

Acts 4.12 *There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*"

This is a declaration which has caused much anxiety in the church, and much irritation outside it. It seems to be about as exclusive a statement of what it means to be "saved" as could be made: only here, in the name of this one person (among all persons of history), is salvation to be had. The church has had a traditional declaration which seems to declare much the same thing: "outside the church there is no salvation"¹ Sit with it for a while, and assess your own response to what is being declared: outside the church, there is no salvation; there is no other name given by which you must be saved except "Jesus". For those whose response to these teachings is negative – whether outright rejection or simply uncertainty, there is a range of reasons as to why we want to discard these declarations, or at least soften them. For Christians sensitive to the good things which might be recognised in non-believers or in other followers of other religions there is the sense of an injustice or unfairness here. Perhaps, pastorally, we fear for those dear to us who do not declare the faith – are they really not "saved" (whatever that means)? For non-Christian religious people there is an extraordinary scandal here – why this one religion and not any other, particularly given some of Christianity's history? For so-called atheists or agnostics, the problem is likely to be the suggestion that there is a need or a possibility of salvation at all, or the fact that so much damage has been done on account of the kind of religious triumphalism which a text like this can produce: "because we know the truth, we can [or even must] impose it upon you".

Although each of the objectors in these groups will object for different reasons, what each has in common is a concern about the exclusivism implicit in this announcement: only those who actually come into contact with the name "Jesus", and then have believed on it – only these may receive "salvation". (We should note in passing that in our rejection of the name of Jesus as the only means of salvation we also assume that we know what salvation actually is – something we'll return to in a moment).

If *this is* the Christian faith, then it appears highly exclusivist, and that worries many of us. But if we do reject the name of Jesus as somehow excluding people, at the same time good religious folk imagine that there is some other *inclusive* way in which we might talk about the possibility of salvation. The problem that the name of Jesus presents is that it is not *common* to all people. Historical events – and a name points to historical events – are not common to everyone but only to those who somehow come into contact with how that event continues to affect later history. This is part of the source of our sense of unfairness; how much better it seems to us that, whatever salvation is, everyone has equal access to it. This means, however, how much better it seems to us that salvation not be about any particular historical event. How much better

it seems, then, that salvation really has nothing final to do with any *particular* person, including Jesus.

But we still wonder about salvation. And so, in rejecting salvation as exclusively in the name of a particular person like Jesus, we propose or assume *other* ways in which people might achieve salvation. Perhaps the most common here is one form or other of moral achievement. When we feel moved to say something like "all religions are really about love, and liberal secularists are really about love too", we are actually asserting that salvation is not about what we *know* – the name of Jesus or whatever – but about what we *do*, for while people will always know different things because of their different histories, they all have to act in relation to each other and, we presume, all know what it means to act ethically or lovingly in their own situation. Surely, then, salvation is about being the right kind of person, for everyone has the opportunity to be that.²

Such a line of thinking is very common in and out of the church as we seek to make sense of Peter's preaching – something which, it would seem, is as difficult to believe as the healing of the lame man we heard about last week. But as we shift from making sense of the reading towards considering what sense it might make of us we must notice that in the broader sweep of Peter's preaching in this morning's reading there is a strange irony or contradiction confronting our objection to the weight given here to the name of Jesus. We object to the declaration of Jesus as the way to God on account of the way it seems to exclude so many people, but in fact the Jesus Peter proclaims is *himself*, the *excluded one*.

Recall from last week's reading that Peter has just been the vehicle of the healing of a lame man. The words which come just before our problematic text run like this:

Acts 4.10 ... *let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.* ¹¹ *This Jesus is*

*'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.'*

It is only then that we hear our troublesome line,

¹² *There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."*

¹ "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus".

² Recall the story told five or six weeks ago [March 22, Lent 4B] about the people who moved the fence of the church cemetery to include the grave of the foreigner who had been so good to them.

It is not simply the *name* Jesus which is presented here as the means of salvation. The name refers to a particular history in which the people to whom Peter preaches are implicated: this Jesus “whom you crucified”, “rejected by you”. The reason Jesus is the only means of salvation for those Peter addresses is that he is their victim – their innocent victim, now presented back to them as an offer of forgiveness. Salvation comes only with reconciliation with our victims, and *our* oppressors’ reconciliation with us.

Having seen this in the story, something – perhaps unexpected – happens. While we might be troubled by Peter’s declaration as a verse by itself, and seek to discover some other universally accessible means of salvation (something “fairer”), the full context of the verse suggests that perhaps the thing which we all have in common with each other – if not quite the name Jesus – might be the fact that we all have victims.

This is hardly good news. Like those who rushed up in last week’s reading to see what Peter had done, only to find themselves accused of the death of Jesus, the suggestion that part of what we have in common with each other is that we all have victims is scarcely a comforting thought. Yet comforting or not, it is realistic, should we examine the impact of our way through life on others around us, whether nearby or far away.

Or, we should say, it is realistic with the exception of Jesus himself, whose approach to those around him is characterised by an utter absence of exclusion. There is in his ministry no turning away of any who turn to him in hope. He is, then, different from all other victims, for no other responsible human being is *purely* victim. If we are in some way oppressed, we are also in other ways oppressors, perhaps even in the same relationship. We might imagine as an example a struggling marriage in which, while the one might be stronger than the other, the abuse nevertheless flows both ways.

In such situations and many others besides, we are both victim and oppressor, responsible and innocent. This being our situation, it becomes impossible to unravel everything, as much as our courts might sometimes be called upon to do such a thing. Yet in Jesus there is a different dynamic.

Yet in Jesus there is a different dynamic, for in him there is no rejection of God, or of those who turn to God in hope of healing.

Jesus has no victims, sacrificed that his own needs might be advanced.

It is in this sense that salvation is had only in the name of Jesus, because it is here that the revelation is made – not so much (or only) of the nature of God in himself, but of the nature of God *in relation to us*. Here, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God turned to the people whose lot it was to be the particular damaged human beings who were to confront him to face to face and do only what such people can do – reject him. This rejection has to lead to death, for Jesus will not render violence in defending himself. Jesus’ death upon the cross is the sign of our violence towards ourselves (and God), and of God’s refusal of such violence towards us. But, *just because of this*, when God

returns to his persecutors in the preaching of Peter it is not with condemnation but with forgiveness – for his character remains the same: an openness to receive those who turn to him in hope.

In the cross and in the resurrection condemnation is suffered but condemned, and rejection is received but rejected. Jesus – and God in him – does not do as is done to him, but quite the opposite: “Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they do”. St Paul declares that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8.1), which is so precisely because in his graceful return to his oppressors Jesus condemns condemnation and so can offer only forgiveness.

We cannot ourselves – we here today – be guilty of the death of Jesus, for this could only be an abstracted guilt. But we can learn from the preaching of Peter to those who *were* guilty what it would take for forgiveness truly to be discovered in *our* lives, with our particular guilts and afflictions. Salvation begins with a repenting – a *turning towards* our victim and a receiving of forgiveness. This is what Peter offers the rulers and leaders in Jerusalem. To the extent that this forgiveness is denied – either denied by us when offered, or not yet offered – so too are we *yet* to be saved.

But while we await that salvation, we dare to *hope* that what was begun in Jesus’ unexpected and undeserved offer of forgiveness to his executioners might continue to work in us and in those around us, calling us to see clearly what our situation is, how positively and negatively we are related to each other, and how we might find a way to a new way of being and relating.

It is *that* hope which declares that the name of Jesus alone saves, only because it is in *his* offer of forgiving grace towards the violent powers in Jerusalem that we see what we know we desperately need – a new start which we can’t create for ourselves: “salvation”.

By the grace of God, may the freedom to forgive which we see in Jesus grow in us, that we might prove for ourselves and others that it is from him that true life and healing might be received.³

³ A number of elements of this sermon have been drawn from Rowan Williams’ very helpful study, *Resurrection: interpreting the Easter gospel*, Morehouse, 1994 [1982].