

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 28 June 2015 at 11am service

Mark 5: 34 And Jesus said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has saved you'

[Readings: 2 Sam1:1,17-27; 2Cor 8: 7-15; Mark 5: 21-43]

It's not often these days that you get buttonholed in the street by someone out doing a bit of evangelism and asked 'Are you saved?' (Did I hear someone saying 'Those were the days!')

So what would you reply – if someone did ask you?

There's an interesting use of the New Testament word for **being saved** in the story of the girl and the woman from Mark's Gospel.

- When Jairus flings himself to the ground in front of Jesus to plead for his daughter, he asks him to come and lay hands on her 'so that she may be **saved**, and live'.
- The hope of the haemorrhaging woman is: 'If I could just touch his clothing, I would be **saved**'.
- And Jesus' startling pronouncement when she does? 'Daughter, your faith has **saved** you'.

In translating the story into English, the Greek word that's used (some form of the verb *sozo*) is rendered as 'made well', 'healed', 'set free', 'made whole'. But it's exactly the same word that's used in a passage like the great declaration at Ephesians 2: 8, so beloved of the Reformers: 'By grace are ye **saved**, through faith.' *Sozo*. Same word. It has this very broad range of meanings, encompassing saving, healing, mending, making whole, making well...

So - that was the spur for my wondering if maybe we should think about being 'saved' this morning – coming as it does in the wake of the unusual experience, for us, of shouting 'I am redeemed' for Songs of Praise the other Sunday!! Did we mean it? And what did we mean??

I might be wrong about this, but I think the notion, and language, around being 'saved' can be difficult for more liberal Christians. So, in a slightly perverse way, it might be important to think about it...

So, for example, do we actually think being 'saved' makes any difference? What does being a Christian mean – it seems to have rather a lot to do with being 'saved'.. If we simply bypass salvation, what are we saying Christian faith **is** about - apart from what we try to do in 'living well/lovingly'? The trouble is, that that then makes faith about what we do and

not about what God does. Which might be a problem...why not all just be humanists, try to live a good life, not hurt anyone, you know..?

The requiem mass for Pope JPII, I remember, struck me because liturgically (can't remember the details) it made no assumptions about his eternal destiny, whether hell, purgatory, heaven) – the Pope!! No assumptions were made, leaving judgement to God. Is that proper humility, a radical trust, or does that kind of openness about being 'saved' potentially leave us open to a lifetime of possibly paralysing uncertainty?

Is it sinful, or essential, to wonder whether I'm saved? The question flamed in the soul of Martin Luther, precisely because of the paralysing and terrifying - for him – uncertainty; and it got the Protestant Reformation going...

If for no other reason, it might just be something we ought to spend some time with, because the language of salvation is core to Wesley's theology.

- All need to be saved
- All may be saved
- All may know that they are saved
- All may be saved to the uttermost

These affirmations are known as the four Methodist 'alls'. I was tested on them in my final interview for accreditation as a Local Preacher. Giles, you might want to take some notes...

That's pretty fundamental stuff. So what can we say about salvation that doesn't just make our toes curl?

Maybe one of the things that can make the language of being 'saved' tricky the impression of smugness it can create...

What does it say about the non-Christian people you work with, for example, live next door to, to see yourself as 'saved'? I'm in, you're out..? How do you *relate* to people in any real and human way on that kind of basis?

There's a story told about Staretz Siluan, or Saint Silvanus, an Orthodox monk who lived at the end of the 19th and into the early years of the 20th centuries. Another brother was apparently gleefully rehearsing the eternal punishment awaiting atheists. Siluan, with some worry, asked, "Tell me, if you are placed in Heaven, and from there you see how others burn in hellish flames, would you remain detached?" "What can you do — it's their own fault," answered the monk. Siluan, filled with sorrow, answered, "Love cannot accept that... At the same time, Siluan was also known as someone acutely aware of his own sin: the depth of his resistance to God.

So rather than smugness, it might be that salvation has something to do with knowing your need of it; some of the very holiest people are people with a profound humility – not feigned or assumed, but a real sense of their imperfection, incompleteness, need... And therefore a *deeper* sense of solidarity with others and their struggles, imperfections – rather than separation, superiority or difference. That might equate to something surprising, but which seems to be a commonplace for people wise and experienced in Christian living: that the closer you draw to God, the more aware you become of your own resistance, failures in love, selfishness, self-sufficiency... Or, to turn it around, the less ‘saved’ you *think* yourself, the more saved you might *be*.

Rowan Williams uses the idea very frequently that being saved, redeemed, healed is not to be equated with a return to innocence. The church as the community of the redeemed will always be a community that bears the scars. In the theology of Wesley – perhaps we’re talking about a proper balancing of ‘need-to-be-saved’ (knowing – having been shown – that we are sinners, what we are saved *from*) with ‘assurance’ – being given the gift of trusting that we’re redeemed.

So what does it mean to be a ‘ransomed sinner’, what does a proper tension between those two notions look like? How will it affect the way you think/live/relate to others/pray..?

There’s also working out what on earth we *mean* in using the biblical language of salvation. What are we saved *from*, to begin with? Traditional language says ‘sin’. But what does that look like? What’s the problem, where’s the fracture – is there in fact a problem that we can’t fix ourselves, and need to *be saved* (passive verb) from?

Some of the stories and images from this week’s news may have left you in no doubt that there’s a problem, a fracture in human nature that we can’t fix...

The senses of the word *sozo* - to reiterate - range from being safe, to being healed, set free/liberated, mended/made whole. And they all offer something of a sense of what salvation may look like, and what we’re saved from, and into...

The notions of health, healing, wholeness prevent an over-spiritualising of Christianity: salvation involves the *whole* person, the *whole* of life, material as well as spiritual, not just a disembodied soul... But on the other hand, you don’t want avoid Christianity ending up in the body-mind-spirit, section at Waterstones, and being recruited into self-actualisation. The theologian and priest Paul Avis, in his book about spirituality and mission in a post-Christian culture, warns about the danger of Christianity becoming just a form of personal therapy...

The sense of salvation as being set free/liberated, emphasises the social and political call of the Gospel, and resists a reduction of salvation to something privatised, individualistic. So, in the reading from Mark about the haemorrhaging woman, for example, was her need based on her illness, or on the way her illness was interpreted as ‘pollution’ in her culture,

leaving her socially excluded, almost 'dead'. And in the light of this, what does it mean for Jesus to sweep aside those same taboos in the house of Jairus - whose job as synagogue-leader was to enforce them – by touching the dead body of his daughter? And what does it say about salvation that Jesus' response to the (polluting) touch of the woman: 'Daughter, your faith has saved you' announces, in the words of the poet Mary Oliver *her place in the family of things*?

But a social/political understanding of salvation has to be balanced with avoiding Christianity becoming nothing more than a political project.

The sense of salvation as a 'mending', I think, speaks to all our broken-heartedness; our fractured lives, and common life; the failures and regrets and wrong turns: our own, and those of human history. But how do we hold the notion of salvation as 'mending' in proper tension with the essential *unmendedness* of reality, the element of tragedy in all human experience and history, the scars we will always bear?

Mended. Set free. Healed. Made whole. Set free. Liberated.

Which meaning of salvation speaks to you more, to who you are and what you long for? Which one reflects your sense of how things could be, what God intends for the world, for all of this and all of us?

Does that give any insights into the nature of your own Christian life and experience? What might that mean for your unfolding sense of your own vocation – the particular shape God's call takes for you in the world and the insight and experience of God's grace that is your gift to God's people?

What does your instinct about what salvation means and looks like tell you about what the deepest prayer of your heart should be: the thing that makes you drop to your knees; the thing you plead for?

One last thing to say, and it's about those Wesleyan 'Alls'

- All need to be saved
- All may be saved
- All may know that they are saved
- All may be saved to the uttermost

It might be worth pausing to set these in context.

There was a widespread belief in the eighteenth century in predestination: the conviction that God had eternally elected those who would be saved, while the rest were doomed to destruction. John Wesley fell out catastrophically with his great friend and colleague George Whitfield over the doctrine. And while from where you're sitting it might sound as

relevant as the legendary scholastic debates about angels and pinheads, this was revolutionary stuff. Try flipping it round and see what happens! What if John had said:

Some may be saved

Most may be saved

People like *us* may be saved

Nearly everyone may be saved?

The fire that fuelled the Wesleys, and the early Methodist field-preachers, was this passionate belief in both the depth and universality of human need, and the all-embracing scope and capacity of divine grace, in its sheer anarchic gratuity, to find and meet and transform people there – *in their need*. It encompasses us all, it's for *all*.

On the weekend of both the Methodist Conference and London Pride, maybe we can simply hear again Wesley's conviction of the universality of our need, and the universal scope of God's saving grace, which, in the end, makes us all one. All need. All may. All may know. All to the uttermost.