

Trinity Year B 2012

“What has come into being in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all humankind.”

At the behest of a person who recently commented on my blog, actually she was posing several questions, chiefly: what do we Episcopalians believe about salvation (of course the short answer to that is: that depends on which Episcopalian you're talking to)? So I have written over the past few weeks several essays on Salvation, and relatively speaking the series has evoked quite a response from out there in the blogosphere, many more than I normally get...I apparently touched a nerve...I even got a response from a Presbyterian pastor in Waxhaw North Carolina, who in so many words called me, among other things, a heretic....but I figured so was Jesus called as much by the high priests, and so was Athanasius, the great Alexandrian apologist, and so was Augustine, and so was Anselm, and so was Thomas Aquinas....so I figured I was in good company....In the course of church history heresies have a way of becoming orthodoxy...and then some orthodoxies become heresy. It has forever been thus....such is the ever emerging life of faith as we travel on this imaginative way...this way of discovery... incorporating new knowledge that comes to us challenging us to continually interpret and reinterpret scripture so that it continues to speak to us with authority, meaning, and relevancy.

Salvation is a term in our culture that has gathered quite a lot of baggage over the years, a word that to an extent reflects our modern Western hyper-individualistic, hyper consuming culture. Salvation is spoken of as personal, as a possession, as a commodity, as it were....something we possess if we rightly believe (whatever believing rightly means), and therefore we are assured of life after death...believe in Jesus and one's soul is assured of a life of bliss after this life of travail...that of course is an oversimplification, but fairly consistent among western Christians...and further salvation is but for a select few....those who don't believe rightly (again, whatever that is) are doomed....Augustine argued as much, and so did Calvin centuries later...that God has basically already chosen those destined for heaven...and the rest are cast off as ballast....so there is theological argument out there for an exclusionary, intensely personal concept of salvation...but I would argue that scripture warrants otherwise.

So today I want to talk about salvation, a word actually used quite infrequently in Hebrew and new testament scripture by the way....I want to talk about salvation that is implicit in the context of scripture...and today

being the feast of the Trinity, I'm going to talk about salvation as it relates to the theological doctrine of the Trinity...I can see my homiletics professor rolling his eyes and saying...NO, don't do it! (and maybe some of you as well) the old seminary joke, that if you preach on the Trinity you are bound to commit heresy... but I've already committed heresy according to brother Rolison, so what the heck... And I'm sure my new friend in Waxhaw N.C., if he were hearing this would become apoplectic.

So I want to begin by saying that salvation is not something we possess, rather it is something we give away, something we bear to the world; and most importantly salvation is for all; salvation is universal, (my friend in Waxhaw by the way called me a universalist also, and he is right, but he didn't mean it as a compliment) Salvation is not just for some, but for all... else we worship a lesser God... This is warranted in both Hebrew and New Testament scripture. As early as Genesis in the twelfth chapter, God in making his covenant with Abraham, tells him about the enterprise of Abraham's progeny becoming a great nation...in fact God says many great nations...but most emphatically that this enterprise is for the good of the world...Quoting God here according to the scribes of Genesis, "I will bless you, and make your name great...so that you will be a blessing....and through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Paul picks up on this theme, Paul the consummate universalist...In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free...in Christ all are made alive, he says...and by "in Christ" he means following the way of Christ, as he poetically describes it in Philippians: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise take account of these things. Keep on doing these things that you have learned and received and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." So salvation is about doing...and it is in our doing salvation that we find unshakeable belief.

In our reading for today in John's gospel we are told that all who believe (the word also means trust) all that trust in the way of the Christ will have eternal life and that that life is not exiled into the hereafter, but that life is for now...John is clear about that...as are the other gospel writers...that salvation is for now and is for all, salvation breaking into our world as we speak, a world besieged by the powers and principalities of evil... Throughout Hebrew scripture and the New testament literature, there are countless synonyms for salvation: well-being, dignity, agency, empowerment, peace of mind, nonviolence, justice...that is why the gospels in speaking of the coming of God's reign, i.e. a world in which those things I

just named hold sway....that is why the gospels have such a socio-economic and political edge...salvation has everything to do with how we live together as God would have it, in a world that is just and fair and egalitarian...in which all by right have well being and dignity, and the power to change their world for the better...so salvation is communal much more so than it is personal....So the world's salvation implies us, depends upon us, children of the faith....we a community of world changers....the gospels therefore belong in the public domain...so faith is not a private matter, but the people of God engaging their world.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus gives us the secret of salvation, the mere secret of bringing about God's reign: We must be born anew, he says....We must enter our second life....All cultures around the world have rites of initiation: marking the transition when one ceases to live for oneself only and then lives for the good of the whole (it's a primitive archetype from our tribal roots: the child must survive, and then upon survival, must help others to survive)...Baptism is our rite...symbolizing our death to self...and rising to new life, a new life of laying down one's life for the greater good, which will quite literally change the world for the better. We claim such a second life for our children at their baptisms...and when baptized as an adult we claim it for ourselves... we die to self and join the household of God, a household in which there are many rooms, we are told in this gospel....room enough for all, well being for all....Salvation, is a process, not a possession, but a lifelong process of bearing God's gracious reign to the world, a life long vocation of raising up the least among us....and this process takes imagination and courage and intelligence and humility...It takes all we've got.

I want to suggest to you that the concept of Trinity is process as well... we speak of the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one and the same...three persons, one God in perfect unity....but that's a very Greek way of theologizing about God....God captured in a neat and clean formula that nobody really understands or necessarily agrees upon, God a marvelous three in one "thing"....What a fight worth seeing back in the fourth and fifth centuries when the early fathers gathered to hammer out this doctrine....but again I want to say that perhaps Trinity makes more sense as *process*...God as process....God, process and relationship....God who creates, the Son who redeems and restores, and the Spirit that sustains and sanctifies....that's a doing Trinity....and it is what our second lives are all about. We are process as well, ever changing, ever growing, ever discovering....We are told in this gospel that the light of God, the life of God, is the light of humankind....so we are to be about creating the world,

creating the world that is good as God calls it good; and we are to redeem and restore those who are left out and lost; and by the power of God's very breath within us we are to sustain and make holy that which is being made and that which is being restored....Trinity is the process of creation, and its continual restoration, and its sustainability....an organic process which is God's very life becoming in earth, one life, one light....and we dear people of God are as much a part of the Trinity as God Godself....In our baptisms we are raised, dare I say, into the Godhead.... And we are blessed to be a part...as our father Abraham was blessed to be a part....so that all families the world over would be blessed...that is our meaning in life; how and why we are made... that we are life and light.... We a glorious process of blessing....May this beautiful process of salvation come to be again and again and again... and right soon O God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer... and right soon.