

## 1. WHY SALVATION?

At the end of her novel *The Children of Men* (1992), P.D. James describes the birth of the first infant in a very grim and frightening Britain devoid of such an event for decades. But the extraordinary thing is that the novel does not end with the wonder of that birth, but with an event subsequent to it:

*From some far childhood memory he recalled the rite. The water had to flow, there were words which had to be said. It was with a thumb wet with his own tears and stained with her blood that he made on the child's forehead the sign of the cross.*

In a way this impromptu (and fictional) rite of quasi-baptism poses for us the question: *why salvation?* Isn't birth itself wonderful enough? Why bother with anything else? Why not end the story with the birth, rather than with this somewhat messy, and undoubtedly irregular, Godward ceremony?

Two celebrated poems offer the gist of an answer to that question, as they articulate a tragic and disturbing vision of the human condition. In *Prayer before Birth* by Louis MacNeice we are to imagine that birth is not as wonderful as we might be tempted to think it is: quite the contrary, it is an extremely perilous business, so perilous that (ironically) salvation might well be conceived as not being born at all.

*I am not yet born, console me.  
I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.*

...

*I am not yet born; O fill me  
With strength against those who would freeze my  
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,  
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with  
one face, a thing, and against all those  
who would dissipate my entirety, would  
blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither  
like water held in the  
hands would spill me.  
Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.  
Otherwise kill me.*

In his poem *The Hand* R.S. Thomas suggests that even God is ambivalent about his human creatures and their capabilities, and so foresees the cost for himself of what he has enterprised:

*It was a hand. God looked at it  
and looked away. There was a coldness  
about his heart, as though the hand*

*clasped it. As at the end  
of a dark tunnel, he saw cities  
the hand would build, engines  
that it would raze them with. His sight  
dimmed. Tempted to undo the joints  
of the fingers, he picked it up.  
But the hand wrestled with him ...  
... But God, feeling the nails  
in his side, the unnerving warmth  
of the contact, fought on in silence ...  
... "I let you go,"  
he said, "but without blessing.  
Messenger to the mixed things  
Of your making, tell them I am."*

Both poets, and the novelist, offer a vision of the human condition in need of help from God, from beyond, which to any Christian reader will resonate with their tradition of faith. For it is not only poetry and fiction which pose the question of salvation: so does the life of Christian prayer and worship, and the enterprise of Christian theology. From the former a very good example is found in the Anglican Franciscan form of Daily Prayer, *Celebrating Daily Prayer*. In Evening Prayer for Christmastide we find the following collect:

*Almighty God, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us through your Son Jesus Christ: grant that, as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity ...*

Here a theological balance is struck between the wonder of being made in the image of God – *God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them* (Genesis 1.27, AV) – and the even greater wonder of being *restored* (presumably also in that image). And so, in prayer, the question is posed to the worshipper: why is restoration through Jesus needed? *Why salvation?*

It hardly needs stating that it is a fundamental Christian belief that more than the natural processes of birth, life, and death are needed to disclose the true wonder of being human. Quite apart from any literary, liturgical, or theological discourse on the matter, the very practice of Baptism in the day-to-day life of the church makes this absolutely clear. This belief that more is needed for the wonder of being human to shine through is so embedded in our thinking, in our liturgies, in our scriptures, in the development of our tradition over two millennia, that we hardly ever explicitly ask *why* it should be so, why the belief is there, *why salvation*. It is our conviction in this essay that we *should* ask *why salvation*, for the act of asking requires us to ponder just what it is (or might be) about the natural, God-given, human condition that leaves open the need to talk of salvation.

The framework of a Christian answer to the question *why salvation?* rests in a basic conviction about the natural, God-given human condition as we actually experience it. A simple way to express this would be to say that there is enough bad news about being human, to make good news from God about it not merely worthwhile but necessary. Although being human is good, because the very possibility is brought into being by the creative and loving will of God (Genesis 1.27), at the same time it is, in some sense that is felt to be both mysterious and tragic, out of kilter with its origin, so that its goodness and glory are obscured, or even at times rendered invisible. And this is taken so seriously as to make Godward, not humanward, talk of salvation natural to Christians: only God can bring being human back into kilter, can lift the veil which obscures its goodness and glory. The story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God made flesh, crucified, risen and ascended, constantly celebrated in Word and Sacrament, restoring and healing human being by bringing it into communion and fellowship with God, is for Christians *the* story of how God brings being human back into kilter and so releases its goodness and glory.

The *locus classicus* for this understanding of our human condition being one which requires salvation has been in ongoing Christian reflection on the story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This story is taken as offering profound insights into the human condition as we experience it. Whether it is understood as a 'fall' from proper relationships with God, between humans, and between humans and the natural world: whether it is seen as a 'fall' so calamitous as to render humans helpless to help themselves, or as a tragic failure to climb high enough towards God, with humankind somehow missing the point of its very being and getting more and more lost: the judgement is the same. Human life is here and now alienated from the goodness and love of its origin. It is scarred and marred by the attempt to live independently of God, and so it is in idolatrous thrall to many gods which are not the true and living and loving God. In other words, the basic Christian understanding of human being is that it has turned away from its origin in the love and goodness of God. It has denied the kind of being it is, and so it has lost its way: hence the common human experiences of incompleteness, brokenness, and alienation. As St Augustine encourages us to pray: *our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee*. In a sense we remember only very imperfectly who we really are, creatures of the love of God: but in Christ this forgetting is overcome.

However, there remain significant differences in contemporary Christian reflection in these areas of which we ought to take note. For while Christians may agree that the human condition requires something they call *salvation*, they differ in how they conceive salvation, because they understand the human plight differently. For example, many Christians today consider that the dignity conferred on human beings in their natural state derives from our being made in the image of God: they are likely to see salvation as a cooperative effort between God and humankind, in which the proclamation of this dignity is the driving force in the quest for human rights and justice. On the other hand, those who are convinced of the impotence of sinful human beings 'out of kilter' with their origin in the love and will of God are likely to

think of salvation in terms of a radical conversion given entirely by God, to which the human contribution is nil or very minimal.

We began with the question *why salvation* but it is now clear that the debate really lies not quite there. *Why salvation* ineluctably leads us into *how salvation*, because the governing question (and answer) is really neither of them. It is *what to make of human being itself?* How serious is our plight? Answers to that govern the *why*, and the *how*, and the *from what* of salvation.

For the Christian seeking insights into the idea of salvation, the single most important resource is of course the Bible. References to the Bible will be found scattered throughout this Essay; but it seems appropriate at this point to explore in some detail the range of ideas concerning salvation which may be found there.

