

## SALVATION.

### CHAPTER 9.

The Lord is my light and my salvation;

Whom then shall I fear?

The Lord is the strength of my life;

Of whom then shall I be afraid?

So wrote the psalmist; and in doing so he made it clear that the idea of salvation was far older than the teaching of Jesus. But what is salvation? And what did those people so long ago mean by the word? The Church of England embraces a few profound truths. It says Salvation is mental, bodily, and spiritual health; and I believe this is profoundly true. It also says that salvation comes only through Jesus; I am not so sure about that. Why should not the Almighty let a man find salvation in another way if he wants to?

It is said that Jesus claimed that salvation came only through him. But what about all those who lived before his time? Even if you say Jesus meant that after he had lived, no-one approached the Father but by him, what about all those who have never heard about him; or only heard of him from the dishonest purveyors of indulgences, ancient and modern, whom anyone could see were dishonest? The local Quaker Meeting recently arranged a number of Lenten addresses by representatives of other faiths. The best was about Judaism; and the lecturer's main point was that Judaism was monotheistic, and that when Jews prayed they thought or believed they had a one-to-one relationship with God. They were talking to Him, not to an intermediary; nor were they talking to someone who was hard of hearing, so that their heart-felt prayers somehow did not reach Him. He heard. How could I bring myself to say they were all mistaken; that actually they were all talking to an anthropomorphic image of God they had in their minds, because you can only approach the Father through Jesus?

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One only has to phrase the question in that way, to see how grossly discourteous and ludicrous it is. So one of the things emphasized by Jesus, if the Last Discourses in John's Gospel are reliable, in my judgement is totally and absolutely wrong!

Albert Schweitzer held the view that Jesus made mistakes; and I'm afraid when you go into it, with however much loyalty, the more mistakes you find he made. He said he would draw all men to himself when he was lifted up from the earth. Yet it simply is not true; he only draws a small fraction of the people of this country to himself. It is a bold man who claims to know and to circumscribe the power and discretion of the Almighty; and Jesus claimed to know the will of the Almighty then and for all time. I just do not believe it. I can understand why Jesus, in his distress before his Passion, should have wished that these things were true; but they were not. We all indulge in wishful thinking; and Jesus was no exception.

Consider the appalling crimes of Christ's Church. Consider for example, the 4<sup>th</sup> Crusade which captured, not Jerusalem, but Constantinople and then sacked it, the capital of the Eastern Christian Empire. H.A.L.Fisher in his History of Europe calls it the most shameful act in medieval history; and who can quarrel with that? And its instigator, Pope Innocent III, so far from repenting in sackcloth and ashes, then set on foot the Albigensian Crusade which was the first genocide of a fellow Christian people. Consider the Papacy in the reign of Pope Alexander VI, the father of Duke Cesare Borgia, a man of devilish wickedness, whom even the father dreaded in the end. The founder of a society or church cannot dictate the path along which it will develop. It takes on a life of its own; and may develop in ways which would have appalled its founder if he had been able to foresee the future. Jesus did pretty well in foreseeing the destruction of Jerusalem, if the authorities rejected his Gospel of peace. Not many people would have foreseen that if Jesus were rejected, the zealot's counsel would prevail, with disastrous results. But even with Jesus there must have been a good deal of self-deception; or else his mind worked in a different way from ours. He avoided the need

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to foresee that his church might develop in unfortunate ways, by prophesying that he would be returning shortly. He foresaw that others might come claiming to be the Messiah; but not apparently that his own followers would be corrupted by power.

If his mind worked in a different way from ours, then it is not much good our trying to imitate him, because it is not possible. If his life was not like ours, then we can only admire him; but then he is no Redeemer, because we cannot follow him, which was the heart of his teaching. We can only imitate him, if his life was like ours. Actually it looks as if his mind was very much like ours: a triumph of hope over experience, which we all indulge in from time to time.

But the clergy would say that everyone knows that Christ's religion is other-worldly; he said so himself at his trial. It is quite unnecessary to repeat his miracles; modern medicine does it for you. What is necessary is to get into heaven; and they hold the keys. And there is no getting away from the fact that during his earthly life Jesus was profoundly uninterested in the wealth creation of society. He simply had no concern who was to grow the food for the community to eat, provided rich women provided the money for his own needs. Maybe he was right: if a greater than Solomon had appeared, then recognising him was more important than getting in the harvest. Finally the clergy say they have kept alive the message of the resurrection; for which we must all be profoundly thankful. But Jesus was wrong, if he thought that you can neglect the harvest and community indefinitely.

This attitude, of despising the welfare of the secular community, lasted in the Church at least until the time of Marcus Aurelius, AD 160 to 180; at that time Christians would not lift a finger to support the Empire. The Empire was already beginning to fail due to the pressure of the barbarians on the frontier; yet Christians refused to join the Army, which was understandable, and refused to join the Civil Service, which was not. Their conduct surely was selfish and short sighted; and it is hardly surprising they were persecuted. Civilization

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took a long time to collapse; but in the end it did, when the German hordes crossed the frozen Rhine 200 years later, and turned Gaul into a flaming desert. Even at the time of Aurelius the danger must have been fairly obvious: he spent most of his 19 years as Emperor on the frontier trying to keep the barbarians out. Was the saving of a few saintly souls of more value than the collapse of the Empire? The parable of the lost sheep says “Yes”! In secular terms, his Ministry was so irresponsible that there could only be one end to it; in religious terms, miracles or Divine acts of healing were necessary to validate it.

The clergy’s answer to all this is to preach about the mortal Jesus, what he said and what he did 2000 years ago, and claim he was never mistaken about anything; not about the risen Christ, and the mighty acts of power he has performed through them, the clergy. The Liturgy makes it only too clear that we are still as hopelessly sunk in sin this week as we were last! In other words, although Christ “saved” us from our sins, it is an ineffective salvation in this world; because it fails to put matters right. The Liturgy voices the somewhat presumptuous hope of sitting on Christ’s throne with him after death (see the new Easter Collect in Common Worship); which is apparently the time when his “salvation” becomes effective. And the clergy welcome the invitation to repeat Christ’s healing miracles with lukewarm enthusiasm. For them it is mostly talk, and little action in this world. Salvation is reserved for the next. And if you ask them what they have done through the power of the spirit of the God who created the Universe, they have no answer; because they haven’t done anything.

The well known healer, Harry Edwards, who flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, refused to use the word “miracles” to describe the Gospel stories; and insisted on calling them “healings”. He ends one of his books by saying that after 2000 years we are just beginning to have the knowledge and experience to appreciate that the Gospel “healings” should be taken literally! Whether he was right or wrong, he was a voice crying in the

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wilderness; and the Church of England regarded his claims with incredulity, as did the medical profession at the time. If however he was right, he convicts the clergy of a dereliction of duty; healing the sick was the greater part of Christ's Ministry, according to tradition. In the Gospels healing and preaching go together.

So was Professor Eucken right to say the clergy have led us all down a cul-de-sac? Professor Eucken was professor of philosophy at Jena in the 1900s, and wrote a book called "The Truth of Religion", in which he said that though Christianity was much the best religion the world has known, the clergy had led it down a cul-de-sac in which 'there was lost all inner relation to reality, all inner obligation, all hope of inner renewal, so that life loses all soul and value and becomes a mere appearance'. Well, there comes a time when fundamental beliefs matter; it is the same whether it is a political party or a religious church. If a political party does not do its thinking, and it becomes obvious that it no longer believes in anything or stands for anything, sooner or late the electorate throws them out. Religion is similar, except that people just leave. Religion is either relevant to people's ordinary lives, or it is unsatisfying. Now the centre of Christian worship is the Eucharist, at which the congregation symbolically eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. At least if it is not symbolism, it is the most revolting metaphor and ceremony. It is supposed to symbolise Christ's spirit coming to dwell in them: see the prayer of humble access. A child could be forgiven for thinking that this should result in tremendously creative action; Christ himself said it would. But in fact it doesn't. Christians do not trust each other, and even find it hard to reach a common understanding on local church committees; at least that is my experience. It is as though the words of comfort in the Eucharist are just words, soothing us all to sleep, but empty of all meaning. It is an example of the confusion of substance with appearance, which lawyers are so familiar with; it is often what legal cases are about. It is a cul-de-sac.

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To sum up, looking at things from the point of view of an impartial outsider, the present condition of the Church of England is susceptible to two interpretations. Put in extreme form, they are as follows:-

- a) We are the faithful remnant of the Children of Israel, who are keeping the flag flying, the lamp burning, in a progressively pagan world; and we must look forward to the second coming of Christ to put all things right.
- b) It is commonly said there are no bad regiments, only bad officers; and there is only one body at whose door to lay the blame for the present fiasco of the empty pews, and that is the clergy's door.

The answer to this invidious choice, is to look at the ascent of man in evolutionary perspective, and then the life and Ministry of Jesus are seen in context. I agree with Professor Sir John Seeley that a prophetic tradition is among the greatest blessings a community can have. Similarly, I agree with Edward Gibbon that the worst curse is a priesthood who claim a superior knowledge. The prophets tried, without any knowledge of science still less of evolution, to peer into the future; and they saw dimly a world of righteousness, mercy, and peace. Their imagery was crude; most of them saw the future as the Gentiles paying tribute to Israel: a most unlikely prospect. But they tried to see. A priesthood claiming a superior knowledge is not trying to see. They have virtually ruled out the possibility of admitting they are ever mistaken. Now we all make mistakes; and if you do not admit it, you condemn yourself to ever increasing error. Like Hitler, after he took personal command of the Wehrmacht in Russia. It is for this reason that the laity have ten times more to teach the clergy, than the clergy have to teach the laity. The laity are by and large better educated; their experience of life is much wider; and relatively few clergymen have had a secular job long enough to know what the temptations are in the secular world, and how to cope with them. The position of the clergy of the C.of E. is remarkably like that of the Pharisees in the time of

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Jesus; to their great credit they had preserved the faith of their forefathers, but were themselves incapable of change.

The crucial question everyone has to ask himself is what he wants to do with his salvation, once he has got it? Does he want to use it to be effective in this world, and at least try to put matters right, within his narrow field of experience? Or does he want to use it to make sure of his seat at the celestial banquet, and wash his hands of this world? In my experience you cannot opt for both. You must either serve others, or dedicate yourself to the worship of God, which some would say is serving yourself. If you want to be effective here and now, you must forget about the hereafter, and leave it to the Almighty; if your aim is to get into heaven, you condemn yourself to be ineffective in this world. I suppose that mastering a trade or profession demands the whole of one's concentration and effort; but whatever the reason, that is my experience. Kierkegaard I think agrees; he says you should will only one thing. Is it to be this world, or the next?

If it is to be in this world, then Salvation can sensibly mean bodily, mental, and spiritual health; and the way to salvation is to learn the right way to live here and now. Christ said he came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly; which could be taken as approving the desire to live this life correctly. But if Salvation is something you hope to achieve in this world, then physical, mental, and spiritual health for the individual are not enough; you need Salvation for Society or the World as well.

If it is to be the next world, then having faith that Jesus Christ is the saviour of the world is the important thing. And Jesus often said that the important thing was to preach the good news, which many have interpreted to mean beliefs are more important than conduct; they were for the judges and torturers of the Inquisition. It seems an invidious choice, until you realize that Christ's Ministry was a stage in Man's evolution.

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The three years Ministry of Jesus were wholly inadequate to give detailed guidance through the labyrinth of life today. And indeed he himself half confirmed this; saying there were many things his disciples could not bear to hear now. There is no alternative to using one's own judgement. It is no good asking the whole time what Jesus would have done.

The limitations of an other-worldly Gospel were exposed when the Roman Church began to exercise political power. It discovered it had no philosophy or theology beyond that of a personal salvation; which was of course hopelessly inadequate to give any balanced judgement in the world of affairs. So all sense of proportion was lost, and the world had to endure the wars of religion and the Inquisition. If you are going to wield political power, you must have a reliable philosophy of political power, in order to cope. And you will not find this in the Gospels, however hard you look. So anyone who relies only on the Jesus of the Gospels, must steer well clear of politics, and leave it to others. The secular world coped with the irresponsibility of the Church by working out its own political philosophy, and in doing so left the Church far behind. Science soon followed, and modern atomic physics has knocked away the foundation of Plato's thought and the Church's thought; and the whole rickety structure is coming down about our ears. Hence the need to re-think religion.

But the heroism of Jesus needs no theological explanation; and he invited us to carry on from where he left off.