

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday 15th March

3. *Prayer for Salvation* Psalms 4 & 134; Chapter 3: Now the God of Peace; Collects: 1,3,5

In our Lent Compline this week it seems particularly appropriate, given all we hear about the coronavirus problem, that we think about prayers to God to save; prayers for salvation. This is, of course, closely related to what we considered last week - prayers for God to show his power. Power can be used to save and, last week, I suggested that Elijah's prayer to God, when confronting the 450 priests of Baal, to show his power by sending down fire from heaven on the sacrificed bullock, was not just for power, but also a prayer for his own salvation because he could foresee that, if it failed, he would be joining the ranks of the other prophets slaughtered by Jezebel.

The psalms, which often take the form of prayers, have many cries for salvation. Psalm 60 starts "O God, you have cast us off and broken us; you have been angry and rebuked us cruelly", but then goes on "Deliver those who are dear to you, save them with your right hand and answer", and psalm 86 has "Turn to me Lord, and answer; save your servant who puts his trust in you". Psalm 22, that we say together after the Maundy Service because in some verses it presages the crucifixion, is one long cry for salvation "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And why are thou so far from my help? O my God I cry in the daytime but thou hearest not" and carries on in this vein for many more verses till in vs 19-21 "Haste thee to help me; deliver my soul from the sword; save me from the lion's mouth". Interestingly, the very next Psalm (23) could not be more different, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want .." Salvation, God intervening to save His people, is a concept that recurs time and again in the Psalms, but it is very much being saved in and for this earthly life: "Be thou our salvation in times of trouble". Proverbs 20 link an instruction and a promise "Do not think to repay evil for evil, but wait for the Lord, he will save you". Jeremiah, not a prophet known for his up-beat view on life, nevertheless has complete confidence in God's power both to heal and to save "Heal me O Lord and I shall be healed; save me and I shall be saved" - again the link between power and salvation, salvation in and for our present life.

Let's think for a moment what humans need to be saved from. Certainly, from all the problems originating from our environment including disease, and from other people who would harm us. This is essentially what all the prayers for saving/salvation in the old testament are for. They ask for a continuation of this life in health, comfort and prosperity. What really does not get much mention in the old testament is prayer to save us from our sins, or from the separation from God that could come at the time of our death. We have known Christ through faith in this worldly life - the last thing we want - the thing we most want to be saved from - is separation from the love of God in Christ after our death. And what, if anything, can separate us from the ongoing love of Christ? It is surely the sins that we commit and indulge in during our earthly life.

My reading suggests that is not really till we get to the New Testament that we encounter the concept that salvation is not primarily for this worldly life (though there are examples) but much more it is salvation from our sins and salvation to eternal life.

To be sure, we obviously wish to cling on to life as we know it in this world; that desire is ever present and it would be surprising if it were not, because it is the only life we truly comprehend. So, in that storm-rocked boat on the sea of Galilee, the disciples ask Jesus to save themselves from drowning; and on the cross one thief crucified alongside Jesus says "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us". In both, it is saving for this life and a rather simple bodily saving at that.

However, from very early in the New Testament, the emphasis changes. When the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream telling him not to be afraid to marry Mary and tells her to call her son Jesus, the angel says "for he will save his people from their sins" - saving from our sins is what is promised. And it is Simeon - when presented with the infant Jesus in the temple as was customary - who exclaims "My eyes have now seen God's salvation." In Luke, Jesus declares his mission of salvation and it is interesting to note the context. It comes after the encounter with Zacchaeus the tax-collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus, then entertained him to dinner (much to the disapproval of the righteous bystanders "Look, he's eating with a

sinner!"). During dinner, when Zacchaeus had repented his tax fiddles and promised to right any wrongs had had done, he is told by Jesus "Today salvation has come to this house. The Son of Man has come to seek and save that which is lost". And there is that similar phrase "I came to call, not the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (and by implication to salvation).

Again and again it is not Jesus' power, but the power of God to save that Jesus emphasizes. You'll remember him saying, "I tell you this, a man who puts his trust in riches will find it hard to enter the Kingdom of Heaven" at which the disciples are amazed and say "But who then can be saved" and all three synoptic Gospels record Jesus' answer "For men it is impossible, but all things are possible for God". Jesus firmly places the power of salvation in God's hands.

A few moments ago we thought about how one of the two thieves crucified beside Christ asked him to save them both from dying. Luke's gospel immediately contrasts this with the repentant thief who acknowledges the wrong that he has done and is told by Jesus not "I'll get us both down from the cross", but rather "Today you will be with me in paradise." Salvation for the life to come.

"What must I do to be saved?" was a question often asked of Jesus. You'll remember the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to win eternal life - so he wasn't just thinking about being saved for this earthly life. This was a young man who, from his answers, had been following all the commandments, but he wasn't prepared to give up the riches he had acquired and follow Jesus; that was the sin he wasn't prepared to forego.

The word "salvation" occurs repeatedly in the letters of Paul and of the other epistle writers. Paul constantly stresses that salvation comes from faith in and public confession of the resurrection of Jesus. And this he stresses is urgent "It is time to wake out of sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed."

Classical Judaism does not see a need for personal salvation; instead it places primacy on individual morality - following the law of God, and God as the source of salvation, provided an individual obeys the law. The Jewish concept of a messiah was not of a divine figure but of a dominating human figure in an age of universal peace.

By contrast, the Christian concept of salvation, which has continually been elaborated since the writings of Paul, is intimately linked with that of redemption and atonement for sin, and is particularly linked with Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice for sin on the cross. Salvation, then is something that should be ongoing in our lives, to be completed only when we stand before Christ for judgement. Variant views on salvation continue to divide the various Christian denominations, but the Christian essence is that salvation is not preservation for this life, but deliverance from eternal separation from God thanks to Christ's atoning death and resurrection.

As we noted last week, inevitably we shall encounter times of great stress when we will pray "O God, save me from this that or the other", meaning "Let me continue with the life I know". Last week, also, I ended by suggesting that our prayers for God's power should primarily be for it to benefit others. By contrast, our prayers for salvation will have a very personal emphasis. "God, save me from the sins that I commit in this life because of selfishness, thoughtlessness, or simple laziness, so that, by your mercy and grace alone, I may finally abide in your eternal presence".

It is therefore entirely appropriate that our compline will start with confession and, toward its end we shall twice pray "Save us O Lord while waking, and guard us while sleeping ..". As we say those words tonight, let us give grateful thanks for the knowledge and love of Christ that is our hope of salvation.