

There is born to you this day a saviour who is Christ the Lord (Christmas Day 2020)

Many Christmases ago, perhaps 45, I read the words from St Matthew's gospel, 'His name shall be called Jesus, because he will save this people from their sins'. It was as if I had never read them before, which of course I had. This year, I did not read them. It was as if they were reading me. I spent all of Christmas quietly repeating them to myself. and went into a room alone as often as I could just to be with them. 'His name shall be Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.'

I wonder whether you have ever had an experience like that. I am lucky because I love words. I have had similar experiences with secular poems. The choir have probably done the same with pieces of music. You have put them on again and again and wallowed in them. Do you remember being 14 and in love? For about a year I was in love with Janet Dalley. I had known her at nursery school when I was 4. But at 14 I never dared speak to her. My love was tongue tied. I was terrified of all girls but Janet Dalley more than all the other. I knew when she would walk past our house and I would be looking from behind a curtain. And I would go into a room alone, put music on and just dream about her. Once I stared at her at the church youth club; she saw that I was looking and glared at me so that I almost turned to jelly.

But here I was, long long ago, ago, in love with a word , in love with Jesus. Why? Because in that moment; in the luxury of Christmas: presents, turkey, family, sumptuous promises from Matthew and Luke at church, all the dark side of life was not dismissed, but included in the light. 'There is born to you today a saviour who is Christ the Lord.' 'His name shall be Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.'

I do not entirely know why I am a Christian, any more than I know why it was my wife I fell in love with and not another girl in her the nurses' house. The most important things about us are unknowable. What I do know is that my childhood Christmases had something about them that I wanted to keep for ever. I loved Father Christmas but I was never deceived by him. Jesus was real. Father Christmas was magic.

But what do the words ***save, salvation and saviour*** mean in the Bible?

They mean, salvation from fear, salvation from the oppression of our enemies, salvation from hunger, salvation from illness and disease, salvation from ourselves, our sins and addictions, salvation from disaster, famine, war, salvation from earthquake and global warming, salvation from the bitter pangs of death and ultimate separation from love, from God and from ourselves, salvation from the world meaning nothing.

Who would not want to be saved? Who would not love Jesus, the saviour?

I have started a new group at church, an august committee of the parochial church council. It has an exclusive membership. You must be under 50 to qualify, except, of course, for me. You must have lived your life in such a way, both with your feet and your mind, that you straddle the Christian world and the secular world. You must be able to feel the lostness of the lost and have an inkling of the joy of being found. In July, this group is going to report to the PCC. Is St Mary's relevant to Maldon? To the real and deep needs, hopes and longings of

the people of Maldon? Not so that we can be entertaining to those who want to associate with us, but so that we can help Maldon to live.

Two weeks ago, we had our first meeting by Zoom. I wanted to talk about salvation. Salvation today. You may not be surprised to know, nobody else wanted to discuss this subject. Why not? Can't we be Christian without salvation? The reason is that salvation has got an awfully bad reputation. Have you ever met a keen Christian who told you that you are not saved, and it is about time you were? It is one thing to see a man walking down the road swathed in a board which tells you on both sides that the end of the world is nigh. It is quite another when a friend tells you that they have got Jesus and that you have not, but do not worry, they are praying for you, and when your prayers work you will be sure of going to heaven, and, by the way, you will never be tempted to have sex with the wrong person when you are saved or in the wrong kind of way. Many decent, liberal Christians have simply ditched the word, salvation.

So, what does the Christian faith mean to you if not salvation, I asked. 'It means not being alone. There is someone always with you', I think it was Elizabeth who said this, followed by nods from the others.

I thought that was good. In time of Covid, is not being alone a kind of salvation? Of course, many of us are alone. Can the church preach a message to the bereaved and the lonely that 'you are not alone?' I do not know. Others here know better than I do.

But in the Bible, against what most people think, salvation is not at all about booking our own little ticket to heaven when we die. It is about being set free, unlocked, into a community of salvation, in which together we become the salvation of the world: freedom from hunger; freedom from addiction; freedom from disaster; freedom from meaning nothing; freedom to love.

And this is unleashed within us when we begin to hear the angel proclaim:

'I am bringing you today good news of great joy. In the town of David a saviour has been born to you..... and this be a sign to you, you will find; a child in bands of cloth and lying in a manger' Amen.