

Images of Salvation

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, September 2005.

Part 1: Family (Colossians 1:15-23, Luke 15:11-32)

Here's a question for you. What is heart of the Christian faith? In just one word. Have a think about that for a moment. Well, I drew up a shortlist. And it included words like 'faith', 'love', 'community', and a whole lot more. But when I had to narrow it down to just one word, I realised my answer has to be the word salvation. Which is another word for 'being saved'.

Now, obviously that raises lots of questions for people. Being 'saved' from what? What do we mean by 'saved' anyway? Normally when people talk about 'saving' it's to do with their bank account, or what the England goalkeeper is failing to do these days. We live in a society where most people don't have a clue what a lot of traditional Christian words mean. Words like salvation.

So this week we're starting a three-part, sermon series that we're calling 'Images of Salvation'. And what we're going to do, this week and for the next two weeks, is to take a look at the pictures we're given in the Bible of what salvation means. So hopefully, by the end of the three weeks, when somebody talks about 'salvation' or 'being saved' we'll have a clearer idea of what they're talking about.

The main picture that's used in the Bible to illustrate salvation is being a part of a family. A loving and supportive family. And that's the big issue we're focussing on this week. Salvation as being part of a family. Because one thing's clear in the Bible. If you ask the question: 'What's wrong with the world?', the answer that comes back time after time is this: broken relationships. Broken relationship between people and God, and broken relationships between people.

Salvation means God putting right what's gone wrong in our world, rescuing our damaged relationships. And because of that, the people who wrote the Bible use three very powerful images to illustrate salvation, all to do with restored relationships. These are: regeneration, reconciliation and adoption. Don't worry if they sound a bit technical - they're important themes if we want to understand the heart of the Christian faith.

a) Regeneration: Another word for regeneration is 'new birth' or being 'born again'. And there's lots of language of new birth in the teaching of Jesus (John 3:3-8). It's also there in other places in the New Testament too (1 John 5:1-4).

The problem is, though, that most people don't like the phrase 'born again'. People use it to refer to a particular type of overenthusiastic Christian ('you're not one of those 'born again' Christians are you?'). I've heard people say: 'Well I'm a Christian but not one of those 'born again' Christians!' But that's a real misunderstanding. The Bible makes it clear that new birth, regeneration, isn't just for a certain kind of emotional Christian who likes drum kits in services, and jumps around a lot.

The experience of having a new start in life, a kind of new birth, ought to be the experience of Christians everywhere. It's what we're reminded about in our baptism service. The picture-language of the water of baptism is about rising out of the water as a person who's been renewed. I don't know if you've ever spotted the parallels between the birth of a baby, as the waters break, and Christian baptism. New life from the waters. And then there's the idea of washing clean the dirt of the past. And there are even overtones of drowning: the death of an old self, the birth of a new person. It's all in there.

And that's why the baptism service, in even the most traditional of churches, talks about people being 'born again'. It's underlining the fact that being a Christian is about being given a new start in life. Whatever we've done in the past can be washed away by God and forgiven. We can all have a new start.

The other thing about this picture of new birth is that it's an image taken from a family. Babies aren't just born to make their own way in the world, they're born into a family. So the new birth we experience makes us

members of God's family and gives us brothers and sisters in that same family. So the Bible writers tell us that what's wrong with the world is broken relationships. With God and with other people. And for that to be put right, we have to have a fresh start. We're born again into God's family.

So that's the first family image of salvation, new birth or regeneration.

- b) Reconciliation:** Another image St Paul uses to describe our restored relationship with God is reconciliation. Paul writes this in our reading from Colossians: 'Once you were alienated from God, But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body,' (Colossians 1:21, 22). And somewhere else he says this: 'when we were God's enemies we were reconciled to him through the death of his son' (Romans 5:10). Reconciliation is all about bringing together two parties who've been separated or hostile.

To get to the heart of this image of reconciliation, you've got to think back to the story of the lost son. The son decides he's going to take his inheritance now, even before his dad's died. So effectively he's saying to the old man: 'I wish you were already dead'. And then he goes off and wastes all the money and gets into a mess. But the story tells us that the father never gives up on him, he's waiting at the window for his son to return. And when he does, instead of clipping him round the ear or telling him not to darken his door again, he rushes out to him and throws his arms around him. That, says Jesus, is what God's like. Longing to welcome people back into his family, longing for reconciliation. Even after we've turned away and rejected God. He's still waiting for us to come home.

And Paul says a bit more about this theme of reconciliation. He says that God's not only reconciled us to himself. He's also given us a job of reconciliation. So it's our job to work to reconcile people to each other, in our society, in our world, in our neighbourhoods and families. And it's our job to call other people to be reconciled to God too. So that's the second family image of salvation: reconciliation.

- c) Adoption:** Another way Paul talks about the restoration of relationship between us and God is with the image of adoption into God's family. He tells the Roman Christians: 'For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). The word Paul uses for 'sonship' is a Greek word meaning adoption. And then he uses the Aramaic word Abba, which is a family word for Father. He's telling us that when we're adopted into God's family, we can see God as a loving father. Not some distant force or strict headmaster. A loving father who's adopted us into his family.

I want to tell you about a woman I know called Kathy. Kathy came to faith relatively late in life. She'd never attended a church or read the Bible. And I asked her one day what it felt like to become a Christian for the first time. She described it as being like coming home for the first time. She felt like she was a small child, being wrapped up in a big, family blanket by a parent who really loved her. Now, Kathy hadn't ever been to church or read the Bible. So she had no idea that the Bible uses the picture language of being in a loving family with a loving father to describe salvation. But her own experience told her what was going on. Becoming a Christian for Kathy was a homecoming. It was an adoption into the Father's family.

I believe there's challenge for lots of us in this theme of salvation as a new start and a returning home, but the challenge will be a bit different, depending on your background.

- a)** We're in an interesting situation as a church in that a high proportion of people who come to our services wouldn't describe themselves as practising Christians. Lots of people at the 10 o'clock service in particular are new to church, or may be coming back after many years. Which is really exciting. But for lots of those people, there comes a point where they just know want to go deeper in faith. They've been dipping their toe in the water for a while, just testing it out. But after a while, they know they want to make a deeper commitment to faith in God. Maybe for you, today's images of salvation as a new start in life, and as a returning home have been meaningful images. Something you want to experience more for yourself. If that's you, then you might want to say your own quiet prayer of deeper commitment to God.

b) In most churches, you also have a number of people who've been practising Christians for many years. But their faith has always been more at the level of the head than the heart. And their faith has never really come alive in a personal and meaningful way. Well, again, if that's you, you might want to pray a prayer too: a prayer that God will warm your heart with what it really means to be in his family. That you'll experience for yourself the joy and warmth and security of having a new start, of being reconciled, and adopted by God.

We're at the start of a new school term. We're going back to work after a summer break. It's a good time to take a fresh look at our values and commitments, and our priorities in life. It's a good time, whatever your background, to begin experience a whole new dimension of God's love in your life.

Let me encourage you to take a new step of faith and commitment this morning.

Part 2: Battle (1Kings 18:20-29, Luke 10:17-24)

Last week, we saw that one image of salvation in the Bible is the family. God's a loving father, like the father in the story of the prodigal son, who longs for people to come home and be a part of his family. So salvation's about coming home, it's about relationships being restored and healed.

But this week we're looking at a very different image of salvation in the Bible, which is the image of warfare and battle. In our baptism service there's a sort of blessing that goes like this: 'Fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and continue his faithful soldier and servant to the end of your life'.

Now, think about that for a moment. Don't you think it's odd when we're baptising a small child, we launch into this military language? It's weird - as if the vicar comes up to a baby in a pram and starts going on about Sherman tanks and nuclear warheads. What's it all about? The answer is that in the Bible salvation isn't only seen as a homecoming to a Father's home. It's also seen as a battle.

St Paul talks about 'putting on the armour of light' (Rom 13:12). He talks about holding weapons of righteousness (2 Cor 6:7) and having divine weapons that can demolish strongholds (10:3-6). He talks about putting on 'armour of God' (Ephesians). He encourages his friend Timothy to endure like a good soldier (2 Tim 2:3). Paul would have seen Roman soldiers on every street corner. Rome was the military occupying power. So for Paul, the army imagery's taken directly from everyday life. A bit like living in present-day Iraq.

And this imagery of warfare is not just in Paul. The book of Revelation is an dramatization of the spiritual battle between good and evil. It's dramatic and sometimes violent. The message of the whole NT is this: There's a battle on. You can't pretend it's not happening. Church isn't always cosy and reassuring, church should be like a military camp where we're equipped and trained for battle.

But if we're in a battle situation, who's the enemy? Well, there's a good summary in that sentence from the baptism service: 'Fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world and the devil'.

1) 'Sin'. In the Bible, the word sin can mean a few things. It can mean broken relationships. It can mean our rebellion against God. It can mean wrong things we do. But sometimes, sin is seen as an alien, invading force that takes over the body of its victims. (Did you ever see the monster in the film Alien? That's exactly how Paul describes sin, an alien life-force that grows inside a person, gradually destroying them): 'It is no longer I myself who do it,' says Paul, 'but it is sin living in me' (Romans 7:17). The letter of James speaks in language that's even more like Ridley Scott's Alien taking over a person: 'Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death' (James 1:14, 15).

So sin is seen as an alien power that's trying to take me over. What does that mean in practical terms? It means the biggest battle I fight is in *here*, in the human heart. It's about right and wrong, good and evil, the values and priorities I live by.

It means being honest about questions like these: Am I tempted to bend the truth to get on in my job?

Do I lose my temper, or have I been violent towards another person? Do I ever gossip about somebody behind their back? Is there somebody I really hate? Do I get resentful when I see something I can't afford? Do I lose my cool when I'm driving? Do I give in to lustful thoughts, or have I been physically intimate with somebody I shouldn't have? Have I taken something that wasn't mine? Do I harbour resentments from something in the past? Am I tempted to give up on my faith? Or walk out on a relationship I'm committed to? Is there a secret, darker side to me that other people don't know about?

Now, you might say: 'No, I've never experienced any of those things'. And I'll say: 'I don't believe you!' Because the truth is that the human heart is a battleground. Any of the things we've just talked about - lying, hatred, violence, lust, bitterness, and so on - have the power to grow inside a person and end up damaging them. Paul and James say it's like an enemy taking us over and destroying us. Or at least holding us back from the fullness of life God wants to give us.

That's why we talk about Jesus Christ 'conquering sin'. It's as if on the cross, all the worst aspects of human nature are dumped onto Jesus and they're put to death there, so you and I can be freed from them. And we can know God's help and strength in the battles that rage inside here. So it's a battle against sin, that impulse inside me to do what's wrong. It's also a battle against 'The world'.

- 2) **'The World'**. That word 'world' is used in two different ways in the Bible. One is just neutral (the world around us). But the other sense is negative (the Bible talks about not being conformed to the world, or being worldly). In that sense, it means the networks of people and systems in our world that are turning their back on God, and ignoring God's will. So 'world' means pressures on us from our culture.

It's not only the sin inside us that we're fighting against. Often it's things in the culture around us that pull us away from God. Pressures to adopt values and lifestyles that aren't line with what God wants for us. Pressures from friends and neighbours, colleagues and the media. Pressures to downplay our faith or compromise our values. That's the pressure of 'the world'. So there's sin, which takes root inside us. There's the world, which means pressures on us from society. And

- 3) **'The devil'**. The problem here is this. If you mention the devil to most people, what they think of is the fancy dress costumes you can hire in that shop next to the Marks & Spencer food shop. With a big toasting fork, horns and a cape. The devil's become a comic book character in red tights and goatee beard.

But if you look at the Bible, and our baptism service, you'll find a rather shocking claim. That there is a real, invisible force of evil at work in the world. It's a force that goes beyond simply our own damaged human nature, or the wrong values of our society. Almost every book of the New Testament warns us to be on our guard against the devil. I was just astonished when I realized that. Having said that, we can safely throw out the horns and pitchfork. Those were just an invention of medieval artists. But I now believe we have to take seriously the reality of some sort of invisible force of evil in the world.

As I was growing up, I knew that the idea of the devil was superstitious nonsense. I knew that in a scientific culture like ours, nobody could possibly believe in a force of evil in the world. I was very sophisticated in those days! As the years have gone by, I find myself taking the words of Jesus about the devil more seriously.

Not a devil with red tights and horns. And certainly not a great dark lord who's all-powerful, as you get in horror films and Satanism. I see the devil more as a drain, that drains away what's right and true, or a black hole that sucks out goodness. Or a disease that attacks a healthy body. Or a computer virus that corrupts a healthy hard-drive. That's what I mean when I say I believe in the devil.

So to be a Christian means to be in a battle. It's a battle against the sin in our own hearts, against damaging influences of the world, and against a force of evil that drains away goodness. What difference does it make to be a practising Christian? Two things: for now and for the future.

- 1) **For Now**: To be a believer is to be on God's side. We're not fighting alone against our own weaknesses, against the pressures of the world, and forces of evil. God himself is our help and strength. He sends his Spirit into our hearts to guide us and empower us. He gives us other believers so we can support each other.

He can give us strength and self-control, when we come to the end of our own strength. We're not alone in the fight. God is a present help in times of trouble.

2) Future: To be a believer is not only to be on God's side, it's to be on the winning side. For now, there's a battle on the earth, and it's being fought in every human heart. But we have God's promise that one day sin, the world and the devil will all be defeated enemies. That the struggle will be over. We have a promise of future glory.

Sometimes, when the battle's hard, when the pressures of the world seem irresistible, when evil seems to be getting the upper hand, when the compulsions in our own hearts seems to be corroding us from within, we need to hang onto that promise. The final victory is certain. And one day all our trials, tribulations and battle scars, will all be forgotten. As it says in the Book of Revelation: one day God will wipe every tear from every eye. But for now, let's not be naive about the world we live in and the lives we're living. There's a battle on.

Part 3: Law-Court (Romans 5:1-11, Luke 18:9-14)

I've got a friend called Anthony, and recently Anthony's dad died of cancer. Anthony used to spend hours driving up and down the motorway to Manchester to see his dad before he died. But after he'd done it a few times, he started to get tired of the long drives from Surrey. So somebody suggested he could fly up instead. It turns out there's a small airline that runs a shuttle from Gatwick to Manchester. So that's what he did.

Each week he'd sit in the departure lounge at Gatwick waiting for the flight. And as he waited, he noticed a man who always seemed to be in the departure lounge with him. This man would walk around, making comments on how the airline was doing, and how the staff were performing. 'Well done, that person's doing her job well', or 'That's no good, he really needs to get his act together'. And he'd write things down on a pad of paper.

At first, he thought the man must be a passenger who was hard to please. But then it dawned on him: maybe the man worked for the airline. So the next time he heard him discussing people's work, Anthony went up to him and said: 'Sorry to bother you, but do you work for the airline?' And the man turned round and said: 'Work for the airline? I own the airline!' Now, remember the story, because we'll come back to it in a minute.

We've reached the last part in our series *Images of Salvation*, where we're looking at the picture-language the Bible uses to describe what it means to be a Christian. And this week we're looking at image taken from a *law-court*. Guilt and innocence, judges and acquittal, and so on. The Bible talks about God as a loving Father, but it also says he's a judge, who can't turn a blind eye to wrongdoing.

But the moment we say God judges evil, or that people have fallen short, we have a problem. In our society, the one thing you can't do is judge other people. We're a laid-back and tolerant society, where it's unacceptable to say another person's made a wrong lifestyle-choice: we should mind our own business. We're also told that the feelings of guilt we experience are unhealthy. We should accept ourselves the way we are. We need to have a healthy self-esteem, and that means putting aside feelings of guilt.

So we've got a problem. The Bible talks about guilt and judgement as something real, that we have to get to grips with. But fashionable pop psychologists says guilt's negative and unnecessary, and they hate the Christian language of sin. Who's right?

Well, I suppose it makes a difference whether the person judging has a right to judge. And it makes a difference whether the guilt people feel is real guilt or false guilt. And that brings us back to the story about Anthony. The man at the airport had a right to make judgements about the airline staff, because he owned the airline! He wasn't criticising because he was having a bad day, or because he wanted to upset people. He was the owner of the airline, he was responsible for it. As those people's employer he had a right to expect certain standards of work, and criticise shortcomings.

The Bible talks about God as judge of the earth. And it talks about a day of judgement. But does God have any right to judge humanity? Well, if we take seriously who God is, then of course he does. He's the creator of life,

the sustainer of life. The source of all goodness. If God can't judge evil, who can? And frankly, if God refuses to judge evil, there's no hope for the world. There's no reason to believe good will triumph in the end. If God doesn't judge, the Hitlers of this world could end up on the winning side.

And what about our feelings of guilt - should we forget guilt and just accept ourselves the way we are? Well, there is such a thing as false guilt. There are people who feel ashamed and guilty all the time, with no reason. And false guilt is obviously a bad thing. But there's also such a thing as real guilt. The Bible says it's due to something called sin: sin means the relationships we damage, the wrong things we do, the wrong thoughts we have, the wrong things we say, the good we *don't do*. As St Paul says: 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23).

So here's the scenario. God is holy and perfect. But we're imperfect. We don't even live up to our own ideals, never mind God's perfection. So God has a right to judge the evil and damage in the world, from huge evils like genocides, right down to me losing my temper when I'm driving (I know a lot of you related to that one last week!).

So what can we do about this gap, between our high ideals and the rather messy reality? Well, the answer some people give is education: if we educate people they'll become better. Some people put their hope in evolution: as a species we'll evolve into better people. The answer given by religion is to try harder - giving people rules and laws to keep. Steven Spielberg says the answer will come from outer space, with an enlightened race of aliens showing us a better way to live.

The problem is, none of these seem to be working. History shows that humanity shed more blood in the past century than all the previous centuries put together. Evolution and education don't seem to have improved us morally. Look at what most people use the Internet for: we just have more sophisticated ways to sin. Giving people more rules leaves them more depressed when they can't keep them. And there's no sign of any aliens yet.

It's a bleak scenario. Humanity stands in the dock, guilty as charged, facing a God who won't allow evil to have the last word in his world. So here's one possible solution: God wipes us all out to cleanse the earth of wrongdoing. Well, he could do that. But God's chosen a different route. Here's how St Paul puts it: (Romans 5:6-8).

It's all about the cross. Paul says Jesus Christ took the judgement that was due to all of us when he died on the cross. As he died, the damage and brokenness of the world were piled onto Jesus. And it was all put to death. Remember, the message of Christmas is that Jesus is actually God in human form. In other words, God himself pays the penalty, and we're acquitted. Paul says Jesus 'becomes sin' for us (2 Corinthians 5:21).

It's an extraordinary scene: the judge steps down from his seat of judgement, moves over to the dock and accepts the punishment himself.

Now, you might say: 'That's all very well, but why does it have to involve punishment at all, especially a death sentence? Why couldn't God say: "I'll just forgive people, let them off?" '

The answer is that the cross shows how seriously God takes the evil and the sin in the world. If I have a headache and I go to see the doctor, and he says 'Take a Paracetamol', that means what I have isn't very serious. If he sends me straight to hospital for an 8-hour operation, that means what I have is very serious. The scale of the treatment needed reveals the scale of the problem.

The message of the cross is that God takes human wrongdoing, and our rejection of him, seriously. It's a road, says God, that leads to death: physical and spiritual death. But the death sentence has already been carried out. It's the judge himself who dies, and the person in the dock who walks free. God himself bears the penalty. But of course the next part of the miracle is that Jesus rose again from the dead. In the end, death itself dies.

Over the past three weeks we've been asking the question: *What is a Christian?*

- Two weeks ago, we looked at the image of *family*, and we said being a Christian is like returning home to a loving parent.
- Last week we looked at the image of *warfare*. We said a Christian is somebody who recognizes there's a battle raging in our world and in the human heart, a battle of right and wrong, good and evil. A Christian is a person who knows which side they're on.
- This week we looked at the image of a *law-court*. We said a Christian is a person who's been set free. How does that happen? Because the same Father who welcomes us home is also the victorious King in the battle against evil. He's also the Judge who takes our place in the dock and accepts a punishment that we deserve. They're the same God.

A Christian is a person who can look at this amazing God and say: 'You know, that's *my Father* you're talking about there'. I wonder: are those words that you can say?