

What do we mean by Salvation?

About sixty years ago an uncle told me a story. He had been to church and was waiting at a bus stop when a young man accosted him with the words: Are you saved? His reply took the form of a question: Are you married?

Quite what was in uncle's mind is not clear, except that he was raising an important question. Are these two questions alike? The 'married' question can be answered definitively by presenting a marriage certificate. Could the 'saved' question be answered with the same certainty?

John Wesley would certainly have thought so. Famously he summarized his gospel message in this way:

All men need to be saved.

All men can be saved.

All men can know they are saved.

All men can be saved to the uttermost.

This little creed is sometimes referred to as 'the four alls of Methodism'. It has been revered and debated for three centuries.

The young man in my story had a very particular view of 'salvation' – and it was not far from John Wesley's notion. Billy Graham used a slightly different definition: salvation is about being right with God. The 'four alls' of John Wesley can lead one into a theological rose garden of colour, fragrance and mystery. 'Tis mystery all'.

In John's Gospel chapter 14 there is a verse we hear at funerals – and other times too, of course. In it Jesus blesses his disciples with his peace. My peace I give to you. This peace was not simply Jesus in a cheerful mood. Happy, reflective, puzzled – moods come and go. Jesus was pointing to something characteristic of him, something essential his nature. He might have been content simply to cheer up his disciples my 'putting on' a show of merriment. But they would have seen through that in a moment, given the rather strange circumstances in which Jesus said it. Jesus was blessing them with something that was truly his own, not something painted on or adopted for the occasion.

In fact, What Jesus was about to undergo could not possibly be met with blithe, cheery unconcern. Without that deep inner peace that was integral to himself and grounded in the love of God – without that peace the experience of crucifixion would have destroyed him utterly. So put out of your mind any mere optimism or 'blithe unconcern'. Jesus was not wrapped in a hermetically-sealed bubble of divine love, like an Ebola patient in intensive care. Jesus' entire well-being was being offered to all those who needed it, beginning with the disciples who would very soon have to put out of their minds any idea of private bliss.

Can we bring this idea – salvation – into better focus for the twenty-first century, so we can all understand it?

To begin with let's look at another word: shalom. It's a Hebrew word closely related to the word salaam with which Muslims greet one another; they both mean 'peace be with you', a sentiment which we Christians express in words such as *May the peace of God keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Christ Jesus our Lord*, which we employ more often as a word of farewell rather than of greeting.

Peace, knowledge, love – an attempt at a summary of total well-being in the face of absolutely anything that might be in any way threatening. Obviously part of it, for us, is the inner certainty of a secure relationship with God in Christ, a profound awareness that we are forgiven and accepted and that our lives are headed in a new direction. We have been invited into the same boat with Jesus, accepting the aching heart of the world and longing to share that peace.

Wait a minute, though. Doesn't forgiveness have something to do with it?

You may be glad to know that that's the subject of an upcoming post.