

Images of Salvation

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Christianity is a religion of salvation. This chapter will explore what that might mean for us to today by exploring what salvation meant for generations of Christians through the images that they used to describe their experience.

The language that Christians have used to explore and understand their experience of salvation is rich and multifaceted. This is because no single theory is able to capture the fullness and richness of the offer of salvation experienced in Jesus Christ. Just as no single image is able to capture the fullness of who and what God is, so no single image is able to capture the fullness of what God offers us in Christ. This is because ultimately salvation is nothing less than participation in the very life of God. Consequently, salvation entails a lot more than simply a change in one's status, like a ticket that enables one to hop on the boat, or one's name on the list at the door of some cosmic nightclub. Salvation entails a change in one's being.

The root of the word salvation means health, reflecting the experience of the change from illness to health. But the sort of health that Christ brought was not only a health of the body, but emotional, mental and spiritual health as well. The experience of healing in one way or another was central to the way in which people experienced Jesus, both in his life and ministry, but especially in his resurrection. Christians felt that they were rescued from their inner brokenness and their isolation from each other. This experience was reflected in their use of such words as reconciliation and at-one-ment to describe the experience. Salvation was experienced as liberation or freedom from all that gets in the way of the fullness of life that God wants for us, from our obsessions and addictions and the circle of violence and despair that have been so much a part of human history. Because people often felt that they were unable to do what they knew was best for them, it seemed natural to describe such a state in terms of slavery and the experience of being freed from the negativity of their lives in terms of redemption and ransom.

Central to the experience of salvation was the encounter with Jesus. It was for this reason that the first generations of Christians considered that salvation depended much more upon who Jesus was than it did upon what he did, although the nature and identity of Jesus was revealed in what he did. Similarly, we are not saved by what we do, but by our relationship with him in whom salvation is to be found. This is what it means to say that we are saved through faith. Faith is not so much an intellectual assent to a set of truths as it is a relationship of trust. To have faith in someone is not to believe in their titles, however appropriate those titles might be, but to believe in the person and entrust oneself to their care.

This salvation was experienced by people in Jesus' earthly ministry. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus announced its character – his mission statement as it were - by reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to the blind new sight,
to set the down-trodden free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favour. (Lk 4:18-19)

These are all images of salvation, but no single image can exhaust the fullness of the salvation that is offered.

The excitement and expectation that Jesus and his ministry raised were dashed by his untimely death. But the death of Jesus was not the end of the story. It is in the Resurrection of Jesus that the fullness of salvation brought by Jesus was revealed. It was in the encounter with the Risen Christ, and the transformation of those who experienced him, that the full import of what God had done for us in Jesus began to be realised. Those who met the Risen Christ experienced the sort of forgiveness and reconciliation, peace and wholeness that only God can offer. This new appreciation of who Jesus was and the salvation he brought helped them to begin to make sense of their previous experiences. In Jesus' life and ministry they had experienced the reign of God, but now this experience was raised to a new unprecedented level.

How were the first Christians to make sense of something so wonderful and unexpected? The first Christians then looked back on Jesus' life with the hindsight of new Easter eyes. They interpreted the experience of salvation according to the cultural and historical expectations that they inherited and reread the Hebrew scriptures in the light of that experience.

One of the first problems that they encountered was the death of Jesus; how were they to make sense of it? Since Jesus' death marks the transition from the glimpses of salvation offered in Jesus' ministry to the new plenitude of salvation revealed in the Resurrection, Jesus' death, then, must also have been salvific in some way. And so, Jesus' death was interpreted as a sacrifice, albeit a sacrifice that surpassed all others to the extent that it put an end to the need for sacrifice. In a sense, Jesus' sacrifice was an anti-sacrifice. This may sound complicated and convoluted. It is. The point is that the first Christians, in trying to make sense of their experience, had to make the old familiar images do new things.¹

The process by which Christians came to interpret and understand the identity and mission of Jesus will be discussed in later chapters. In the rest of this chapter, we will

¹ For discussions of some of the ways in which Christianity has transformed sacrifice see Robert J. Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), David Power, "Words that Crack: The Uses of 'Sacrifice' in Eucharistic Discourse", *Worship* 53 (1979) 386 – 404, and especially the work of René Girard of which *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2001) is a good introduction.

explore a few of the major models that the Christian tradition offers for helping to understand and make sense of the Christian experience of salvation.

Models for Understanding Salvation

The Church was careful not to make any dogmatic statements about the precise manner by which our salvation was achieved. The Nicene Creed simply states that “for our salvation . . . he became incarnate”. The debates of the early centuries, rather, focused upon the person of Jesus. It was perceived to be of vital importance for our salvation that Jesus be both fully human and fully divine. As St Athanasius, the great defender of the Council of Nicaea, expressed: “the Son of God became human so that we might become God”² Our salvation is *in* Jesus Christ. Salvation depends upon who Jesus is. Most models and theologies of salvation take this axiom as their starting point in one way or another.

There are many distinct models for understanding salvation. John McIntyre in his book, *The Shape of Soteriology*, lists thirteen³ and, even then, his list is incomplete. Rather than give an exhaustive list, we will consider just a few models that might be considered representative of the variety of approaches.

Atonement and Satisfaction

I will begin my exploration of some of the major attempts to make sense of the Christian experience of salvation by looking at what is probably the best-known and most influential model. There are many models of salvation, but the idea that Christ has somehow put us right with God through his atoning death on the Cross finds its classic expression in the theology of St Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century and his model of salvation as “satisfaction”. The eleventh century may seem like a strange place to start, but Anselm’s model has been so influential that it is often very difficult to read other expressions of atonement theology without reading Anselm’s theology into them.

Anselm’s theory of satisfaction begins with the central Christian insight that our salvation is founded upon the identity and nature of Jesus Christ as being both fully human and fully divine. Anselm understands that Jesus in his person and nature bridges the gap between God and humanity. But this raises the question for Anselm as to why it was necessary for such a gap to be bridged.

To appreciate the sort of questions that Anselm was asking and the sort of reasons he employed, it is helpful to consider that Anselm’s approach to these issues was shaped by his own understanding and experience of the world. Anselm lived in a feudal society in which the entire social order depended upon everyone knowing one’s place and the very specific rules for interacting with other people according to their station in life. The basic

² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.3.

³ The Thirteen models that John McIntyre lists are: 1) ransom; 2) redemption; 3) salvation; 4) sacrifice; 5) propitiation; 6) expiation; 7) atonement; 8) reconciliation; 9) victory; 10) punishment; 11) satisfaction; 12) example; 13) liberation. *The shape of soteriology : studies in the doctrine of the death of Christ*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992).

premise of feudal society is that social order and hierarchy are fundamental to the ordering of creation. To deviate from the proper order of things is to court chaos and anarchy. Anselm was not aware that this was a particular view of world that arose out of a particular place and time. Rather, this way of doing things was simply taken for granted, like the air that one breathes, and Anselm, like his contemporaries, thought that the laws governing the feudal society in which they lived were the pattern for every society at every time. The king could not mix with the commoner because to do so would be to neglect his responsibilities as king. That God should become a human being was then the most extraordinary state of affairs. It must have been an action that God could only have taken as a last resort.

Anselm begins his argument by asking what problem was created by the fall of Adam and Eve. God could not simply forgive them, Anselm argues, because God's own "honour" was diminished by what they had done. God, being aware of his responsibilities as the upholder of the moral order of the universe, could not simply ignore the debt. Adam had not only sinned against God, but in sinning had transgressed the eternal social order. Something had to be done to make things right again, to restore right order.

Anselm argued that God could not have intervened himself, because God was not the debtor, and it would hardly make any sense to pay oneself a debt owed by someone else. Similarly, God could not have used an angel, because the angel would not be the debtor either. Only a human being could discharge the debt incurred by a human being. But the difficulty there was that, although human beings were certainly debtors, because they were now tainted with original sin, they were simply not able to do what was required. Logically, the only possibility was for a being who was both God and a human being to do what was needed, for only he both owed the debt and was capable of discharging the obligation required to pay it back. The incarnate Christ, then, was the only solution.

According to this view, the incarnation was a response to the fall such that if humanity had not fallen into sin then there would have been no reason for God to have become human. Anselm's understanding of salvation, in line with his presupposition of a static worldview, involves simply the restoration of a pre-existing and pre-ordained order. There is no organic growth or development in Anselm's theory, but simply a return to the proper order of things. Although Anselm does emphasise the role and extravagance of divine love within a feudal worldview, many people today have difficulty accepting the worldview in which this logic operates.

One could try to upgrade the analogy. One might imagine a contemporary scenario in which the world was akin to the product of a sophisticated computer program, as in the film *The Matrix*. Adam's sin could be seen to create a basic instability in the system, a computer virus that threatened to bring down the whole system and which could only be cured by the designer himself entering the system or at least intervening in some way. As attractive and illustrative as such an analogy might be, it has significant limitations. It assumes, for a start, a particular idea of God as being little more than some grand watchmaker who, as long as things are working like clockwork, is content to step back and have little to do with the world. The death of Christ becomes little more than a drop

of oil – or redeeming blood - in the right place. It does explain the incarnation as a logical necessity, but it does not do full justice to the extent of God’s involvement with the world.

Salvation History

There is another view that goes back to the New Testament, also elaborated upon by later Christian writers, that is in many ways more consistent with our contemporary understanding of the universe as organic and evolving. This model sees the creation of the world, the incarnation of Christ, and redemption through Christ, as part of a single movement of God’s grace. The very first act of salvation, according to this view, is creation itself. Because God did not simply create the world to exist apart from God, but from the very beginning intended that the world should share in God’s own life, the creation of the world is God’s first saving act. Out of this view it follows that, even if Adam had not sinned, God would still have entered the world by becoming incarnate, because it was always God’s intention to share God’s own divine life with us. God is not some detached architect but passionately concerned and involved with every sparrow and with every hair on your head.

Just as the creation of the world, as the prologue to John’s Gospel explains, took place through the Word of God, the incarnation of the Word of God flows and follows on from the act of creation. God cares so passionately about the world that God enters into the world itself and inaugurates the process whereby creation is exalted and enabled to share in the fullness of the divine life. That our redemption also entails our divinisation and participation in divine life was an idea common to many of the church fathers.

This model finds its clearest expression and development in the second century in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, Christianity’s first great post-apostolic theologian:

When [Christ] was incarnate and became a human being, he recapitulated in himself the long history of the human race, obtaining salvation for us, so that we might regain in Jesus Christ what we had lost in Adam, that is, being in the image and likeness of God.⁴

This model is consistent with the idea of God working throughout the whole of salvation history, from Adam and Noah, Abraham and Moses, and the entire history of Israel. The coming of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, is simply the climax of God’s saving action in the world. The whole of salvation history is summed up and brought to completion in Jesus. This idea has sometimes been called recapitulation in that Jesus reiterates, repeats with a new clarity, and completes all that God has been doing for us all along.

The idea of recapitulation has its biblical foundation in the letters of St Paul which describe Christ as the new Adam: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (Rom 5; 1 Cor 15:22). Christ is the head of the new creation who summarises or recapitulates in himself the whole of creation. His coming is the fullness

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.1. Adapted from Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*. Vol. 1. Westminster, MD.: The Newman Press, 1950, 296.

of time (Gal 4:4), the climax of human history. The central text for this approach is Ephesians 1:10, which speaks of God's plan to sum up all things in Christ. In the theology of the church fathers, the incarnation is the beginning and foundation of our salvation, but the resurrection is also crucial, as it is as "firstborn of the dead" (Col 1:18) that Christ restores the human race to existence in the image and likeness of God that had been lost in Adam.

There are two aspects to recapitulation. The first aspect involves the restoration of what was lost, but it progresses beyond the idea of simple restitution towards the idea that redemption is none other than the fulfilment of the plan of creation itself. Irenaeus believed that Adam's sin was due to immaturity rather than any sort of evil intent. In making this claim, he draws upon Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 3:2, "I have fed you with milk and not solid food, for you were not able to take it". This is a view that, I feel, is much more in keeping with an evolutionary universe. God did not create us fully grown, but nurtures and nourishes us, as a mother nurtures her child. The growth and development of humanity, nourished by the Spirit and fulfilled in the Son, is a growth towards a sharing in the fullness of God's own life in which we become more and more like God.

But as attractive an idea as this is, like any model, it has its limitations. One objection is that the model of recapitulation runs the risk of making redemption seem like an automatic and inevitable process that neglects the role of freedom, both human and divine. For this reason the model of recapitulation has sometimes been supplemented by the idea of the divine education of the human race through Christ. Peter Abelard elaborated this model in the early 12th century. Abelard argued that Christ died, not out of any necessity, but in order to reveal the profound depths of God's love for humanity. It was the attitudes of men and women, their fear and ignorance that keep them from God. According to Abelard's model, the death of Christ provides more than just a moral example. It has a transforming influence that shifts the perspective of humanity, leading us to trust and repentance, although it is hard to see how Jesus' example differs substantially from the inspiring example of any other "great soul". The inspiration that Christ offers is not simply so that we might be like him but rather that we be transformed in and through him.

A Sacramental View of Salvation

That salvation is found in Christ finds its clearest expression in the Christian liturgy and sacraments. In the sacraments our salvation is presented not only as an event in the past, but as a saving mystery made present that orients us towards the future. St Paul explains that in our baptism we are baptised into Christ.

So by our baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life. If we have been joined to him by dying a death like his, so we shall by a resurrection like his; realising that our former self was crucified with him. . . . But we believe that if we died with Christ we shall live with him too. (Rom 6: 4-10)

The passion and resurrection of Christ constitute a whole that is often designated by the term “paschal mystery” which is a way of symbolising those events that lie at the heart of the Christian experience of salvation. While focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus the term connects these events with the whole of salvation history of which they are the climax. The term is derived from the Hebrew word *pesach*, which refers to Israel’s annual commemoration of the first Passover where Israel was liberated from slavery in Egypt. It becomes, then, a fitting image for Jesus’ own Passover from death into the fullness of divine life in which we participate sacramentally.

One of the richest understandings of salvation within the Christian tradition and which lies at the heart of the sacramental system is the idea that salvation entails our divinisation. If salvation consists in sharing in God’s own life, then our sanctification will entail becoming more like God, and more like Christ who is the image of God in human form. We are especially nourished in this process when we celebrate the Eucharist.

When we celebrate the Eucharist we participate in the paschal mystery and make it present in our lives. The Eucharist presents us with our most powerful image of salvation in that in the Eucharist a plurality of images is maintained. In the first document to come out of the Second Vatican Council, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the Eucharist is described as both a sacrifice and “a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us”.⁵ It can be seen then that the Eucharist does not merely commemorate the saving actions of Christ in the past, but also makes the saving mystery present and gives a glimpse of what things will be like when the reign of God is fully realised and our salvation fully achieved. The central image here is that of the paschal banquet. It is “paschal” because it is the culmination and fulfillment of the entire sweep of salvation history. It is a banquet because the banquet is probably the richest image that we have of celebration, fellowship and the fullness of life that is salvation.⁶

Sacramental images have the advantage of returning us to the expression of the earliest experiences of salvation by the Church. But ultimately, no single image or model is able to do justice to the richness of the Christian experience and promise of salvation. We can see this in the rich variety of symbols used in the New Testament to attempt to describe what our ultimate salvation will be like. It is described as a banquet (Lk 14:15-24); a wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14; 25:1-13); the new Jerusalem “prepared as a bride dressed for her husband” (Rev 21:2.); or as the beatific vision as a face to face encounter in which “I shall know just as fully as I am myself known”. (1 Cor 13:12). None of these images exhausts the content of Christian hope but, if one were to identify one common denominator, it is that each of these images is profoundly relational. The Christian view of salvation is both profoundly personal and communal.

Many problems that we might have with particular models of salvation often arise when we view salvation in too individualistic a manner. Take, for example, the idea of original sin. Considered in too individualistic a manner we might end up with the abhorrent image

⁵ SC 47.

⁶ Cf. Jn 10:10: “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full”.

of an innocent baby cut off from the grace of God. But if we were to consider the idea of original sin as a way of expressing the communal reality of sin; that the sin of one effects the whole community; that children are born into a world of broken relationships that need healing; then the idea of original sin makes a lot of sense.

Salvation is not then an individualistic affair. Neither is the Christian understanding of salvation that of an exclusive club on the only lifeboat to escape from a sinking world. To seek to get on that lifeboat and escape is to run away from our responsibility as Christians. If salvation is in Christ, and we are the Body of Christ for the world, then Christians also have a role to play in the salvation of that world. The salvation offered in Christ is supposed to be the salvation of the world, not salvation from the world.

St Paul links both our adoption as children of God with the salvation of the whole world. We are an Easter people, reborn in Christ who is the first-born of the new creation. In the resurrection, the transformation of the world has begun. St Paul tells us that the whole of creation is to be “freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God” (Rom 8:21). All this suggests that the salvation offered to us by God in Christ is too magnificent to be captured by any single image. Ultimately, it must include the whole world.

Further Reading

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