

CHAPTER TWELVE: JESUS THE SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD

The God of Israel redeemed the Israelites from Egypt: 'I am the Lord, there is no other saviour but me' (Isaiah 43:11). Jesus' disciples came to recognize Jesus as the presence of God completing God's redemptive and saving action in their lives. Jesus' name means 'the Lord is salvation' (see Matthew 1:21). His coming was greeted by Mary, his mother, with the cry 'My spirit exults in God

my Saviour' (Luke 1:47), and by Zechariah: 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited his people, he has come to their rescue and he has raised up for us a power for salvation' (Luke 1:68). Simeon, an old man who longed for the fulfilment of God's promises, held the child Jesus in his arms and prayed: 'Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel' (Luke 2:29-32).

John the Baptist is portrayed as preparing the way for Jesus, in whom 'all mankind will see the salvation of God' (Luke 3:6, quoting Isaiah 40:5). In previous chapters we have seen that Jesus was understood to be Immanuel, the one in whom God was present to his disciples, the temple of God's abiding presence among them, the one in whom they experienced the Holy Spirit of the life-giving and redeeming God. Jesus was the one who expressed in the human condition (in the 'flesh') God's word to them. Jesus was God's Wisdom and God's focal Word. In this chapter we will concentrate on the redemption and salvation which Jesus' disciples experienced. In the light of Jesus' resurrection, we know that Jesus' saving presence and action continues in our lives today.

Jesus redeemed people, and so they came to experience freedom. Jesus saved them, and so they came to experience meaning, direction and hope in their lives. In Jesus, they believed that their God brought about a new Exodus, a new Passover; he brought them into a new communion through a new covenant and a new way. Moreover, the history of the early Christian communities brought Jesus' disciples to the realization that what Jesus had done for them had significance, not only for them, but for the whole world.

Jesus gave his message, his 'good news' in word; he also, and more significantly, gave it in the way he lived, the choices he made, and the values he espoused for which he gave his life. It was a message of love, a convincing message because he was acutely aware of what was inhibiting love in his world, and he accurately, courageously and unrelentingly worked against all that was keeping the people bound, and leading them away from belief in the living God, and so from belief in themselves and in their world. Jesus continues his mission today.

The main thing reducing Jesus' contemporaries to despair was their understanding of evil and its power over their lives. They lived in fear of the demonic. Jesus declared that evil had no power over him (John 14:30), and that the power of evil had been condemned (John 16:11) and overthrown (John 12:31). In his sermon at the house of Cornelius, Peter states: 'God had anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power, and because God was with him, he went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil' (Acts 10:37-38; see also 1 John 3:8). The world into which Christianity spread after Jesus' death seems to have been even more dominated by this fear. Many thought of themselves as caught in the grip of

fate and imprisoned in a meaningless world. Paul assured them that they had been liberated from 'this present wicked world' (Galatians 1:4), and from the 'power of darkness' (Colossians 1:13).

Again and again in the Gospels Jesus is presented as light overcoming darkness, as good overpowering evil, as the one who is filled with the Holy Spirit and who casts out any evil spirit. The first miracle of Jesus recorded by the Synoptics, in which a man suffering from convulsions is healed by Jesus' teaching (Mark 1:29-39), is portrayed in this way, as is the account of the paralyzed man who is released from his sin (Mark 2:1-17), and the epileptic boy (Mark 9:14-29). Jesus' ministry is presented as putting to flight everything that is a threat to life: 'I have come that they may live and live to the full' (John 10:10).

The extent of God's power, realized in the ministry of Jesus, is portrayed in three successive scenes. We looked at them in Chapter Nine. Together they illustrate Paul's statement that 'Nothing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:39).

The first scene is the storm on the lake (Mark 4:35-41; Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25). It powerfully portrays Jesus who showed, again and again throughout his life, that nothing that happens around a person, nothing that threatens a person from outside, can take away the protection and love of God. That he believed this himself is clear from the way he approached his own death.

The second scene takes us to the pagan land on the opposite shore, the land of the Gadarenes (Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39). It is one thing to have a storm raging around us; it is another to have a storm raging within. Living among the tombs on the hillside is a man possessed. He is a symbol of someone with a psyche broken by the ravages of a dislocated world. Jesus liberates him from the 'legion' of forces that warred within his psyche. In Jesus' presence he found healing and peace.

In the third scene the reign of God's love penetrates even beyond the veil of death, as Jesus takes a little girl by the hand and restores her to life (Mark 5:21-43; Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56). Death was thought to be the result of sin and to express the ultimate power of evil, since it wrenched people away from life, and therefore, as it was thought, from union with God. Jesus 'set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death' (Hebrews 2:15). Ultimately it was by the way he approached his own death, by his peaceful and prayerful acceptance of it, and by the fact that he remained confident in the power of his Father's love to 'save him out of death' (Hebrews 5:7), that he gave death a new meaning and robbed it of its 'sting' (1 Corinthians 15:55).

The liberation effected by Jesus was not automatic. The Hebrews did not have to leave Egypt, and they are frequently represented as longing to go back. The journey across the desert seemed too demanding. It was the same for Jesus' contemporaries. They did not have to be liberated, and they could go back to the 'security' of the Law and the temple and the ways of life to which they had grown accustomed. But Jesus, like Moses before him, was there to lead them across the desert, and to stay with them till they reached the Promised Land. He asked them to place their trust in God as he did, to accept the challenge he gave them, and to journey

with him along the way. This point is portrayed dramatically when, after the three powerful scenes just described, Jesus comes to his hometown. We are told: 'He could work no miracle there. He was amazed at their lack of faith' (Mark 6:5-6).

Jesus placed his trust in his Father's love. He asks the same trust of us. He manifested the presence of God's love. He asked people to '*be-lieve*' in it (to *be* in this *love*), to open their hearts to receive it, and to allow it to work miracles in their lives. Love does not force itself. The all-powerful love of God can liberate us only if we welcome it.

Other factors inhibiting faith: – factors related to the contemporary fear of the demonic – were their false images of God. Jesus' contemporaries understood suffering as the result of God's rejection of the sufferer. The scene with the leper (Mark 1:40-45) is a perfect example of this. The leper was ostracized, and in God's name (see Leviticus 13). Jesus, in the name of the living God, embraced him. Likewise, with the man born blind (John 9:1-41). Jesus' acceptance of his own suffering forced people to see its relationship to God's will in a different, and liberating, light. There is also their understanding of riches as a proof of God's blessing. The rich young man was of this mind, as were Jesus' own disciples (Mark 10:17-31). Jesus' words and life challenged them to question their assumptions and offered them a way out of finding their value in possessions. 'A man's life is not made secure by what he owns, even when he has more than he needs' (Luke 12:15).

Jesus also liberated people from traditions that claimed to be religious, and from laws that claimed to define God and express God's will, but which were, in fact, causes of oppression: 'How ingeniously you get round the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition' (Mark 7:9). 'Alas for you lawyers, because you load on men burdens that are unendurable, burdens that you yourselves do not move a finger to lift' (Luke 11:46). The Sadducees and the Pharisees are portrayed as authorities that upheld such false gods. We see Jesus' attitude forcefully expressed when he does not fast (Mark 2:18-22) and when he takes a walk on the Sabbath, and when he heals a man with a withered hand (Mark 2:23-3:6). The fig- tree that was all show, full of leaves but with no fruit, was a symbol of the kind of institutionalized religious practice that failed to assuage people's hunger for God (Mark 11:12-14). The temple that Jesus emptied was a symbol of the same, for it failed to help people find communion with God; it failed to be a house of prayer, and it was not 'for all the peoples' (Mark 11:15-19).

Jesus liberated people from the useless spiral of violence engaged in by the Zealots who saw warfare as an instrument of God's will. Jesus told the people to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). We are told: 'As he drew near and came in sight of the city, Jesus shed tears over it and said: If you, in your turn, had only understood on this day the message of peace' (Luke 19:41-42). His own behaviour confirmed his teaching: 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). He liberated them also, if they wanted such liberation, from distrust of people. He ate with the outcasts of society (Matthew 9:41), and commissioned his disciples: 'Go, make disciples of all the nations' (Matthew 28:19). We are all children of the one Father whose saving and liberating love is for all.

The New Testament uses a number of images to portray Jesus as redeemer and saviour. One is that of 'leader' (Greek: *archegos*). 'As it was his purpose to bring a great many of his sons into glory, it was appropriate that God should make perfect through suffering the leader who would take them to their salvation' (Hebrews 2:10). God is our '*arche*', the source and origin and goal of our existence. Jesus is our *archegos*, our way to the Father (John 14:4-6). Like Moses, he walks with us through the desert: 'With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we too should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection. For the sake of the joy which was still in the future, he endured the cross, disregarding the shamefulness of it, and from now on has taken his place at the right hand of God's throne' (Hebrews 12:1-2). Peter speaks of Jesus as the one who leads us to life (Acts 3:15), as the one whom God raised up to be our 'leader and saviour' (Acts 5:31), as our 'chief shepherd' (1 Peter 5:4).

Linked with the image of leader is that of 'brother'. Jesus, our redeemer, is one of us, one 'from among yourselves, from your own brothers' (Deuteronomy 18:15). 'The one who sanctifies, and the ones who are sanctified, are of the same stock; that is why he openly calls them brothers. It was essential that he should become completely like his brothers (Hebrews 2:11, 17; see Mark 3:35; Matthew 25:40, 28:10; John 20:17; Romans 8:29). Jesus not only shows us the way to live, he walks the way with us, and since he is completely like us, since he is 'as all people are' (Philippians 2:7), he enables and encourages others to walk with him.

A third image, linked to that of leader, is that of a 'shepherd' who goes out in search of the straying, wounded and lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14). Paul tells us that Jesus 'came into the world to save sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15) and Jesus himself said: 'The Son of Man has come to seek out and save what is lost' (Luke 19: 10; see Mark 6:34; Matthew 9:36). He is spoken of as one who, like David, will 'shepherd my people Israel' (Matthew 2:6, quoting Micah 5:1); and as one who, like Moses, is the 'great shepherd of the sheep' (Hebrews 13:20, quoting Isaiah 63:11). Peter speaks of Jesus as the 'guardian and shepherd of your souls' (1 Peter 2:25; see 1 Peter 4:5). The Book of Revelation recognizes him as shepherd over all the nations (Revelation 2:27, 12:5, 19:15). Jesus is the 'good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10:11). He is the shepherd who is struck down in death (Mark 14:27; Matthew 26:31), who seals with his blood an eternal covenant with God (Hebrews 13:20). He leads us, as a shepherd, to 'springs of living water' (Revelation 7:17). He is the shepherd who 'sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free' (Titus 2: 14): 'Remember the ransom paid to free you from the useless way of life your ancestors handed down was paid in the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18)

It is 'through his blood' that we 'gain our freedom' (Ephesians 1:7; see Colossians 1:14). To speak of Jesus as the redeemer-shepherd is to associate him with the Exodus journey, and so with another image, that of the Passover Lamb. The Beloved Disciple speaks of him as the 'Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29 and 1:36). It is this imagery that pervades the Last Supper account and the Passion. It is also a favourite image in the Book of Revelation where it occurs 28 times. There the exalted Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb who was sacrificed (Revelation 5:12), as the Lamb who is victorious (Revelation 7:10), as the Lamb who 'will lead them to springs of living water' (Revelation 7:17), as the Lamb who invites everyone to the marriage feast (Revelation 19:9), as the Lamb who is a lamp in the temple of the city of God (Revelation 21:23).

Jesus liberates people that we might experience greater and greater freedom to live life to the full (see John 10:10). 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom', wrote Paul (2 Corinthians 3:17). 'When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free' (Galatians 5:1). The Beloved Disciple has Jesus say: 'If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free. If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:31-32, 36).

Jesus frees people 'so that they could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good' (Titus 2:14, quoting Exodus 19:5). Jesus continues to free us. Jesus frees us so that we can 'discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do' (Romans 12:2). Jesus frees us so that we can fill our minds with 'everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise' (Philippians 4:8). Jesus frees us so that we will 'resist evil and conquer it with good' (Romans 12:21). Paul writes, 'Try to imitate God, as children that God loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Ephesians 5:1-2). Like Jesus, the disciple who has been liberated is to give his or her life to bring about the 'new heavens and new earth, the place where righteousness will be at home' (2 Peter 3:13). Redemption is in view of salvation – a life lived according to God's purpose and in communion with God.

Jesus' own salvation came finally only when he was redeemed from death by his Father. Jesus enjoys fullness of life in the exaltation of heaven. It will be the same for us. 'Our homeland is in heaven' (Philippians 3:20). We are still 'waiting for our bodies to be set free' (Romans 8:23; see Ephesians 4:30). 'We must be content to hope that we shall be saved – our salvation is not in sight, we should not be hoping for it if it were – but, as I say, we must hope to be saved since we are not saved yet – it is something we must wait for with patience' (Romans 8:24-25).

It is possible to be 'sure of the end to which your faith looks forward' (1 Peter 1:9). The New Testament is full of statements of the experiences of Jesus' disciples – experiences that gave them this assurance: 'When we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, we were still enemies; now that we have been reconciled, surely we may count on being saved by the life of his Son? Not merely because we have been reconciled, but because we are filled with joyful trust in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have already gained our reconciliation' (Romans 5:10-11; see 2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

This joyful trust is based primarily on our experience of Jesus' Spirit in our lives. 'Remember it is God himself who assures us all, and you, of our standing in Christ, and has anointed us, marking us with his seal and giving us the pledge, the Spirit that we carry in our hearts' (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). Moved by this Spirit, we, like Jesus, call God 'Abba' (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). Jesus has taught us to look on God as a Father whose love is faithful and constant. The good news leads to a life of 'righteousness and peace and joy brought by the Holy Spirit' (Romans 14:17).

Paul prayed for the community in Rome: 'May the God of hope bring you such joy and peace in your faith that the power of the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope' (Romans 15:13).

Peter, too, wrote to those who were following Jesus: 'You are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described, because you believe; and you are sure of the end to which your faith looks forward, the salvation of your souls' (1 Peter 1:8). In his Letter to the Romans Paul wrote: 'Through our Lord Jesus Christ by faith, we are judged righteous and at peace with God, since it is by faith and through Jesus that we have entered this state of grace in which we can boast about looking forward to God's glory' (Romans 5:1-2).

Paul recognized that he and his community were constantly graced by God. He invites them to remain open to that gracious love, upheld by their knowledge that Jesus remained convinced even on the cross that his Father's unconditional love would remain with him and redeem him from death. Their experience of the Spirit of Jesus among them was such as to 'remove all bounds to hope' (Romans 15:13). It is the same for us.

Jesus is frequently called 'saviour' (see, for example, Luke 2:3; Acts 5:31, 13:23; 1 Timothy 1:1, Titus 1:4, Titus 3:6; 2 Peter 1:1, 3:18; 1 John 4:14). In Jesus his disciples experienced God giving meaning and direction to their lives. It was Jesus who brought them into intimate communion with the Father. Peter claimed that Jesus was 'the only one by whom we can be saved' (Acts 4:12). In a Letter composed within the community of the Beloved Disciple we read: 'anyone who has the Son has life; anyone who does not have the Son does not have life' (1 John 5:12). Paul claimed that Jesus was the 'yes' to all the promises made by God (see 2 Corinthians 1:20).

This was the experience of Jesus' disciples. It was also the experience of those who, throughout the Roman Empire, came to know Jesus through the Christian community. Paul observed that both Jew and Gentile had found communion with God 'by being redeemed in Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:24). Jesus was the answer to the hopes and dreams of Israel. He was also the answer to the hopes and dreams of the nations. Paul noted this in his letter to the Colossians: 'The good news which has reached you is spreading all over the world and producing the same results as it has among you ever since the day when you heard about God's grace and understood what this really is' (Colossians 1:6). So it is that we read: 'The living God is the Saviour of the whole human race' (1 Timothy 4:10). 'God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race' (Titus 2:11).

The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple expresses the same insight. The Samaritans declare: 'We know that he really is the saviour of the world' (John 4:42; see 1 John 4:14). Jesus himself declares: 'I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; he will have the light of life' (John 8:12; see John 9:5). After the Sanhedrin had decided to kill Jesus, we hear: 'Jesus was to die for the nation – and not for the nation only, but to gather together into unity the scattered children of God' (John 11:51-52). The authorities complained: 'The whole world is running after him' (John 12:19). Some Greeks at the festival asked to see Jesus (John 12:21) and Jesus' words in response to this request are: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). 'He is the sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours, but the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:1-2).

Our search for meaning, for salvation, is in reality a search for love, and a search for love that goes beyond all the limits of this finite world. Our search is a religious one, a longing for a love that is unconditional and unrestricted. This is the kind of love Jesus gave. When he loved them, his disciples believed that his love was the love of God. Jesus' love engaged their religious

experience, drew them into the mystery, and invited them into communion with God. When Jesus liberated them, they experienced it as a liberation brought about by God. They found themselves able to call God 'Abba', as Jesus did. Jesus put words to God's Word and gave a face to God's Glory. They came to recognize him as the one through whom God was communicating with them in human terms. Surrounded by Jesus' love they came to realize that Love was the real name for what they had, till then, called God.

No doubt their insight into the meaning of Jesus came only gradually, and deepened throughout the years he was with them, and then throughout the years after Jesus' death when they experienced his presence among them. Their thoughts kept coming back to the cross. In that hour of darkness, when the pain, and frustration, and sin and anger of his enemies fell upon him and tried to crush him – it was then that he showed who God really is, by the manner in which he kept believing and kept loving, and what we, as human beings, are capable of when we believe in God's power to save. In the light reflected from the cross, everything else Jesus said and did became a sign of God's redeeming and saving love. To contemplate Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:37) is to see unrestricted, unconditional love – a love offered to every human being. Anyone who wants may 'draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation' (Isaiah 12:3). Anyone who believes can find meaning there for his or her life, healing, and direction. We can find there the communion with God that our hearts desire. The language of the cross is, indeed, 'God's power to save' (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Jesus' disciples invite each of us to join Thomas in recognizing in Jesus 'my Lord and my God' (John 20:28), and, knowing we are loved, to grow into the fullness of life for which we are made and for which we long.