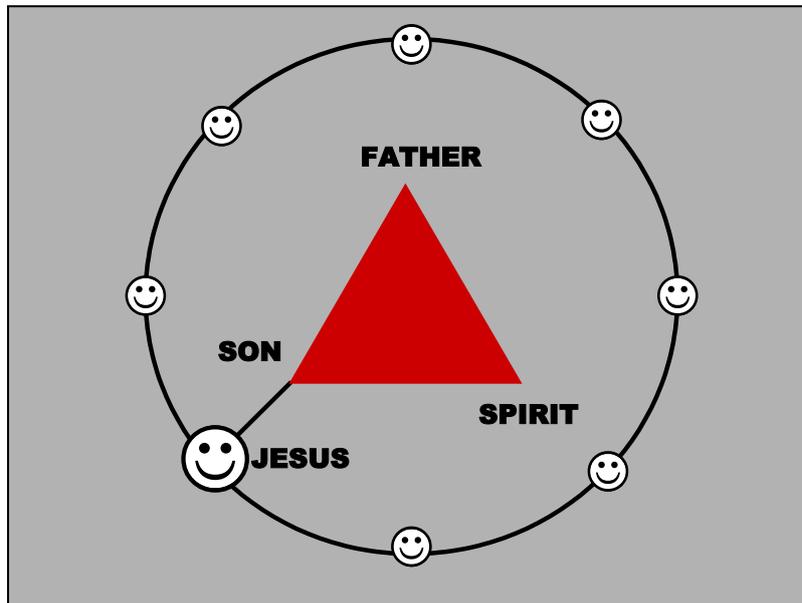


God is a Community

Part 4: Jesus



One of the most commonly voiced Christian assertions is that “Jesus saves!” This week we will look at exactly what Christians mean by this statement and try to answer some of the questions surrounding Jesus and salvation.

What does it mean to be “saved” and what are we “saved” from?

The term “salvation” can refer to both the situation in which we find ourselves after we have been saved and the process by which that situation is achieved. As we have seen already, humanity was created for harmonious relationships with God, self, others and environment. But more than that, we were created for participation in a united Divine/human community of love where we experience such closeness to God that we become one with the Father just as Jesus is (John 17:21).

This situation of unity between the Divine Community (the Trinity) and the human community and our experience thereof, *is* the state of salvation. The way in which these two communities become united is through the Incarnation of Jesus the Son who, being eternally part of the Trinity, also becomes part of humanity. Moreover, we believe that it was always God’s intention to unite the two communities in this way. So we should not think of Jesus’ becoming part of our world as a contingency plan devised by God to deal with sin, but as part of God’s original and eternal purpose.

The *process* of salvation is however not just a simple matter of God’s Word becoming flesh because sin has entered the world and caused enmity (or broken relationships) where harmony should have existed. We saw last week how far-reaching the effects of this enmity are, corrupting individuals, families, entire societies and the global ecology, and ultimately leading to death. Thus when we ask, “What are we saved from?” the answer is: sin and its consequences. The process of salvation overcomes the fractures between God and humanity caused by sin and reconciles us to God, self, others and our world.

Who is Jesus?

From the foregoing it should be clear that in the process of salvation, *who* Jesus is is just as important as what Jesus *does*. Salvation as the union between the Trinity and humanity could not be achieved by just anybody. It was therefore vital for the Church, from the very beginning, to be absolutely clear about its understanding of who Jesus is and during the first five centuries of the Church her Councils spent most of their time answering this question. Given the definition of salvation as the union between the Divine and human communities, it should also be clear that the only way for this to be achieved is if Jesus is himself completely part of both communities. And this is precisely what the Councils and Creeds of the early Church affirmed. In the face of opposition which sought to emphasize either Jesus' divinity or his humanity at the expense of the other, Church orthodoxy declared that Jesus is both fully human and fully Divine¹.

Let's consider some of the implications of this orthodox Christian belief that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

1) Jesus is fully human.

- Jesus experienced all the needs and feelings that we experience such as fatigue (John 4:6), anger (John 2:15-16), need for support (Matt 26:40), distress in the face of suffering (Matt 26:37-39), etc.
- Jesus was tempted just as we are tempted (Heb 2:18, 4:15).
- Jesus experienced human limitations.
 - Firstly, he was not born with perfect knowledge etc, but developed through childhood as all children develop.
 - Secondly, his knowledge was limited by his 1st century, Galilean Jewish context.
 - Thirdly, his knowledge of his own divinity developed during his life.
- Because of these limitations, Jesus also needed to have faith (i.e. to trust his heavenly Father – Heb12:2), to pray (Matt 26:39) and to obey (Phil 2:8-9), as we do.
- Jesus is a true example for us. We cannot hide behind Jesus' divinity to excuse our failure to be like him. Jesus gives us the example of how a human being can be fully one with God in love and obedience.

2) Jesus is fully Divine.

- Jesus is the Word of God, co-eternal with the Father. When we discussed the nature of God in Part 1, we noted that God is and always has been Trinitarian in shape. God didn't suddenly split into three on the day Jesus was born, nor did God create Jesus as a representative to visit the world. The Word of God has always been part of the Godhead (Trinity / Divine Community).
- Jesus is the Son of God who reveals the very nature of God the Father to us (Col 2:9, John 6:46).
- Jesus not only reveals the nature of the Father, but also the nature of the relationships of love that exist within the Divine Community (John 17).
- Jesus speaks for God. Within Jewish thought, there is only One who has the power to forgive sins, namely God. When Jesus tells sinners that their sins are forgiven (Matt 9:2, Lk 7:48) he is claiming to be God and to speak for God.

¹ A study of these early Councils and issues with which they wrestled gives one a fascinating insight into the complexity and importance of being clear about what we believe about Jesus. The interested reader is referred to histories of the Early Church such as JND Kelly's classic *Early Christian Doctrines*.

How does Jesus save us?

Most Western Christians today would answer “by dying on the Cross”. The Cross is certainly central to the process of salvation, but there is also a great deal more to it than that. The more complete answer is to say that Jesus saves us through his birth, life and teaching, Passion and death, Resurrection and Ascension.

1) How does Jesus’ birth save us?

- The Incarnation seals the unity between God and humanity. The very fact that Jesus is both God and Human joins the two communities into one.
- If sin is the obstacle standing in the way of such a union, then the very fact that such a union came about through the Incarnation implies God’s forgiveness of sin, or at the very least God’s willingness to overcome sin through forgiveness.

2) How does Jesus’ life and teaching save us?

There are two traditional answers to this question:

Firstly, through his example as a human being who was tempted but did not sin, Jesus set the precedent for a human life lived as a response of total love and obedience to the Father.

Secondly, through his life and teaching, Jesus helps us overcome our ignorance of God, an ignorance caused by sin. Through Jesus we discover what God is truly like.

During the 20th Century, Liberation Theology and advances in the study of the historical life of Christ brought about a renewed interest in the saving power of Jesus’ life and teachings. Writers point out that for too long the focus in the Church has been on the Good News *about* Jesus, namely the message that Jesus’ death and Resurrection save us. They discern a shift in focus towards the Good News *of* Jesus, namely the message that Jesus himself proclaimed. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was at hand, he healed the sick, cast out demons, and proclaimed good news to the poor. Above all he declared forgiveness to sinners. This work started by Jesus and continued by His Church is itself an important part of the process of salvation.

3) How does Jesus’ death save us?

New Testament Answers

The New Testament uses various images to explain how Jesus’ death saves us. These include:

- **Ransom/Redemption:** (Mark 10:45, Rom 6:17-18) The idea is that through the price of his blood and/or life, Jesus buys us back from slavery to sin and death.
- **Atonement/Reconciliation:** (Heb 9:11-14, Rom 5:10) In the light of the Hebrew sacrificial system, Jesus’ death was seen as part of the process of purifying sinners and reconciling them to God.
- **Victory:** (1 Cor 15:54-57, Rev 5:5) Jesus’ death has conquered the power of Satan and death.

Vicarious Atonement

In the Church the predominant view which developed to describe the saving power of the Cross centred around the idea that Jesus died vicariously (i.e. as a substitute) in our place. Typically, the line of reasoning for this view runs as follows: By sinning we offend God and break God’s law. God’s justice demands that someone must be punished for the offence. We are unable (or unwilling) to bear the punishment

ourselves, so Jesus takes our sins upon himself, and God punishes him on the Cross instead of us.

Some serious objections have recently been raised concerning this view of Jesus' death. Firstly, the suggestion that God the Father could stand beside God the Son punishing Him on the Cross, doesn't seem to take their unity within the Trinity seriously enough. But more seriously, the image of God as a vindictive Judge demanding that someone be punished to restore God's honour or sense of justice does not square with Jesus' own picture of God as a loving Father. Defenders of the vicarious atonement doctrine argue at this point that God's love and justice are not contradictory, but that is hardly the point. No-one would deny that God is a God of justice. The question rather is whether violent punishment (such as the Cross) is the only way that God's justice can be answered, or whether it could just as effectively be answered by God's grace. The latter view seems to be supported by the fact that Jesus was able to forgive sinners during his ministry – before the “price” of the Cross had been paid!

An Alternative Approach

Recent attempts to rethink the salvific power of the Cross have tended to shift the focus back onto the historical context of Jesus' Passion. Brian Gaybba suggests that Jesus' death saves us because he died rather than break his unity with sinful humanity. He writes as follows:

Jesus accepted sinners as his brothers and sisters, making it clear that God therefore accepted them too. This caused considerable scandal. In the end it led to a confrontation between Jesus and his critics, a confrontation so severe that Jesus could avoid death only by abandoning his complete acceptance of sinners. However Jesus accepted death rather than do so.... His death saved the bond of love with which he bound himself to sinful humanity.

The advantage of such approaches is that they move God from the side of the punisher to the side of the sufferer. God, in Christ, suffers with us. The violence is endured by God rather than inflicted by God. God meets the violence of sinful humanity and its sinfulness with grace.

4) How does Jesus' Resurrection save us?

The Resurrection is the victory of God's love over the power of sin and death. Death, the most horrific and final consequence of sin, takes power over Jesus on the Cross, fracturing the very unity of the Trinity. But it is not a power that can last. The Spirit of Love that binds Father and Son in the unity of the Godhead endures even beyond the grave and brings about a new beginning and a “newness of life.”

The Resurrection is furthermore the coming into being of the risen life, a situation in which human life (Jesus' human life in this case) has been totally transformed by the Spirit of Love present in the Trinity. This transformation of Jesus' humanity sets the precedent for the resurrection and transformation of our human lives.

5) How does Jesus' Ascension save us?

The doctrine of the Ascension is not limited to the idea that Jesus, after his Resurrection was taken up to heaven in the clouds. It includes the following aspects:

- Jesus' humanity was taken up into the unity and inner life of the Trinity.
- Just as the Incarnation involved a member of the Divine Community becoming part of our world, the Ascension involves a member of the human community becoming part of God's world.
- The Ascension places Jesus in the position of divine authority over the world (He is seated at the right hand of the Father).

- The Ascension puts Jesus in the position to send his Holy Spirit into the world. And the Holy Spirit in turn plays an essential role in our experience and appropriation of salvation, as we shall see shortly.

Do you need Jesus to be saved?

If salvation is the unity of the Divine/Human Community of Love and if that unity is only achieved by God removing the obstacles to unity and someone becoming a member of both communities, then Jesus, as that “someone”, is indeed necessary for the salvation of humanity and creation. As to what exactly it means to say that Jesus is necessary for salvation is a matter of some debate.

Theologians normally make a distinction between *needing Jesus* in order to be saved (ontological necessity) and *needing to know Jesus* in order to be saved (epistemological necessity). Christians would probably all agree that everyone actually needs Jesus in order to be saved. But not all would hold that everyone needs *to know* Jesus in order to be saved. The exclusivist Christian view is that only those who encounter Jesus and call on His name can be saved, whereas the universalist Christian view is that Jesus’ work of salvation has fundamentally altered the human condition such that all can be saved (or indeed are saved).

Evangelism and mission for the former group is driven to some extent by the fear that those who have not professed Jesus as Lord are eternally lost, whereas for the latter group it is driven entirely by the desire to see everyone participate fully in the salvation life that has become available to us through the work of Christ.

When are you saved?

In recent times it has become popular for Christians to answer this question by referring to the moment of their conversion, baptism or public profession of faith. Indeed such moments can have a profound effect on our experience of our salvation, but it is worth reflecting on the fact that we are saved by the work of Jesus and not by anything that we do ourselves. Traditionally then, this question has been answered in three stages:

1) You were saved on Good Friday.

In fact, given the discussion above about the various ways in which Jesus saves us, it is probably more correct to say, you were saved at the time of Jesus birth, life, death, Resurrection and Ascension. The point though is that it is the work of Christ that has already achieved one aspect of our salvation. This aspect of salvation is usually referred to as “Justification.”

2) You are being saved today.

Again this is stating the matter too narrowly. In fact we are being saved every day as the Holy Spirit works within us to convict us of sin, to turn us towards Jesus, to assure us of God’s grace, to draw us into the Community of Love and to gradually transform us into the likeness of Christ.

This aspect of salvation is usually referred to as “Sanctification.”

3) You will be saved at the Coming of our Lord in Glory.

The final transformation of our humanity along the lines of that which Jesus has already experienced in His Resurrection will only become a reality for us when we, ourselves experience the resurrection and enter into the nearer presence of God.

This final aspect of salvation is usually referred to as “Glorification.”