

Psalm 80:1-7;17-19

03.12.17 (1st Sunday in Advent)

Saved!

‘Are you saved, brother?’ Or, ‘when did you get saved, sister?’ I wonder if that question has been put to you and how you might answer it. It’s a question which usually carries with it a particular understanding of the Gospel which carries particular baggage. The focus is on sin, and on us as sinners, and it rests on the threat of judgement – from which we need to be saved. And the task of evangelism is of convincing people that this is indeed their predicament. This past week the Men’s Group watched a film about Martin Luther, the German monk who kick-started the Reformation 500 years ago, and he was portrayed, accurately, as a tortured figure convicted of sin and desperate to find some mercy from a vengeful God. Throughout the film there are strong images of fire, evoking a sense of judgement from which Luther, in anguish, sought refuge. It was a reminder that the Reformation was at its heart all about how we ‘get saved’.

All this came to mind as a result of pondering Psalm 80 from which we have read this morning. I was particularly struck by the refrain that features three times: ‘Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved’. That phrase led me to wonder what exactly it was that the psalmist is seeking to be saved from. The wrath of God? Judgement? Well, actually no. The answer is rather more complex than that. For a start, there is a political dimension to the salvation the psalmist is seeking. Verses we didn’t read refer to fire and the breaking down of walls and it seems therefore that Israel was experiencing siege and invasion and destruction, and the psalmist is looking to God for rescue. But that introduces a deeper dimension to the psalm. There is anger and resentment against God here and in part the psalmist is pleading to be saved from God’s neglect, from God’s misrule. God has turned his face away. So the opening verses portray God as Israel’s shepherd, but unlike the well-known Psalm 23 this shepherd does not lead the sheep beside still waters, and nor does he prepare a table in the wilderness in the presence of their enemies. This shepherd, we are told, has fed his people with the bread of tears and made them a laughing stock, such that ‘our enemies laugh among themselves’, as verse 6 puts it. The beginning of Psalm 80 reads almost as a parody of Psalm 23.

In short, what the psalmist is pleading to be saved from is a cluster of destructive forces that are overshadowing his life. And hence his repeated plea: ‘Restore us, O God: let your face shine, that we may be saved.’ And note too those words and particularly the word ‘restore’. The emphasis here is not just negatively upon what we are saved from – invasion, destruction, judgement, divine neglect - but also what salvation is ‘to’, what its goal and end is - restoration. So the psalmist prays in v.18: ‘give us life and we will call upon your name...’ In other words the purpose of salvation is to restore life – ‘life in all its fullness’ as Jesus put it.’

That’s the trouble with the way we too often speak of salvation, of ‘being saved’. All the emphasis is on what we are saved from – sin, or judgement, or hell, or destruction or whatever. But that is to miss the point. What if we took a lead from Psalm 80 and thought of salvation as restoration, of being saved as being restored, being reinstated to something that we have lost, being repaired and put right?

It’s so significant that in the Gospels the word for healing is the same word as for salvation. In the miracles of healing Christ performed he was restoring people: restoring sight, restoring health, restoring people to their place in the community from which their disease or their sin had excluded them. This, you see, is the thing about sin. It diminishes. It demeans. It makes us less than what God has made us to be. It’s not just about transgressing commandments or doing wrong stuff. It’s about being ensnared by forces which diminish and tarnish us. And salvation is not about cancelling some debt that we owe to God, as it had become in mediaeval times and in Luther’s day. It was that notion of sin as debt that led to so many of the distortions of salvation that Luther reacted against. Salvation is rather about restoration, restoring us to what we have been created to be. And that is at the heart of the mission of the church – sharing in Christ’s ministry of restoration to a damaged and diminished world.

Return to that thrice-repeated phrase, ‘Restore us, O God: let your face shine, that we may be saved.’ The memory there is of Moses on the mountain where he met God face to face as he received God’s law. Then Moses’ face shone with God’s glory and with such radiance that Moses had to cover his face. Likewise for us - when God’s face shines upon us, we are restored like withering flowers basking in sunshine. So advent begins with the psalmist’s

plea to be saved: 'Restore us, O God of hosts: let your face shine that we might be saved.' And from there we journey to Christmas. Amen.

Gracious, advent God,
God who comes amongst us,
God who comes and reaches out to us,
God who comes in Jesus of Nazareth,
the baby of Bethlehem,
all glory, praise and honour be to you.
We worship you, God whose glory is revealed
in the world that you have made
in all its wonder and splendour.
We worship you, God, whose glory is revealed,
shining in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Yet on this first Sunday in Advent we
acknowledge the brokenness of our world,
the damage we do to it and to one another.
We acknowledge that your glory is concealed
by the world that we have made
as we confess to you our sins.
Come, living God. Come and restore us;
heal us and make us new.
Reassure us that you came not to condemn
But to save.
And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ,
Our Lord and Saviour, in whose words
We pray together, saying.....