

Easter 4  
25/4/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 4:1-13

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

No other name

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In a sentence

*There is no salvation without reconciliation – the reconciliation of real persons in real disputes; this is what God promises.*

*‘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.’*

That name, of course, is ‘Jesus’.

Here, perhaps, we find the heart of all objections to Christian faith, whether against doctrine or biblical testimony or Christian ethics. To modern ears, Peter’s declaration seems to be about as exclusive as could be made: only *here*, in the name of this *one* person among all persons of history, is salvation to be had.

And so the desire to discard this declaration, or at least soften it, is strong, whether it be from our concern for the ‘salvation’ of those good people who don’t believe – perhaps even members of our own family – or our rejection of the idea of salvation altogether and the triumphalism of those who consider themselves saved and others damned.

What the various objections share is a concern about the *exclusivism* implicit in this announcement. The problem is that the name of Jesus is not common to *all* people. The implication seems to be that only those who come into contact with the name ‘Jesus’, and then have believed on it, only these receive ‘salvation’. If salvation is tied to one such event – as the name ‘Jesus’ suggests – this is, at the very least, *unfair*. Historical events and persons are common only to those who come into contact with that event or its ‘downstream’ history, and not everyone will have that contact. How much better it seems to us that, whatever salvation is, everyone has equal access to it.

But we ought to give a little thought to what ‘saved’ might mean. The history of religion has delivered us a notion of salvation deeply coloured by the negative: we are saved *from* something. That something is, broadly, ‘damnation’: the wrath of God and associated hellfire, in the various versions of various religions. But salvation is properly also – even predominantly – salvation *for* something.

We are saved *for* what we are saved *as*: we are saved as human beings to fulfil our very humanity. Put more simply, to be saved is to be made fully human or, as is more the case for us, the process of *being* saved is one of *becoming* more fully human.

If Jesus is somehow the means of this, it is hard to see how he is of use to those who do not – and could not – know him because of his historical particularity. And so we seek other things we think make us human, or more fully or valuably human. The most common appeal here is to one form or other of moral achievement. When we feel moved to say something like ‘all religions are really about love, and even atheistic secularists are really about love too’, we are 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 – being human in the right way – for everyone surely has the opportunity to be that. In this way, no one is implicitly excluded from at least the *possibility* of salvation; we include everyone.

Yet, a strange irony now emerges from the broader sweep of Peter's preaching. We object to the declaration of Jesus as the way to God because it seems to exclude so many people but, in fact, the Jesus Peter proclaims is the *excluded* Jesus. The words which come just before today's problematic text run like this, referring back to the lame man healed in the preceding story:

*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. <sup>11</sup> This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'*

It is only then that we hear the disturbing assertion,

*<sup>12</sup> There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name...by which we must be saved.'*

It is not simply the *name* Jesus presented here as the means of salvation, as if it were like the magic spells we considered last week. The name refers to particular events in which the specific 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 these people is that he is *their* victim – the one they have excluded – now presented back to them in a reconciling offer of forgiveness.

If Jesus is the means of their salvation, and their salvation is a turning to a fuller humanity, then this fuller humanity has to do with *overcoming the exclusion*: a reconciliation to their victim. Salvation comes only with the reconciliation of oppressors and victims, the overcoming of exclusion.

Thinking about salvation in this way, we have also re-thought the problem to which Jesus might constitute an answer – what it is *from which* we are saved. While we might be troubled by Peter's declaration as a verse plucked from its setting, the full context of the verse suggests that perhaps the thing we all have in common with each other – if not yet the name Jesus – might be the fact that we all have victims, that we all exclude.

We here today cannot be guilty of the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, may whom Peter addressed in his sermon would not be directly responsible either. 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. Salvation has to do with reconciliation – not 'merely' to God in the abstract but to each other, concretely.

Today, of course, is ANZAC Day, on which we recognise many things, if perhaps not sufficiently what it signals about the victims we make or are of each other and the need for difficult reconciliation war creates. The following is a poem from the American writer and poet Hermann Hagedorn, published in 1917, which conveys a vision of salvation as post-war reconciliation, under the title 'Resurrection'.

NOT long did we lie on the torn, red field of pain.  
 We fell, we lay, we slumbered, we took rest,  
 With the wild nerves quiet at last, and the vexed brain  
 Cleared of the wingèd nightmares, and the breast  
 Freed of the heavy dreams of hearts afar.  
 We rose at last under the morning star.  
 We rose, and greeted our brothers, and welcomed our foes.  
 We rose; like the wheat when the wind is over, we rose.  
 With shouts we rose, with gasps and incredulous cries,  
 With bursts of singing, and silence, and awestruck eyes,  
 With broken laughter, half tears, we rose from the sod,  
 With welling tears and with glad lips, whispering, "God."  
 Like babes, refreshed from sleep, like children, we rose,  
 Brimming with deep content, from our dreamless repose.  
 And, "What do you call it?" asked one. "I thought I was dead."  
 "You are," cried another. "We're all of us dead and flat."  
 "I'm alive as a cricket. There's something wrong with your head."  
 They stretched their limbs and argued it out where they sat.  
 And over the wide field friend and foe  
 Spoke of small things, remembering not old woe  
 Of war and hunger, hatred and fierce words.  
 They sat and listened to the brooks and birds,  
 And watched the starlight perish in pale flame,  
 Wondering what God would look like when He came.

*'Resurrection', by Hermann Hagedorn (George Herbert Clarke, ed., A Treasury of War Poetry. 1917)*

If there is the slightest critique which might be made of Hagedorn's vision, it is what we might read into the last line – 'Wondering what God would look like when He [comes]', as if God has not *already* come in the vision.

For, what Hagedorn has already recounted – the reconciliation of victims and oppressors, of those who revel in war and those who just want to go home, of the innocent and the guilty; the reconciliation of the German and the French, and the Australian and the Turk; the reconciliation of the Bolsheviks and the Czarists, the Americans and the Japanese; the reconciliation of the Nazis and the Jews, of the Israelis and the Palestinians, of needy refugees and the blind eye; the reconciliation of the Aborigines and we colonists – *all of this* is what God 'looks like when He comes': the reconciliation of the living and the dead.

There is no salvation without justice, no justice without peace, no peace without reconciliation, no reconciliation without grace.

To say that Jesus' name marks salvation is not to exclude anyone. It is to draw to our attention what about us is excluded by others, and what about others we exclude. In one excluded man's grace towards those who cast him out, we see the beginnings of a reconciled humanity.

To declare that salvation is found in Jesus is not arrogantly to exclude an abstract person in some distant time or place who could not possibly know Jesus' name. It is humbly to preach and seek reconciliation wherever we can with the real and tangible people who are part of our lives.

There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved but the names we would rather we did not know. These will save us, or we will save them. Salvation is reconciliation of what we have divided and separated.

This is what it is like when God comes.

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