

John Docherty, April 17, 2016

Salvation belongs to our God

When we first moved to Montreal in 1981, I travelled ahead of Mary-Lou and our 10 month old son Robert in hopes of fairly quickly finding a job and having them come to an apartment of our own. I arrived on a Friday, and stayed with some friends I had met some years earlier when on a bike trip to Nova Scotia.

They were members of a Pentecostal church, so I went with them to church on my first Sunday. Upon entering the church I was introduced to one of their friends : “John, we'd like you to meet so-and-so”, who then immediately greeted me with “Hello. Are you saved?”

Fortunately, I had just graduated with a degree in theology from a conservative evangelical Bible college, and so I could answer him with a confident “yes”. Today I might not be so quick to accept the question as valid, nor respond so reflexively.

But even then, even in the flush of youthful enthusiasm for a faith I'd adopted and embraced wholeheartedly, I was a little taken aback by the question. Partly because it was a little abrupt, with not so much as a “nice day, isn't it?” No intro, no preamble, just “Are you saved?”

I was partly taken aback, too, because of the evident intensity behind the question. The person asking it obviously felt an urgent need to get right to the heart of the matter; to not waste time on useless chatter until he had assured himself that I was okay with the Lord; that I was not in danger of hell-fire; that he had not neglected to take his cue from Colossians 4.5: “Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time.”

Had I answered “no” to his question, or exhibited some kind of confusion about what on earth he could possibly have meant by it, I suspect I'd have been in for a heavy dose of evangelism.

But I was also partly taken aback by the question because, upon reflection, and this happened almost instantaneously, I was a little uncomfortable having answered with a simple “yes”. I felt like I needed to qualify the answer a little.

“Are you saved?”

Of course, on one level, it was simply another way of asking “are you a Christian?”. Granted, implied in the question is a fairly precise definition of what constitutes “a

Christian". In other words, in this context, the question could have been re-phrased "are you a *born-again* Christian?", or "have you given your life to the Lord?", or "do you know Jesus as saviour?"

But even then, even knowing that he was really just asking me whether or not I was a Christian, I felt like a better answer would have been something like "well, *you* tell *me*. Watch me for a while; get to know me; take note of how I live my life; then decide for yourself whether or not I'm a Christian."

And I think that would have been a better answer, because it would at least have intimated that he should be able to tell what I believe by how I live my life. It's not to say that Christians are necessarily better behaved than others, but it *is* to say that a Christian's life should at the very least show some of the hallmarks of what we say we believe about what is important :

living in right relationship with others;

being prepared to return hurt with forgiveness and mercy;

letting our yes be yes and our no be no;

walking humbly with our God.

"Are you saved?"

The title from today's lectionary readings is "salvation belongs to our God".

Our God. *Our* God. There's something faintly tribal sounding in that choice of wording (... *our* God is better than *your* God ...). I think I would have preferred a simple statement that "salvation belongs to God", but I'll leave that alone for now.

But, as I said, the title from today's lectionary readings is "salvation belongs to our God", and, with the possible exception of the reading from Acts (I'm not quite sure how it fits), the salvation theme is present largely in the form of an oddly fused image of God's protective role as a shepherd; the One who looks over the flock; the One who leads the sheep into green pastures; the One who saves;

and the other image of the sheep themselves who, while being in need of protection, and salvation, are also the means by which salvation is obtained. The sheep, after all, are the animals used in the temple sacrifices; the creatures whose lives are given to protect others; the creatures protected by the shepherd, and the creatures provided by the shepherd for sacrifice.

I say the image is oddly fused, because in the person of Jesus we have an image of Him as the Good Shepherd (according to the passage we read from the Gospel of John – Jesus says “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”), and yet earlier in the Gospel of John, in the first chapter, John the Baptist calls him the Lamb of God, and then in the passage we read from the book of the Revelation, Jesus is the Lamb that was slain.

And so we have this unusual picture of salvation in which the one who is meant to protect is also the one who hands over the innocent to be killed.

Or, if you prefer, the one who is meant to protect does so by paradoxically appearing to leave the sheep defenceless : the shepherd joins the flock and gives up his own life.

Now, it's of course all metaphor and poetic imagery - Jesus was neither literally a shepherd nor a sheep - but it's an attempt to describe a relationship. It's a way of explaining salvation.

But what are we being saved from?

I think the most common theological answer to that would be that we are saved from eternal damnation / eternal torment / eternal punishment.

If you're from a particular theological background, you might say that at least part of salvation means we are being saved from our depraved nature.

One of the sources I looked at in preparing for this meditation quotes Charles Spurgeon. He was a Baptist preacher in England in the middle of the 19th century, and probably the most famous preacher of his day. He had this to say about the 23rd Psalm and our human nature:

“... before a man can truly say, "the LORD is my shepherd" he must first feel himself to be a sheep by nature, "for he cannot know that God is his Shepherd unless he feels in himself that he has the nature of a sheep ... He must relate to a sheep in its foolishness, its dependency, and in the warped nature of its will ...”. It hadn't occurred to me, before reading that, that sheep had warped wills.

As I was looking through commentaries on the 23rd Psalm, I was frankly a little surprised, and insulted on behalf of sheep everywhere, at what a bad rap sheep get. Over and over I was reading how significant it was that the psalm highlights things like :

“He makes me lie down in green pastures” - because, according to one commentator,

sheep are too stupid to find grass on their own. They'll stand in one spot and eat until they hit dirt. Oh, and the shepherd has to make them lie down because they don't have sense enough to do it on their own. And heaven forbid that they fall on their backs – apparently sheep are like turtles and can't get up again if that happens.

“he leads me beside still waters” - because sheep are total cowards who freak out if the water is moving;

“He leads me in right paths” - because sheep are such idiots that they simply wander off and have no idea how to find their way home. And there better not be a cliff anywhere nearby, because it seems they have a habit of not stopping if the path happens to end at the edge of one. Maybe they're just depressed, or something – I don't know. Without a shepherd to protect them, word has it that they'd also stand out in the middle of a field in a thunderstorm waiting to get hit by lightning or to starve because nobody suggested they should look for grass somewhere else once they'd hit dirt.

Again, I feel for sheep the planet over. And I resent the fact that other sheep-like qualities seem to be ignored in these descriptions. Qualities like loyalty to, and perhaps even love for, the shepherd;

qualities like a meek and gentle nature;

qualities like, perhaps, even a generosity of spirit that provides wool and meat (not to mention the raw material required for the making of a leather sack for traditional bagpipes ...).

But I digress just a little bit.

What are we saved from?

The Mennonite confession of faith follows orthodox teaching on that point, and tries to encompass the various ways that salvation can be understood across the Mennonite spectrum by being, in my opinion, a little vague, or somewhat imprecise in its language. The commentary on Article 8, which is the one that deals directly with salvation, references words like “substitutionary atonement”, “Christ the victor”, “moral influence”, but the article itself avoids using those terms. It's kept a little more simple, and accessible.

Instead, the article offers its own summary in its very first sentence:

“We believe that, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God offers salvation from sin and a new way of life to all people.”

I like the fact that the confession of faith includes the role of the life of Jesus in offering salvation. And I like the fact that I think I can read into this sentence a suggestion that we are not just offered a salvation linked to eternal life, but a salvation linked to freedom from the consequences of sin.

We are saved from the consequences of sin by the fact that we are introduced to a new way of life, and this new way of life offers to save us here, and now.

It offers to save us from the consequences of sin here and now by opening a way that prioritizes right relationships;

It offers to save us from the consequences of sin here and now by encouraging us to adopt a way that is prepared to return hurt with forgiveness and mercy;

It offers to save us from the consequences of sin here and now by showing us a way that says our yes will be yes, and our no will be no;

It offers to save us from the consequences of sin here and now by putting us on a way that allows us to walk humbly with our God.

Are you saved?