

"Who wants to be saved?"

A few days ago I found myself humming the tune to the song, "Who wants to be a millionaire?" The song had its first life in the 1956 movie "High Society", which was a bit before my time; I came to know it through an advertising campaign for Lindemans wines when I was a child. In the campaign people (who seemed to look pretty much like they *were* millionaires!) sat about in glorious settings drinking, of course, Lindemans' wines, and they answered the song's question with its own answer: "I don't, 'cause all I want is you" – "you" now apparently being a good wine. What makes the song's question an interesting one is that it would seem that the answer is obvious – and yet denied. Does not everyone "want to be a millionaire"? This, at least, would seem to be the reason for the success of the game show which has taken the line as its title, as people line up for the chance of becoming an "instant" millionaire – even if that's now not quite what it was in 1979, or 1956.

On first reading today's text from Isaiah, I was struck by a similar question: Who wants to be *saved*? Try that question "on" for a moment, shifting the emphasis around a bit if it helps: Who *wants* to be saved? Who wants to be *saved*? *Who* wants to be saved? It's a question which is interesting in the same way as the millionaire question, in that the church, at least, has long assumed that the answer is "everyone". And, yet, we could well imagine an atheistic advertising campaign which portrayed happy people sitting about in glorious settings, doing anything *except* going to church and singing "Who wants to be saved?" and answering, "I don't, 'cause all I want is you" – whatever "you" now designates!¹

Who wants to be saved? This is an important question which we ignore at the peril of distorting the gospel and the God to which it points. If the church answers this question with "everyone", it not only refuses to take seriously that many people *don't* want to be saved; it also is doing something different from what Isaiah is doing in his poem. Isaiah certainly celebrates salvation, but he doesn't propose a *theory* of a need to be saved; he speaks rather of *his own* salvation: "Surely God is my salvation", although the

emphasis properly falls on "God" here, and not on "my."²

Our reading from Isaiah this morning is rather an "up beat" passage, and yet it comes at the end of a long series of accusations and warnings and threats from God towards Israel. Things have not gone well with the covenant among God's people, and the time of reckoning approaches. And yet, Isaiah believes that there is an order or a reason to all which is about to come upon Israel. As disastrous as it will be, it is understood as the work of the God who *loves* Israel, and not of a capricious deity who now determines to rain down havoc after a long period of earlier benevolence and patience. And so, when Isaiah speaks of salvation, it is neither a theoretical thing, nor an *unexpected* thing; this is what is to be expected of this God, even if we have been harshly dealt with in his hands. Thus, God says to Isaiah, My anger will be turned away, and you will be comforted (cf. v.1), "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD..." (v.3). This promise is had in the midst of the warnings and the dire predictions which Isaiah is also given to utter. If the question were asked here, "Who wants to be saved", the answer would be unequivocal, "We do".

Last week I spoke about the song of Zechariah as "the song of a soul set free". We noted how it is something of a strange song to us, for it seems to spring from deep experiences of sadness and of great joy which are usually quite outside of our own experience. It is hard to sing such a song of a soul set free as our *own*, for it is still someone else's. But its strangeness stands as a provocation, an invitation, a proposal of a difference set of experiences, both high and low, and Isaiah does the same.

We don't use the language of salvation much these days, at least public discourse. There are, of course, many things which we consider to be threats: Global warming is one such thing, as is the greed of individuals and institutions which can lead to the kind of financial disaster we've seen unfold over the last 18 months or so. International terrorism is another threat, as are the geopolitical conflicts which seem to have given rise to modern terrorism and continue to give us the sense of menacing presence not quite far enough away. In addition to these social and political concerns, there are also those of our

¹ Perhaps the really interesting question is whether such an advertising campaign could be a Christian one, rather than one by the Atheist Society.

² As suggested by verse 1 of chapter 12.

own lives – health, relationships, money and employment and so on.

But the important thing is that, at the public level, our solutions to (or salvation from) these threats and experiences is not for us a thing come from God. And so, to the extent that global warming is affected by human activity, we expect that it will be our activity which will moderate its effects. Our response to the financial meltdown is greater regulation, and terrorism is met with more penetrating intelligence work. Such responses in policy and regulation are very important; God is not going to take from us our freedom to act or our responsibility for action in response to what seems to threaten us.

But the important point is that we tend to imagine that what ails us is a question of the *absence* of God or that if God were “more” present then the threats would disappear. God, that is, contrary to Isaiah’s understanding, seems to serve as the solution to our problems, and is here in no sense the *cause* of those problems.

There are two reasons for this kind of thinking: the idea that God is some kind of gap-filler who serves us wherever we can’t serve ourselves, and a pious concern to protect God from criticism. Where God is a gap-filler in our lives, God eventually shrinks as we find other things to plug the holes, other comforts, other understandings. We don’t need to be “saved” in a religious sense if we can see that there is less and less to be saved from, and imagine that eventually we won’t need God at all. Many have already drawn this conclusion in our society today.

But we also have a pious desire not to attribute anything bad to God. If we suffer anything, it seems to the devout that it cannot be from God that the suffering has come, for God it is we turn to for protection, not for attack. Here God is, again, something of a gap-filler – an answer to our problems, and not a problem in himself (except, to follow the logic of gap-filling theology, when we find we no longer have any problems).

But (if you’ve been able to keep up with all of this!) we find ourselves now moving into quite dangerous territory. If God is not merely a solution to our woes, there enters the thought that God might somehow be their *source*. And so Isaiah acknowledges (12.1): for though you were *angry* with me, your anger turned away. As we’ve already noted, most of the first twelve chapters of Isaiah is about the calamity which God is going to bring on the people.

There’s not time this morning to unpack a whole theology of suffering and God’s role in it, but we can simply note that the *particular* suffering Isaiah speaks of is Israel’s humiliation through

the loss of their land, their sovereignty, their temple, and so on. A direct link is drawn between these losses and the people’s actions in failing the covenant, although not quite so hard a “cause-and-effect” link as it might first seem to be. God’s hand is not *forced* by the people’s sin; God remains free to act or not, to punish or to be patient. God is understood, rather, as the *content* or the *meaning* of what happened to Israel. These otherwise “secular” events are filled with religious and moral *significance*. It is as if Isaiah says to the people, “Let the fall of Israel be for you a sign of what it means to break the covenant with God.” And so he also says, “Let the promised restoration be for you a sign of God’s enduring care.”

To be saved is not simply to be rescued from a faceless, meaningless mire. It is to learn to see a face and a meaning in that mire. To pick up from last week, to be saved is to learn to see what had held us captive. It is not simply to be freed from something which has held us in thrall, but to come to see more clearly just what that captivity was. For much of what holds us captive can in fact seem to us to be good things. How easy it is to interpret good health, or youth, or wealth, or intelligence or beauty as righteousness – *our* righteousness. It is just such blindness which is the reason for the accusations which Isaiah and all of the prophets bring to bear on God’s people: you have not seen that you do not understand God; that is your true illness, and it is that which God treats in all these tribulations.

The glorious thing (v.5) which Isaiah celebrates is not only the promised (or delivered) healing from the effects of invasion and exile but the *gift* of instruction which comes with the suffering; this makes possible a *forgiveness* which is no mere restoration to the old order but the beginning of something totally new.

“Who wants to be saved?” is a question which comes too soon because, at least when it comes to this God; it can only be answered by those who have, indeed been saved. For the rest of us, it is a prompt to reflection upon our lives with their longings and desires, and an invitation to hear that we have not yet seen clearly but need God’s coming light to know who we truly are and what God might make of us.

By God’s grace, may that invitation be met in us with longing prayer and eager anticipation, that we might all discover that great, indeed, is the Holy One of Israel among us, who has done gloriously, and will do so again. Amen.