
How Does Jesus Save Us?

Luke 19.28-40

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 1, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Palm Sunday is a day of paradoxes. Jesus is a king, but he rides not on a military horse but on an agricultural donkey. Jesus is the toast of the town, but five days later he is executed. He is the darling of the same people who will soon afterwards call for his blood. Palm Sunday is the first of eight days that shook the world, and shake it still.

The question I want to explore with you is at the heart of the significance of these eight days. How does Jesus save us? I want to set out five historic and widely-held answers to that question and explore what our answer to the question might be today.

The first answer to the question focuses on Jesus' birth. The key date is Christmas Day. It says that Jesus saves us by re-enacting or "recapitulating" every aspect of our human existence, setting right what was out of joint. Thus Adam disobeyed God by eating from the tree, whereas Christ obeyed God by dying on the tree. Christ sanctifies every dimension of human life. We are saved because in Christ the corruptible, finite quality of human nature is joined to the immortal, incorruptible character of God and thus transformed. The crucifixion and resurrection show that Christ also transforms death, but the real moment of salvation is the incarnation itself.

The second answer to the question focuses on Jesus' life. This is sometimes called the moral theory. It suggests that we human beings are the audience for Jesus' life. In his kindness and generosity, in his ministry to outcasts, sinners and the sick, in his close relationship to the father, in his prophetic confrontation with those who kept people under oppression, and most of all in his selfless and faithful journey to the cross, Jesus offers himself as the one who transforms our hearts to follow in his steps in the way of sacrificial love. Think of the words, "my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride." This theory is sometimes described as subjective, because Jesus doesn't seem objectively to change anything about fundamental reality – it is we who are changed. The danger can be that Jesus simply illustrates what we already knew by other methods than revelation.

The third answer to the question focuses on the suffering laid on Jesus as he went to and hung on the cross. Here the crucial moment is Good Friday. The theory is that humanity had accumulated an unpayable level of guilt before God. Humanity therefore deserved eternal punishment. But through a unique act of grace, God sent Jesus to face this punishment in our place. This is often called penal substitution. The words of Isaiah 53 are very significant and echo through Christian history – "surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." It's important to note here that what's most important is that Jesus suffered. While his death is significant, and the resurrection is not ignored, the theory rests so much on the necessity of punishment that attention often focuses chiefly on the extent of Jesus' sufferings. Our imaginations focus on how much suffering it would take to substitute for the sins of the whole world. A characteristically Protestant version of this theory is that Jesus suffered not so much for humanity's sins in general but for each individual's sins in particular. Such an objective view of salvation leaves an open question over whether one is automatically saved whether one believes or not.

The fourth answer to the question also concentrates on Good Friday but this time focuses on Jesus' death itself. Jesus is a sacrifice that sets right our relationship to God. In this view the problem is essentially one of debt. The most influential view says that the debt is to God's honor. The failure of humanity to do justice before God creates a terrible imbalance in the moral universe. Only humanity *must* pay the debt but only God *can* pay the debt. Hence the God-human, Jesus. When Jesus dies he repays the debt of honor with interest, and it is this interest, known as merit, that humanity can access through the sacraments, and thus find salvation. This is a characteristically Roman Catholic view. An older version of this theory also focused on Jesus' actual death but

saw the debt as owed not to God but to Satan. In this view Adam and Eve had sold humanity to the Devil and thus God needed to ransom humanity the way one would redeem a slave. However, Jesus' death, while succeeding as a ransom and buying us back, was in fact a trick because Jesus rose from death and escaped the Devil's clutches. Whenever we use the word redemption we hint at this ransom theory, but the theory has in fact been out of fashion for a millennium or so.

The fifth answer to the question focuses on Jesus' resurrection. If substitution sees salvation as decided in a law court, then this fifth view sees it as a battle. Death cannot hold Jesus; he destroys death and opens out the prospect of eternal life by rising from the grave. The resurrection of Jesus brings about our resurrection by dismantling the hold of death not just once but for all time. Again there's a significant ambiguity here about whether this resurrection model logically means automatic salvation for all. But either way, the key word is victory. This is the characteristic Eastern Orthodox view. It's achieved a revival in the West particularly among those keen to stress how Jesus' resurrection doesn't just save the individual soul but transforms whole societies by dismantling all the social, economic and cultural forces that oppress people.

Looking at the five theories, I'm sure that many people here will have been encouraged at some stage in their Christian life to regard only one of them as the whole story and to distrust or disapprove of the others. But I imagine there would be a similar number who would like to take the best bits of all of them, and simply say, if there's salvation coming from Christ, bring it on, I'll have as much as is going, please. It's important to say that there are scriptural texts that lend support to all five views, so anyone who's in the habit of promoting suspicion around any of them will have the relevant scriptural texts to deal with.

But I want to suggest today that there's a real danger with all five theories. And that is that they're theories. That's to say, they are disembodied constructs that pay little or no attention to the context and contours of Jesus' life. The single word that epitomizes the context and contours of Jesus' life is this: Israel. Most of the theories of the way Jesus saves us exclude almost all the circumstantial detail that makes up the gospels. There's a good reason for that: these theories are trying to set forth ways in which any individual anywhere can find salvation in Christ. But the trouble is, the circumstantial detail is the gospel.

Let me explain. When you hear all these theories together, you get this picture of this agitated God, worried about his honor or scratching around to find some booty to pay off Satan, subject to some eternal law court that says what he can and can't do or fixing some kind of heavenly imbalance as if it were a leaky roof. You see a picture of the Holy Trinity either subject to some eternal rule of engagement that's not of their own making, or gathered together in the board room scratching their heads over Adam's fall as if it were a hole in the budget. What's this got to do with the Jesus of the gospels? Almost nothing.

Instead, the Jesus of the gospels reenacts the story of Israel, coming up out of Egypt with Joseph like Israel did, beginning at the Jordan like Israel did, facing 40 days in the wilderness like Israel faced 40 years, calling 12 disciples like Israel had 12 tribes, and most of all assembling around himself and transforming those facing internal exile in Israel, the leper, the prostitute, the tax collector, the social outcast, just as he came to transform the internal exile of Israel which found itself under Roman occupation. 500 years before Christ Israel had returned from exile not knowing whether it had learned its lessons about sin, redemption and the character of God from its time in Babylon or not. Finding itself in Jesus' time living under internal exile, it seemed not. Jesus emerged from Galilee with resonances of every major player in Israel's history. He was the second Adam; he was the one righteous man like Noah; he made a new people like Abraham; he was the new Israel like Jacob; he went down to despair and rose up to save his people like Joseph; he led his people to liberation like Moses; he was the ultimate king like David; he was a healer and troublemaker like Elijah. By facing the way of the cross he took the story of Israel on himself and went into internal exile among his own people. Exile names the unique condition in which Israel discovered that God brings liberation through suffering, and that God is made known through and to Gentiles as well as Jews.

The cross was not, I believe, inevitable. That I regard as the special poignancy of Palm Sunday. It might not have been like this. The cross was always likely, even probable, because this is what happens when the utter goodness of God is utterly vulnerable in the presence of the shortsightedness and cruelty of human beings. Hence Jesus predicted it three times. But I don't believe the cross was inevitable. Israel could have said yes. I

can imagine that if Israel had rallied behind Jesus the nation might have experienced much of what Jesus called the kingdom of God. What a threat to Rome that would have been – not a threat of arms but a threat of a changed society. Israel might then have been subject to a collective cross at the hands of the Romans as transforming as the cross of the individual man Christ. Isaiah 53, the story of the suffering servant, would have applied to the whole nation after all. But by rejecting Jesus, and by telling us that Jesus died practically alone the gospels make clear this was utter rejection, his people put God to the ultimate test. And most wonderfully of all, God turned that rejection into the ultimate demonstration of his grace, at Easter turning brutal death into breathtaking glory, and at Pentecost, in the birth of the Church and its clothing in the Holy Spirit, making available to the whole world the homecoming brought about through Christ.

This is, I believe, how Jesus saves us. Not through a decontextualized theory that posits a faraway God doing curious deals in the light of arbitrary codes of debt, justice or honor: but through the Jews, God's everlasting love for them, and his love through them for all the nations and the whole creation. The Church is that body of people who declare they want to be in continuity with this story, who in baptism accept that this story is their story, who know themselves to be in exile from God and see Jesus as the one who went into exile for them and who finally brings them home. The Church is not a collection of individuals who make their own private arrangements about which theory of salvation they fancy and join up with a bunch of others who favor the same one. It is those people who believe they are called to be the context of Jesus' story.

The Church is called to demonstrate that salvation in Christ isn't just a theory. If we start with one or more of the five theories of how Jesus saves us, we'll be casting around for a church that gets our favorite theory right. But it should be the other way round. We should seek to embody in our church life such hopefulness, such faithfulness, such patience, such endurance, such forgiveness, such truthfulness that could only be possible if Jesus has saved us. We should be a context that demands an explanation, a living mystery that invites scrutiny. We should be a people coming out of exile, out of the exile of sin, of oppression, of estrangement, of fear, of suffering, of death. We should be a people helping to bring others out of exile, of despair, of loneliness, of regret, of humiliation. We should be a people who speak of the God who made himself known to us in exile, the God who went into exile for us, and the God who brought us home. We should be a context that demands an explanation. The explanation is Jesus.

In the gospels the context of Jesus' story is the disciples, the poor, and the authorities, who together make up Israel. For much of the last 2000 years, Jesus' identity and story has been presented as if it needed no context, and thus the Church has been invisible. But today, it is we who are called to be the context of Jesus' story. We are some kind of mixture of the disciples, the poor and the authorities. We must ensure that salvation in Christ is never just a theory. It's a reality. It has to be seen in context. And it could just be that that context, at the moment, doesn't just mean the Jews. It means us.