is the core meaning of John 3:16: “whoever believes in [Christ] shall not perish but have eternal life”.

Perhaps because of the vulnerability of John’s community, or internal divisions, there are hard words for those who reject Christ and work against the divine community, particularly those who do outright evil. However, the possibility of repentance is always there. There is also much use of the imagery of light and darkness. The early church struggled with Gnosticism, the belief that there was some secret knowledge that Jesus imparted, beyond the public teaching of the church. But John declares that all truth comes to the light and is recognized by the church as part of the divine truth. Teaching and activities done in secret, perhaps sinful or abusive or simply untrue, come to the light to be condemned. One thinks, perhaps, of secret racist or sexist behaviour, or bullying or abuse.

Despite this and other passages about Christian salvation – and remember that Jesus’s very name, Jesus, in Hebrew means “the one who saves” or ‘Saviour’ – there are many, including some Christians, who decide they do not really need a doctrine of Christian salvation in their lives. They say, perhaps, “I follow Jesus’s teaching, I try to do what is right, I love as Jesus taught us to love – why do I need salvation?” One answer, of course, is that you are already participating in it, though you may not realize it. If pressed, such a person likely will recognize God’s grace. The recognition of God’s grace brings us into Christian salvation.

But there are others, probably not Christians, who say, “I don’t need any of this. ‘Man is the measure of all things.’ We can sort it all out ourselves, we don’t need Christ.” Here is the rejection of God and divine grace that John suggests will not end well. While Christians are not free from such attitudes, the result can be arrogance, intolerance, and lack of respect for others, for there is no God to be seen in others. And, of course, the last mystery, death, cannot be faced with hope.

Our participation in Christian salvation, here and now, does not mean we simply do nothing, nor does it make us lazy, as though Christ does all the work for us. In Philippians, Paul, imprisoned and unsure of his future, tells his followers, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” That does not mean to go out to look for some new source of salvation beyond Christ. Rather, we are to reflect and act on how we are to minister, that is, participate in Christ’s salvation, in our various situations and contexts, here and now. And that is not some casual activity, but a serious one, to be done with “fear and trembling,” for the salvation of others depends on how we live out our salvation.

Finally, what does all this say to us as a cathedral congregation and as individual Christians? We have embarked on some major ministries here, as we work out our salvation “with fear and trembling,” such as the Cathedral Café, and very inclusive Sunday worship. We have tried to use the ministries of laity and clergy in constructive ways. I believe we are engaged in living Christian salvation, here and now. But issues always slip through the cracks. How well do we address the loneliness and isolation of our own members? Last Sunday afternoon, the Dean, Deacon Monica, and I attended a wonderful potluck dinner after an induction. Perhaps

we here need a great big potluck supper or other social events just to get to know each other better. Christian salvation should bring forth joy, and not just be a cause for hard work. And as individual Christians, we each have our own story and experience and we know best what we are capable of in terms of living Christian salvation. At best, we can help each other discern what is best for us, though simple Christian friendship. Where we are too active, perhaps slow down. And where we are too sluggish, wake up a bit and do something.

As some of you know, a little over a month ago I had emergency surgery for an intestinal issue. I thank you for your prayers and support and I am on the mend. The surgery took place at St. Joseph's Hospital, a Roman Catholic institution. My hospital bed faced a wall on which were mounted a large clock and a slightly smaller crucifix. I thought to myself, *chronos*, human time, and *kairos*, divine time, brought together. Is that not salvation? We have so much human time on this earth, *chronos*, but as Christians we are called to convert it to divine time, *kairos*, doing the right thing at the right time. "Now is the day of salvation." God grant us grace to recognize the divine time to do what is right and act accordingly. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Jesus Christ to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." There is work to be done and joy to be had. Thanks be to God.