

The Saving Power of God

As we approach the Easter season we will again celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Again the question, “Why did Jesus die?” will be raised. “Did Jesus die so that we can be brought into a right relationship with God?” “Did Jesus see himself as the sacrificial lamb?” The Christian doctrine of atonement is based on the belief that Jesus should die as recompense for the sin of Adam’s disobedience, so that we can be brought back into a right relationship with God. So we would be “at-one-ment” with the divine.

A close examination of the canonical gospels conveys clearly that for Jesus the way to God is already open. Six times Jesus tells people “*Your faith has saved you*”. He uses the past tense, indicating that the action of being saved happened in the past and that its results continue into the present. Their faith, or in the case of the paralysed man lowered through the roof, the faith of friends, has already saved them. It is interesting that Jesus talks about the saving power of God Not his own power. It is after his death that his followers begin to express the belief that Jesus is equal with God and that it is his power that heals rather than the invoking of God’s power.

Further, Jesus does not portray the act of salvation as being contingent on his soon to come execution and death. In Jesus we find no mention of a sacrificial death, rather faith saved people because it allowed God to reach into their lives and heal them. It is God who does the saving. Finlan says, “people who related to Jesus knew that God’s saving power was already available, they did not have to wait for Jesus’ death” (Finlan: “Problems with Atonement” 2005 Liturgical Press). He supports his claim by quoting Luke 12:32 “*For it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*”

This approach also supports the notion that we have immediate access to God, and that the people who related to Jesus also had this access. The teaching of trust is a core message of Jesus, and is recorded in the gospels (Luke 7:50, 8:48, 17:19, 18:42 and Mark 5:34, 10:52). Unfortunately this approach does not become the core message of the Christian gospel nor is it expressed in the creeds or the doctrinal statements.

To understand the message of Jesus, we need to discard the concept of sacrificial thinking. Jesus’ practice supports the Hosea principle, when he claims that God says “*I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice.*” We see Jesus supporting this principle in his opposition to the purity laws, particularly when they are used to attack people who are doing God’s work. Jesus is inferring that the laws have become more important than the welfare of people, (Matthew 12:7 “*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*”).

Accordingly whenever we fail to understand the Hosea principle and put ritual minutiae before people we commit an injustice. In Matthew 5:24 we read that ritual cannot proceed if personal relationships are not restored, indicating that relationships are more important than ritual.

Reconciliation occurs through right relationships and not ritual, even with the practice of the Eucharist, where the blood acts as a covenant sacrificial blood. There is scholarly debate regarding these verses, (Luke 22:19-20) because they are absent from the oldest western Greek manuscripts, and from the oldest Latin and Syriac versions, indicating that these verses were added later. The Revised English Bible drops the “body” and “blood” passages altogether, and leaves us only with an intimate farewell scene. Finlan believes this is consistent with our understanding of Jesus’ words and action.

He also claims Jesus believes *“salvation and wholeness are freely available without any mediating transaction, that faith means trusting in God’s straightforward generosity, and forgiveness is conditioned only by one’s willingness to forgive others”*. (Page 114)

The atonement is intertwined with many important and essential Christian teachings, such as the divine incarnation and the certainty of the ritual vindication of the just. As a result many people will feel the loss of these beliefs if we surrender the atonement doctrine.

It is interesting to note that both Jesus and Paul taught salvation by faith leading to spiritual rebirth and alliance with God’s purposes. For Jesus this was freely available from God, but for Paul salvation had to be arranged – there was a mechanism of salvation – Christ had to be made sin and handed over for our transgressions. For Jesus faith is primarily trust. This is also present in Paul but what dominates is an intellectual component, namely belief. *“Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.* (Romans 10:9). For Paul, faith means accepting certain meanings of the messiah’s death and resurrection.

This particular take on salvation does not come from Jesus’ teaching and ministry, but from believing certain formulae about his death, after his death. For Paul, Christ is a mediator not a proclaimer of salvation. Paul never says your faith has made you whole, as Jesus did. For Paul the pure in heart could not see God (as Matthew proclaims) because for Paul there are no pure in heart. Access to God requires an intervening transaction on behalf of wretched humanity.

Finlan assures us that in Jesus and Paul we are dealing with two entirely different instincts about God and about access to God. Jesus with fully adult know how and lack of illusions is able to say that *“... a sincere and child-like faith opens the portals of heaven.”* (Matt 5:6-8).

There is no denying that Paul’s approach is a practical success. Through his metaphors he blends the ancient psychology of atonement with the new gospel by using a spiritualising interpretation.

It is also important to recognise that Paul’s interpretation of Jesus as being integral to the saving activity has found wide acceptance in the life of the Christian church. This is evidenced by the ‘atonement’ oriented hymns and

prayers of our orthodox liturgy. A cursory glance through out 'Together In Song' hymn book confirms this as is shown by Charles Wesley's hymn:

And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood.
Died he for me, who caused his pain-
for me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love how can it be
that, thou my God didst die for me

The open hearted message of faith and sincerity that is Jesus' central teaching appears to have been brushed aside by intense emotions of repentance and yearning, and a desire for the punishment of wrong doers. For Paul the winning of converts was his all consuming passion "*I have become all things to all people that I by all means might save some*" (1Cor 9:22), rather than like Jesus who pointed to the work of God's Spirit already available and not dependent on his sacrificial death; for Paul Jesus is the saviour but for Jesus, the saving power is from God.

Is it time for us to recognise that 'salvation', 'transformation' or whatever we may wish to call this change of heart and action, comes from God and was available before and not dependent on the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps it is time to embrace the God of love who was before Jesus and accept that grace and forgiveness are not dependent on his death.

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