

GROSVENOR ESSAY NO. 5



on salvation

The Doctrine Committee
of the Scottish Episcopal Church



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On Salvation

Cover illustration

Our cover design, echoing the Celtic cross of our first Essay, symbolises the centrality of the cross to Christian understandings of salvation, and echoes the 'wonderful exchange' referred to in the Eucharistic Prayer of our 1982 Liturgy.

ISBN 0905573 83 8

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Grosvenor Essay No. 5: On Salvation

Preface

This Grosvenor Essay addresses a subject which we often hear mentioned, but which we very rarely pause to think about: salvation. Yet as soon as we do start to think about salvation, we are likely to find that numerous questions start to arise. What does it mean to be ‘saved’? From what are we saved, and to what purpose? And what about ‘redemption’? What does this mean, and how does it relate to salvation?

We are of course entering theological territory over which a vast amount of labour has been expended over the centuries, to the extent that (as with all such areas) a specialist vocabulary has been developed in thinking and writing about salvation. We have where possible avoided using technical terms in this essay, but some have proved necessary, and these have been explained on their first occurrence.

As in previous essays, the Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church has considered this topic from a variety of different angles, in the hope that our multifaceted approach will ultimately cast more light than any attempt to give a single, univocal account of salvation could do. We also believe this to be a more realistic approach. ‘Salvation’ has been considered in many different ways within the Christian tradition, as men and women of different ages have reflected on the human condition, on the significance of the life and death of Jesus Christ, on the role of the Church, and on the functioning of the wider society in which that Church is set. Not only the content of their writings, but also their styles, have been widely diverse. We hope that contributions to this essay reflect both these kinds of diversity, and that they explore helpfully some elements of the richly varied material which our theme of salvation offers – without, of course, in any way pretending to be exhaustive in their coverage of that theme.

We begin by thinking about the human condition, and the need for salvation which appears to be a common human experience. We look at some of the resources offered by the Christian tradition in responding to that need, examining biblical understandings of salvation, and some of the ways in which these understandings have been developed by the community of the faithful, the Church, particularly in its sacramental tradition. We explore ‘salvation anxiety’ in the contemporary world, and we look at the ways in which the sciences have been thought of as in some sense ‘salvific’. We examine the idea that the plight of our world, facing

ecological catastrophe, offers us an important way into thinking of salvation as ecological restoration. Finally, we look at some of the ways in which the arts have offered spaces for explorations of salvation.

As in earlier essays we have eschewed footnotes in favour of an annotated bibliography, which not only offers references to materials we have found valuable in writing the essay, but also gives suggestions for further reading on topics which you may have found interesting. As usual, we have not attempted to offer a definitive understanding of our subject-matter, nor to make statements about how members of the Scottish Episcopal Church should think about it. Our more modest aim is simply to inspire thought and discussion around this matter, which must be one of central concern to Christians – and, indeed, to all of a broadly religious or spiritual turn of mind.

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1. WHY SALVATION?

At the end of her novel *The Children of Men* (1992), P.D. James describes the birth of the first infant in a very grim and frightening Britain devoid of such an event for decades. But the extraordinary thing is that the novel does not end with the wonder of that birth, but with an event subsequent to it:

From some far childhood memory he recalled the rite. The water had to flow, there were words which had to be said. It was with a thumb wet with his own tears and stained with her blood that he made on the child's forehead the sign of the cross.

In a way this impromptu (and fictional) rite of quasi-baptism poses for us the question: *why salvation?* Isn't birth itself wonderful enough? Why bother with anything else? Why not end the story with the birth, rather than with this somewhat messy, and undoubtedly irregular, Godward ceremony?

Two celebrated poems offer the gist of an answer to that question, as they articulate a tragic and disturbing vision of the human condition. In *Prayer before Birth* by Louis MacNeice we are to imagine that birth is not as wonderful as we might be tempted to think it is: quite the contrary, it is an extremely perilous business, so perilous that (ironically) salvation might well be conceived as not being born at all.

*I am not yet born, console me.
I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.*

...

*I am not yet born; O fill me
With strength against those who would freeze my
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
one face, a thing, and against all those
who would dissipate my entirety, would
blow me like thistledown hither and
thither or hither and thither
like water held in the
hands would spill me.
Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.
Otherwise kill me.*

In his poem *The Hand* R.S. Thomas suggests that even God is ambivalent about his human creatures and their capabilities, and so foresees the cost for himself of what he has enterprised:

*It was a hand. God looked at it
and looked away. There was a coldness
about his heart, as though the hand
clasped it. As at the end
of a dark tunnel, he saw cities
the hand would build, engines
that it would raze them with. His sight
dimmed. Tempted to undo the joints
of the fingers, he picked it up.
But the hand wrestled with him ...
... But God, feeling the nails
in his side, the unnerving warmth
of the contact, fought on in silence ...
... "I let you go,"
he said, "but without blessing.
Messenger to the mixed things
Of your making, tell them I am."*

Both poets, and the novelist, offer a vision of the human condition in need of help from God, from beyond, which to any Christian reader will resonate with their tradition of faith. For it is not only poetry and fiction which pose the question of salvation: so does the life of Christian prayer and worship, and the enterprise of Christian theology. From the former a very good example is found in the Anglican Franciscan form of Daily Prayer, *Celebrating Daily Prayer*. In Evening Prayer for Christmastide we find the following collect:

Almighty God, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us through your Son Jesus Christ: grant that, as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity ...

Here a theological balance is struck between the wonder of being made in the image of God – *God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them* (Genesis 1.27, AV) – and the even greater wonder of being *restored* (presumably also in that image). And so, in prayer, the question is posed to the worshipper: why is restoration through Jesus needed? *Why salvation?*

It hardly needs stating that it is a fundamental Christian belief that more than the natural processes of birth, life, and death are needed to disclose the true wonder of being human. Quite apart from any literary, liturgical, or theological discourse on the matter, the very practice of Baptism in the day-to-day life of the church makes this absolutely clear. This belief that more is needed for the wonder of being human to shine through is so embedded in our thinking, in our liturgies, in our scriptures, in the development of our tradition over two millennia, that we hardly ever explicitly ask *why* it should be so, why the belief is there, *why salvation*. It is our conviction in this essay that we *should* ask *why salvation*, for the act of asking requires us to ponder just what it is (or might be) about the natural, God-given, human condition that leaves open the need to talk of salvation.

The framework of a Christian answer to the question *why salvation?* rests in a basic conviction about the natural, God-given human condition as we actually experience it. A simple way to express this would be to say that there is enough bad news about being human, to make good news from God about it not merely worthwhile but necessary. Although being human is good, because the very possibility is brought into being by the creative and loving will of God (Genesis 1.27), at the same time it is, in some sense that is felt to be both mysterious and tragic, out of kilter with its origin, so that its goodness and glory are obscured, or even at times rendered invisible. And this is taken so seriously as to make Godward, not humanward, talk of salvation natural to Christians: only God can bring being human back into kilter, can lift the veil which obscures its goodness and glory. The story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God made flesh, crucified, risen and ascended, constantly celebrated in Word and Sacrament, restoring and healing human being by bringing it into communion and fellowship with God, is for Christians *the* story of how God brings being human back into kilter and so releases its goodness and glory.

The *locus classicus* for this understanding of our human condition being one which requires salvation has been in ongoing Christian reflection on the story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This story is taken as offering profound insights into the human condition as we experience it. Whether it is understood as a 'fall' from proper relationships with God, between humans, and between humans and the natural world: whether it is seen as a 'fall' so calamitous as to render humans helpless to help themselves, or as a tragic failure to climb high enough towards God, with humankind somehow missing the point of its very being and getting more and more lost: the judgement is the same. Human life is here and now alienated from the goodness and love of its origin. It is scarred and marred by the attempt to live independently of God,

and so it is in idolatrous thrall to many gods which are not the true and living and loving God. In other words, the basic Christian understanding of human being is that it has turned away from its origin in the love and goodness of God. It has denied the kind of being it is, and so it has lost its way: hence the common human experiences of incompleteness, brokenness, and alienation. As St Augustine encourages us to pray: *our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee*. In a sense we remember only very imperfectly who we really are, creatures of the love of God: but in Christ this forgetting is overcome.

However, there remain significant differences in contemporary Christian reflection in these areas of which we ought to take note. For while Christians may agree that the human condition requires something they call *salvation*, they differ in how they conceive salvation, because they understand the human plight differently. For example, many Christians today consider that the dignity conferred on human beings in their natural state derives from our being made in the image of God: they are likely to see salvation as a cooperative effort between God and humankind, in which the proclamation of this dignity is the driving force in the quest for human rights and justice. On the other hand, those who are convinced of the impotence of sinful human beings 'out of kilter' with their origin in the love and will of God are likely to think of salvation in terms of a radical conversion given entirely by God, to which the human contribution is nil or very minimal.

We began with the question *why salvation* but it is now clear that the debate really lies not quite there. *Why salvation* ineluctably leads us into *how salvation*, because the governing question (and answer) is really neither of them. It is *what to make of human being itself?* How serious is our plight? Answers to that govern the *why*, and the *how*, and the *from what* of salvation.

For the Christian seeking insights into the idea of salvation, the single most important resource is of course the Bible. References to the Bible will be found scattered throughout this Essay; but it seems appropriate at this point to explore in some detail the range of ideas concerning salvation which may be found there.

2. BIBLICAL IDEAS OF SALVATION

2.1. *The Centrality of Salvation Language in the Bible*

Within the disparate collection of literature that constitutes the Bible there is a variety of ideas relating to the concept of salvation which remain prominent, persistent and resilient. Although written over about a millennium, and reflecting various cultures and socio-religious outlooks, salvation language remains a significant means by which writers express both personal and corporate hopes for divine deliverance from a range of physical, spiritual or political situations and anxieties. Later authors did not write in a vacuum, but consciously and explicitly drew upon the work of their predecessors. This is particularly apparent in those parts of the New Testament where the Old Testament is cited as support for notions of salvation focussed on Christ. For this reason, our discussion will offer a broadly chronological overview of the concept of salvation within the biblical texts (notwithstanding the problems of determining the specific dating of certain texts); but we will first focus on the meaning of the terms used for salvation. It needs to be recognized, however, that the biblical texts were not treated by believing communities as abstract theoretical treatises on salvation. Rather, such texts both shaped the piety of individuals and provided the framework for the corporate liturgical expressions of worship of the communities in which, and for which, they were written.

2.2. *Salvation in the Old Testament*

The Hebrew verbs *yasa* (to save, deliver, rescue) and *ga'al* (to redeem), although not representing the full range of soteriological terminology (that is to say, terminology concerned with salvation), are perhaps the two most commonly used terms to encapsulate such ideas. The translators responsible for the Septuagint (an early translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek) consistently render *yasa* by the key Greek verb *sōzō* (to save). The verb *yasa* is used in a variety of different senses which denote recipients in need of special intervention by an outside force to protect them from circumstances that threaten their wellbeing. In the Old Testament the one who brings about such salvation, or who is implored to intervene, is usually God, although acts of deliverance can come via an agent acting either knowingly or unwittingly on behalf of God. The function of God as a saviour becomes such a central aspect of God's activity that the bible often uses the description 'the God who saves'. Thus, the early Israelites receive prophetic criticism for wanting a king rather than trusting in the God who saves them: 'But you have this day rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, "No! But set a king over us"' (1 Sam 10.19). In more positive contexts, intercessors address God in a variety of petitions by acknowledging his

saving actions (Psalms 7.10; 34.18; 37.40; 72.13; 145.19). From such uses of verbal descriptions it is in some ways an obvious linguistic development to see God described in the Hebrew Scriptures as a 'saviour'.

Perhaps one of the most striking features relating to the concept of salvation is its applicability to so many situations and such a large variety of recipients. In the Genesis account Jacob prays to God for deliverance from the hand of his brother Esau (Gen 32.11). The story of the Exodus from Egypt is in its very essence a 'divine deliverance narrative'. The attendant miracles function to provide confidence in the God who is about to deliver his people. This is especially so with the plagues (Ex 7-12) that culminate with the Passover, which itself becomes the central festival in Judaism – a celebration of deliverance and salvation. Miracles also are provided that allow escape through the Red Sea (Ex 14), and miraculous provision of food in the wilderness to sustain the people who have been rescued (Ex 16.31-35). The Psalms contain many prayers calling for deliverance from the wicked (Ps 12.1; 43.1; 86.16) or more specifically from personal enemies (Ps 7; 109). Furthermore, a number of the Psalms are records of acts of thanksgiving when the intercessor has received some sought-after deliverance or rescue (Ps 18; 34; 86).

The language of *redemption* reflects the reality of the institution of slavery in the ancient world along with wider notions of subservience and dependence. Often, redemption from slavery was brought about through the payment of some kind of ransom. This imagery of paying a debt, often in some kind of metaphorical sense, is taken up by later biblical writers to portray the redemptive activity of God. The Levitical laws pertaining to slavery are within their own contemporary setting humane, allowing for the moderate treatment of destitute fellow Israelites reduced to slavery and providing a mechanism for the redemption of non-Israelites (Lev 25.39-49). This lenient attitude is based upon Israel's own experience of slavery in Egypt and the merciful deliverance received from the Lord (Lev 25.38, 55). In the book of Ruth, the heroine's fortunes are restored by a kinsman-redeemer whose actions toward Ruth restore and reintegrate her into the Israelite people. Although Boaz redeems Ruth, her mother-in-law Naomi praises God for this action. 'Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today' (Ruth 4.14a). A key aspect in this story is Boaz paying the price of redemption to acquire Ruth, when Ruth's closer relative declined this right.

The evolving concept of salvation shifts from the idea of rescue from clear and present perils, to a concern about a futurist salvation, whereby God rescues his people from final judgment and death itself. Such ideas

are already present in embryonic form in the Psalms with their recognition that it is impossible for one to praise God from Sheol (Ps 6.5), and consequently there are calls for deliverance from the forces of death (Ps 49.15). However, the impression given is that the intercessor is calling for a deliverance that delays such a fate and is not petitioning for total escape from death, which is still seen as the fate of all humanity.

By contrast, the later prophetic writings envisage an eschatological dimension to God's saving power (that is, a dimension pertaining to the end-times). Speaking of a day that is coming, Zechariah presents a vision in which day and night will be suspended (Zech 14.6-7), the wealth of the nations will be gathered to Jerusalem (Zech 14.14), and then the worship of the Lord will be inclusive with the remnants of the nations going up to worship the Lord (Zech 14.16). Some of the latest writings in the Old Testament begin to describe apocalyptic hopes of resurrection as the ultimate form of salvation. In the final part of Isaiah, although not envisaging eternal life, the prophet sees that among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as part of the restored order, life will be lengthened almost to the proportions of those patriarchs recorded in the book of Genesis, so that 'an old man will not live out his days and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred will be thought accursed' (Isa 65.20), and 'as the life time of a tree so shall be the days of my people' (Isa 65.22). Finally, in the book of Daniel, which is most likely the last part of the Old Testament to be written, there is a clear presentation of the idea of deliverance or salvation resulting in continuity of being. As part of the description of apocalyptic conflict and distress during which Michael the archangel stands watch over the people, there is the promise that 'everyone shall be delivered who is found written in the book' (Dan 12.1). Unlike the Psalms, this is not a salvation from having to descend into Sheol. Rather, it is the promise of revivification for the dead: 'many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt' (Dan 12.2). In the Psalms the vision of the future for such individuals is underdeveloped: in the book of Daniel, future hope is simply that 'they will shine like stars in the firmament' (Dan 12.3). What is striking is that this hope of salvation to everlasting life arose alongside the events of the Maccabean crisis in the second century BCE, when the concepts of martyrdom and dying for one's faith first developed. Amid circumstances that called upon believers to lay down their lives for their God, there was the expectation that such sacrifice would not only be rewarded, but would in fact be reversed as a vindication of the faith expressed and as a demonstration of the power of God. In this sense, the hope of such radical salvation was the means by which one could challenge prevailing power structures with a world-inverting belief that

status and wealth in the present life were vacuous, and that death was in actual fact the means of obtaining true life.

2.3. Salvation in the New Testament

The New Testament builds upon ideas concerning salvation that had been developed in both the Old Testament and Intertestamental era. Such notions were often shaped by apocalyptic outlooks which saw the forthcoming end-times as the period when salvation would come about fully. During intense periods of persecution (either real or perceived), these end times were seen as being close to the contemporary situation. Thus, when Jesus arrived proclaiming 'the kingdom of God is at hand' (Mk 1.15), the eschatological future is presented as being collapsed into the present moment and the soteriological blessings of that apparently future age are shown as being present, at least in an anticipatory sense.

Apart from concepts of salvation derived from the Old Testament and Intertestamental literature, it needs to be noted that the ideas of salvation contained in the New Testament are expressed in the Greek language. Consequently a new dimension and range of ideas are added to the way salvation is understood. This derives in part from the slightly different nuances of the Greek term *sōzō* (usually translated 'to save'), and also from the way in which that term had been used within the mystery religions of the Eastern Mediterranean world. The latter consideration perhaps impacts more noticeably on the Pauline Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, where there is far greater interaction with Hellenistic culture.

The term *sōzō* encapsulates, to a greater extent than the Hebrew words denoting salvation, the idea of healing coupled with medical connotations. Thus in Matt 9.22, when the woman with a hæmorrhage is cured, Jesus is able to declare: 'daughter, your faith has saved/ healed you.' Similarly, in a summary statement about Jesus' ministry in Mark's gospel, it is noted that all who touched the fringe of Jesus' garment were made well (*esōzonto*) (Mk 6.59). The term also refers to deliverance or rescue from a wider range of natural dangers or afflictions. Hence a doubting Peter, who begins to sink while attempting to walk on water, cries out: 'Lord, save me' (Matt 14.30). Within the Gospel of Luke the theme of salvation is particularly prominent in the birth narratives, with Zechariah declaring the themes of redemption and salvation almost as a refrain throughout the *Benedictus* (Lk 1.68, 69, 71, 77). Here the language is intentionally reminiscent of those Psalms which focus on the same theme, and the 'horn of salvation' has clear links with the House of David (v. 69), so that the links with the Psalms and their Davidic theology are further strengthened. Similarly, in the *Nunc dimittis* Simeon, upon glimpsing the infant Jesus, declares 'my eyes have seen your salvation' (Lk 2.30). Therefore, salvation is squarely fixed upon a

person in Luke's Gospel, even before that person performs what could be understood in Old Testament terms as an act of deliverance for the people of Israel.

One significant development in the New Testament is the way in which salvation is viewed as a fixed quality or state, and not simply as interventionist action by God. The author of the epistle to the Ephesians can therefore declare: 'by grace you have been saved' (Eph 2.5). The experience of salvation results in believers obtaining a permanent status before God. Two questions that arise from this more abstract conception of salvation are: how, and from what, have believers been saved? Addressing the first question Paul offers what appears to be a fairly straightforward and almost credal answer: 'if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Rom 10.9). While such a straightforward answer is unpacked in various ways by Paul, confession of Jesus as Lord seems to be a central test in determining those who have received salvation. Turning to the question of from what believers are saved, in a very real sense for Paul one is saved from the anger or wrath of God. This is presented with a Christological focus which sees Christ as activating salvation through his own death and placating the anger of God: 'Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God' (Rom 5.9). Related to this, the deutero-Pauline epistles speak of salvation from sin: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim 1.15). While such language may be unfashionable in certain circles, with concerns that it results in some barbaric penal substitution theory of an angry Father smiting an innocent son in a loveless manner, this is itself a caricature of the Pauline understanding, and a misrepresentation of his overall theology of salvation. Instead, Pauline theology stresses more incarnational aspects of salvation, through Christ's identification with humanity even to the point of death. Concepts of retributive justice, or of appeasing a vindictive deity, are foreign to Pauline theology. Therefore, the notion of being saved 'from the wrath of God' is only one aspect of Pauline thinking. In Romans 8, Paul introduces a cosmic dimension to the understanding of Christ's saving work. The whole of creation is portrayed as groaning under the weight of corruption. Here the notion of salvation as healing works implicitly as a metaphor of restoration. Thus creation is itself 'set free from its slavery to corruption' (Rom 8.21). It is within this greater cosmic dimension that Paul views believers' redemption and salvation to be taking place (Rom 8.24-25).

In Pauline thought the idea of salvation is therefore both narrower and broader than some of the Hebrew biblical ideas of national and

corporate salvation. First, Paul narrows the focus by seeing individuals as the primary sphere in which salvation occurs (Rom 5.9: c.f. Acts 16.34, in which the Philippian jailor and his household receive salvation). This may in part be a reflection of the social reality of the first generation of Christians, who were a minority and marginalized group. However, Paul also enlarges previous conceptions of salvation by combining notions of cosmic renewal with previous Jewish understandings. Here he may be indebted to ideas that circulated in the mystery cults, although he has certainly domesticated such ideas by giving them a Christ-centred focus.

2.4. Conclusions

The concept of salvation is represented through a multiplicity of ideas in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. For the most part these ideas are not in tension, but exhibit a growing and creative understanding of the meaning of salvation. A major theme is that salvation comes from a God who can be characterized as a saviour who is keen to rescue, deliver and save his people from affliction. Individual cries and corporate laments are common in the Old Testament, and there is an expectation that the righteous will obtain a positive hearing from God. As was noted, in the Old Testament the idea that salvation results in eternal life is a very late concept, which only finds unambiguous presentation in Daniel 12.1-3. By contrast, two centuries later, when the New Testament was beginning to be written, the notion of salvation as deliverance from death had wide currency. Salvation is seen as being obtained through profession of faith (Matt 8.5-13) or confession of Jesus as Lord (Rom 10.9). While salvation is often accompanied by baptism, as in the case of the Philippian jailor (Acts 16.30-34) or the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.35-39), baptism is never itself viewed as a vehicle of salvation, but only as a necessary public declaration of that salvation.

The language of salvation remains potent both in secular and ecclesial contexts. Its resilience is due in part to its multifaceted and adaptable nature; but this resilience is also dependent upon the human need to call upon a being who is able to provide deliverance and rescue in times of need, affliction or persecution. For the marginal and alienated in society the hope of salvation is the means of envisaging a better future. It is unsurprising, therefore, that much of the richest biblical reflection on the God who saves his people came during periods of exodus, exile or persecution. The God of the down-trodden remains the God who is their saviour.

3. SALVATION AND THE CHURCH

It is very illuminating to note that there is a variety of biblical perspectives on salvation, and that these represent a growth in thinking and understanding. We should not be surprised to find that this process continued in post-biblical times; and in the earliest Christian centuries there were in fact two developments which were to be of particular significance.

First, there was a development in the way in which people understood humanity. To the idea that salvation led to a form of life after death was added a more worked-out dualist anthropology derived from Plato (c.f. *Phaedo* 80-81), which saw human beings as composite entities consisting of a mortal, physical body (which, at a person's death, decayed), and an immortal, immaterial soul (which survived the death of the body to enter into eternal life). This dualism, which achieved particular prominence later on through the writings of Descartes, persists in the modern Christian mind, both through its exposition by Christian commentators and through its expression in liturgies. However, it sits uncomfortably with the biblical concept of 'resurrection', which clearly suggests that peoples' bodies as well as their souls were to enjoy some form of ongoing existence after death.

The decay of our current bodies suggested to St Paul that we would be resurrected with 'spiritual bodies', though there is clearly some relationship between the two (1 Cor 15.44). The timing of such resurrection was also an issue: did people enter into eternal life immediately after leaving the present one, or, as it were, 'sleep' until the final judgment? To begin with, Christians seem to have preferred the latter understanding, since the last judgment was believed to be imminent (c.f. 1 Thess 4.16). But the belief seems to have grown that (to put it crudely) on death the individual soul left the body and departed to the afterlife, which might be one of bliss or one of torment, depending on the actions of the individual during his or her earthly life (Mt 25.31-46).

The second development concerned the role played in salvation by the Church. A number of disputes between Christian groupings arose in first few Christian centuries, and it was not uncommon for one group to anathematise the other in such controversies. What gave a particular edge to a Christian individual's membership of this group or that was the declaration that to be 'saved' depended on membership of a particular group. Eventually, St Cyprian of Carthage (c.200-258) insisted that to be a Christian meant to be a member of the Church, and, moreover, that there could only be one true Church, from which some seceded (c.f. *Epistle* 51).

The fate of the individual *post mortem* therefore came to be seen to be bound up with that individual's ecclesiastical affiliation; and this in turn conferred considerable authority on the Church.

It was against this background that the familiar Christian narrative of the salvation of the believer's soul *post mortem* was developed. Once the classical understandings of paradise (in which the soul of the individual enjoyed eternal bliss), and of hell (in which the soul of the individual was condemned to eternal torment) were established, it was no great leap thence to conceive of a purgatory, to which might be consigned those souls who were neither so virtuous as to enjoy eternal blessings nor so wicked as to merit eternal punishment – that is to say, as a destination in which most of those who die are likely to find themselves. Thus there developed the mediaeval 'three-tier' cosmos so memorably described by Dante in his 'Divine Comedy', a compelling narrative that has left deep resonances in Western consciousness to this day.

Christians from the earliest times saw themselves as part of a single community with their ancestors in the faith: the Church in paradise was part of a continuum with the 'Church militant here in earth.' Prayer for the intercession of the Saints grew out of such an understanding. Now, if the prayers of people in this life have the capacity to interact with people in the next life, it would be a logical step to assume that such prayers might be efficacious on behalf of souls in purgatory. Such an understanding led to the selling of indulgences and other abuses of power by the mediaeval Church; and the challenging of these abuses was a major element in the upheaval in Western Christendom known as the Reformation (see also section 5 below).

A significant theological thrust of the reformers was the insistence that each individual is able to approach God without the need of priests, or other ecclesiastical intermediaries. In those societies influenced by the reformers, then, salvation became more personalised: it was for individuals to 'work out their own salvation' through their personal approach to God. This, the reformers hastened to add, was not something that could be achieved by human effort, for example by doing good works: rather, justification of individuals in the sight of God was through faith in Jesus Christ. The dynamic of the salvation narrative which had developed over many centuries was subtly altered, so that whilst the key role of the salvific death of Christ for each individual believer was re-affirmed, the role of the community of the faithful in heaven and on earth may be seen to have been subtly diminished.

A new questioning of this narrative led also to more widespread questioning: about the nature of the atonement and of heaven and hell, for example, and of the whole character of salvation. The idea of Jesus's death as a sacrifice to appease an angry God (although itself a caricature, as we have seen) was seen to sit uncomfortably with the concept of God as love: so, too, was the idea that such a God would condemn people to suffer for an eternity. The idea of Jesus's death as a ransom paid to the devil (the idea behind the concept of 'redemption', the 'buying-back' of souls condemned to punishment through their sins) was similarly questioned, as people questioned the ethics of such a transaction – and, indeed, the very existence of the devil. The idea was explored that 'salvation' should refer not to a future event but to some process that is happening now: that the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus, to membership in which his disciples are called, is coming about in the here-and-now (Luke 17.21). The process of discipleship may then be seen to be a conformation to the likeness of Christ (Gal 3.19) in the context of this present life, irrespective of what may befall the believer in any future one. Such ideas arose in parallel with those of Marxism, which were themselves suggestive of a secular form of salvation arising through the establishment of fair and just social systems: indeed, this is one of many such secular re-imaginings of salvation which were aired in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Further examples are found in the works of Wagner and of other Romantic artists, which are frequently concerned with redemption accessed through the achieving of a union with nature, or through transcendent love – although in Wagner's case, such a vision often owes more to eastern religion, filtered through the philosopher Schopenhauer, than it does to Christianity.

The rich understandings of salvation found in the Bible, then, have been amplified and enhanced by reflections of thinkers down the ages. Christians today are blessed in being able to employ such a variety of tools in reflecting on what 'salvation' means for them. Various ways in which they have done so will be explored in later sections of this essay. First, though, we turn to an important tradition within the Church which can aid our thinking about salvation: the concept of the Sacraments.

4. SALVATION AND THE SACRAMENTS

4.1. *The World as sacrament*

How do we find and experience God in the world? Many writers bear witness to the possibility of mystical experience there. From Plotinus to Wordsworth there are those who have felt a sensible consciousness of a divine presence in the natural world: those who have felt

*A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of thought,
And rolls through all things.*

(Wordsworth: *Lines composed above Tintern Abbey*)

The research of the Alister Hardy Institute in the 1980s suggests that many people have similar experiences of touches and hints of a heightened existential awareness. Characteristically, this experience of the numinous seems to dissolve the sense of alienation that assails us in the world. There is often a consciousness of wellbeing and oneness with the Deity or the Soul of the world, accompanied by a shaft of illumination, of direct insight into the meaning of life. Conversely, the experience may be a source of fear and awe at the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – as Rudolf Otto affirms in his classic treatment of this theme, *Idea of the Holy*.

So the Universe itself may be conceived of as a sacrament of the divine, an outward and visible sign of an inward indwelling grace where we can sometimes find, with William Blake, ‘Eternity in a grain of sand’.

4.2. *Types and Shadows*

Such experiences, however exalted, nevertheless remain in the realm of the unexpected or unbidden: they offer only an intermittent and occluded vision of the God who is truly ‘Present in all things by His presence, power and substance’ (in Aquinas’ phrase). They serve to remind us that we ‘see through a glass darkly’ in this world, and that we are frequently left with a painful nostalgia, a longing for a connection with the divine. For the Christian, this disjunction is seen as the result of the Fall (however this is understood), and salvation is seen as the healing of the breach – the recovery of our relationship with God within a sacramental

universe. The history of human salvation begins with God's revelation of himself in the unfolding of events in the history of Israel. It is implicit in the types and shadows of the old covenants: the promise to Abraham, the binding of Isaac, the burning bush, the Exodus, the giving of the Law at Sinai, the Angel of God's presence, the grand narrative of the saving interventions of God to the end of making a people for His own possession.

God is understood as revealing the meaning and purpose behind this engagement with the people of Israel through the vehicle of prophecy. Behind the alien words that came unsought and unbidden into the ears of those summoned by God, there dwelt the certain reality of the Word, of the One who speaks. The authenticity of the word of prophecy was the warrant for belief in God's involvement in human affairs. The way of salvation and deliverance for Israel lay in hearing and obeying this word wherever it was revealed. It was in the sacramental dynamic of the word spoken, heard and recounted that God's will and purpose was shown and accomplished.

The Hebrew Scriptures accept that this prophetic witness was not limited to the people of Israel. The living God also spoke through 'heathen' seers, as the story of Balaam bears witness. But perhaps it was in the keeping of Torah, that outward and visible sign of the inner invisible mystery of the moral universe, that humanity came closest to the mind and heart of God. The writer of Psalm 119 addresses God as a beloved: as 'Thou'. This whole psalm is suffused with the joy and delight of obedience – obedience understood not as slavish subservience, but as the oblation of heart, mind and will to the Beloved.

4.3. *Jesus the Sacrament of God*

In Jesus, John teaches us, the nature of God is fully revealed and embodied: 'That which was from the beginning, that we have seen with our eyes, that our hands have handled, the Word of Life.' (1 Jn 1.1)

The lineaments and detail of the life of Jesus of Nazareth – the particularity of his presence in that place and at that time – point us to an eternal provenance and a promise of universal grace. For in his incarnation Jesus draws a protecting veil between us and the blazing face of God. His works in Palestine demonstrate the love and the goodwill of the Father who invites us to come home, to be His children. In teaching, in feeding the hungry, in touching the sick, in raising the dead to life, virtue goes out of Jesus and heals those he encounters. He becomes a real and saving presence in their lives. In and through his passion, death and resurrection, he restores the image of God in humanity: he reconciles us to the Father and brings us home, not only to a future heaven but to a present earth –

though this is an earth transfigured by the one in whom we live and move and have our being. In him, the same universe which had become for us the far country of alienation and death becomes our true native land.

When Jesus shares his mission with His disciples, when he breaks the bread, when he kneels and washes their feet, when he teaches them to pray to the father 'Thy kingdom come', he is inviting them (and, by extension, his followers in every age and place) to work with him in allowing that kingdom to break into the particularity of their own time and place. As Jesus was sent into the world to be the sacrament of God, the outward and visible and effectual sign of his presence, so the many brethren of Christ the firstborn are called to be the same. As the familiar tag proclaims, the Church is after all, despite her weakness and inadequacy, the extension of the Incarnation: her mandate is to baptize, to bring reconciliation, to nurture, to heal, to love to the uttermost, to tell the lost and alienated the good news of grace and glory, in the name and in the power of the crucified and risen Christ our Lord.

4.4. Christ's Church the sacrament of God

The Sacrament of God in the world now is Christ's Church, the inseparable cosmic fullness of head and body together, the 'New Adam' of Paul, of Irenaeus and Tertullian, of Julian and Teilhard. In the words of the second century North African writer Tertullian, the Christian is in the world as the soul is in the body. Christians are called to be a community of Christ's presence in this present world until, in the fullness of time, 'the measure of the stature of Christ is reached.' And, as it is the Church that is the divinely instituted temple of Christ's indwelling, so it is within the Church that we receive the divinely appointed means of grace, the sacraments. The word 'sacrament' derives from the Latin word for an oath, referring originally to the oath of fealty taken by the soldiers in the Roman army. By a transposition the word has become indicative of the divine guarantee in relation to certain rites: they are the appointed channels of his grace for the believer, who can have certainty in faith regarding their efficacy as signs of the covenant relationship between God and the Christian. In the days of martyrdom and persecution, the confessors refused to swear the *sacramentum* of the emperor, because they would not betray the *sacramentum* they had sworn to Christ in baptism.

Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, in his letter to Trajan, refers to the *sacramentum* taken by the Christians. Tertullian uses the word to denote not only a sign or a mystery, but also the rites of Baptism and the Eucharist. By the fourth century, the newly converted Christian in Jerusalem would undertake an extended catechetical and moral formation

before undergoing the sacraments of Initiation and the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. The conversion experience of the individual Christian would therefore be caught up into the saving mystery, the remembrance of the Lord's passion and resurrection, in the liturgical celebration of the whole Christian community.

For the eastern Fathers, the Word took on our human nature that we might be made partakers of the divine nature. What was Christ's by nature is ours by grace. Not only humanity, but the whole creation, is made new by the redeeming work of God in Christ. This understanding of the cosmic significance of salvation is expressed in the following passage from Gregory of Nazianzus:

Christ is baptized, let us descend with him, that we also may ascend with him. ... John baptizes, Jesus comes to him; perhaps to sanctify the Baptist himself, but certainly to bury the whole of the old Adam in the water; and before this and for the sake of this, to sanctify Jordan. As he is Spirit and flesh, so he consecrates us by Spirit and water ... Jesus goes up out of the water; for with himself he carries up the world and sees the heavens split open which Adam had shut against himself and all his posterity, as the gates of Paradise by the flaming sword. (From Oration 39: 14-16.)

After their Initiation, Sunday by Sunday Christians take their place in the Eucharistic assembly, united in worship with the whole church on earth and in heaven. Then, succoured by the Eucharist, the 'medicine of immortality', they go out into the world to play their part in 'renewing the face of the earth'.

4.5. Salvation and Healing

If Christ is truly *Emmanuel*, with us and for us, and if Christ is present in our lives and in the lives of those we seek to bring to God, we need to consider the implications of this, both for the ministry of all believers and for the ministry of those called to authorised service and ministry in the church. Or, to put the matter another way: How can we engage authentically with the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows, of the people of our time? How can we make a contemporary community of Presence for the present community? What must we be doing to do the work of God?

Essentially, our mission and ministry is the work of God in us through Christ. Our primary calling as Christians is to be *alter Christus*, another Christ. It is the love of Christ that motivates us, giving us the power to 'see each other through his eyes', and to find Him in the other. It is to the earthly

life of Jesus that we look to find an authentic model of ministry. This ministry, to be Christ-like, will demand in us the authenticity of Jesus' way of personal encounter in pastoral care. The Gospel accounts record many of these encounters, brief, intense, and discerning. He listens, he says a word or two, and he heals. If as a church we are to make a conscious and purposeful loving response to the needs of others – both as individuals, and corporately in our neighbourhood congregations as we put into practice our vision of mission for and from the local church and the Diocese – then we need to listen: to listen to people's stories, rather than prejudging or predicting their lives and needs.

But as Christians, we are also given words to say in the name of Christ: words of encouragement, affirmation, consolation or challenge: words coming from the depth of our human experience. And with these words God has given us the sacramental signs of his saving presence, to make these words flesh. Water, bread and wine, oil, human love, the touch of a hand: all within our daily human lives, all God bearing, all channels of his love, of his grace, of his Christ.

In our weekly celebrations of the Eucharist all is gathered up in the way that he has given to us. At the offertory, in the bread our labour – for the world, for him, for each other – is gathered up and offered, to become the Body of Christ. In the wine all the sorrow and pain of the world is gathered up and offered, to become the Blood of Christ. And week by week or day by day, a prayer used at the offertory in the Eucharist becomes a reality in our lives.

By the mystery of this water and wine, may we become partakers of the divinity of Christ, who for our sakes shared our humanity.

5. SALVATION ANXIETY

The remainder of our essay continues to focus on the modern context in which our thinking about salvation must take place. We begin with some reflections on the nature of that context.

We are used to hearing dire predictions about the fate of Christianity in the modern world. The religion that once held sway over kings and emperors has now been pushed to the margins of Western society and will soon disappear. Beliefs that were once universal are now the exception; church institutions that once formed the backbone of society are now all but irrelevant; faith that once commanded respect in the public square is today little more than an amusing side show.

The story sounds plausible until you examine the facts. And the facts seem to suggest that the story is little more than a myth. If we glance at the polls, for example, we find that belief in God is a fairly stable component of our national psyche. Or if we consider the relevance of churchgoing to social cohesion, we find that the churches, far from being irrelevant, are important sources of 'social capital', often serving as the only viable institution in deprived neighbourhoods. Again, if we question whether or not religion has evacuated the public square, we discover that, from church schools to suicide bombers, religion's public profile is still very much alive – admittedly, for good and ill. It seems the tide on Dover Beach is taking a very long time to go out.

There is one aspect of this story, however, where the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of secularization can be heard unmistakably. Indeed, it could be argued that this aspect marks the decisive difference between pre-modern and post-modern religion. It is precisely in our attitude to salvation.

At the risk of caricature, the majority of pre-modern Europeans believed that life's major task was the working out of one's own salvation, which included the importance of dying a 'good death'. By contrast, in a post-modern culture such as ours, anxiety about our eternal destiny is a rare condition, even among churchgoers, and may even be regarded by most as a peculiar anachronism.

Although there is much debate about the true extent of religiosity among medieval people, the contrast between their religious anxieties and our modern complacency can nevertheless be amply illustrated. For example, one of the stark indicators of persistent salvation anxiety in the

medieval period is the existence of chantry chapels, in which a priest was paid to say masses for the repose of the benefactor's soul. No doubt this practice was fuelled by the belief in purgatory, and the consequent need to arrange a fast-track passage through the flames when the time came. No doubt, too, the chantries also served to perpetuate the name of the deceased. But neither of these motives negates the real anxiety about salvation which seems to have been the main reason for establishing them in the first place.

At the dissolution of the monasteries it is traditionally estimated that there were 2 374 chantries in existence in England – no small investment for the wealthy of the land. Together with the whole apparatus of confessions, penances, and the selling of indulgences, they belong to an era which seemed intent on working out its salvation with fear and trembling. As the historian Keith Thomas comments, 'A substantial proportion of the resources of medieval society were thus given over to ensuring the spiritual welfare of its dead members.' Compare today, where we are far more likely to share the sentiment which is sometimes attributed to Voltaire on his deathbed: 'God will forgive me: that's his job.'

The doctrine of purgatory was dealt a lethal blow by the Reformation in Europe, at least in the newly Protestant countries. But what the Reformation failed to do was to banish the attendant anxieties about salvation. On the face of it, this should not have been so. Luther's 'rediscovery' of the doctrine of justification by faith ought to have distanced salvation from any efforts on our part to achieve it. If the thief on the cross could be with Jesus that same day in Paradise, so could anyone. Yet one very influential strand of thought has suggested that anxiety about salvation remained alive and well in the post-Reformation world, centred on Max Weber's celebrated and controversial essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5).

Weber begins by observing an interesting correlation. Those countries in Europe in which Calvinism took hold seem to show the most progress in the development of what he terms 'rational capitalism' – the kind of economic progress based on the maximization of return on investment which we take for granted today. Weber wonders whether there may be some causal link behind this correlation: is it the case, he asks, that there is something in the Calvinist psyche that promotes the conditions on which rational capitalism flourishes? He answers this question with a logic that is somewhat convoluted, and yet sufficiently suggestive that this debate has continued to this day.

Weber's basic thesis is that two streams of Protestant thinking converged to assist the growth of modern capitalism. The first is Luther's idea of the 'calling'. In medieval society, to respond to God's call to a fully devoted life required taking up vows and joining a monastic community. Luther, by contrast, developed the notion that the whole of life was the stage of God's interest and action, including the sphere of work. God could be served equally well by the diligent carpenter as by the prayerful monk, if that was his calling. This means that, for those in business, there became a God-given responsibility to fulfil that calling to the utmost: to live frugally, re-invest wisely, maximise returns, redeem the time. So the work-ethic was born.

The other stream of thought issued from Calvin's notion of predestination. This doctrine emphasised the various scriptural passages indicating that our eternal destiny is really a foregone conclusion, decided before the foundation of the world in the inscrutable mind of God. You might have been predestined for salvation, or you might have been predestined for damnation: either way, the point is that there is absolutely nothing you can do to change it. But in order to make this doctrine more bearable, Calvinists taught the importance of looking for 'signs of grace' in your life: evidence that you are, indeed, one of the elect. So while you cannot alter God's decision, you can at least seek reassurance that you have fallen on the right side of the fence. One of the signs of grace that would confirm this for you, argued Weber, was success in your worldly calling. The man successful in business could feel a lot more reassured about his eternal destiny than the man who is a failure. Here, Weber argues, is the second catalyst for capitalist enterprise. Given the importance of success in providing the rewards of eternal reassurance, who would *not* work harder to ensure that these reassurances are in place? And so, through somewhat labyrinthine logic, Weber arrives at the position that Calvinist salvation anxiety was one of the potent forces behind the emergence of modern, rational capitalism.

Our point here is not to argue for, or against, Weber's thesis, but simply to draw attention to the powerful influence of salvation anxiety since the Reformation. As Weber puts it, 'for the man of the age of the Reformation the most important thing in his life [was] his eternal salvation'. If anything, then, such anxieties were not limited to the medieval mind, but hung on after the Reformation and may even be perennial. The eminent sociologist of religion, Bryan Wilson, defined religion as a 'salvation system' (a neat, but all-encompassing, definition of a notion that is often held to be indefinable). The common factor in all religion, he suggested, is not belief in God or the supernatural, but the provision of a system which offers

humanity salvation of one kind or another. Anxiety to obtain salvation seems to have been hard-wired into the human condition.

From the Enlightenment onwards, however, salvation anxiety became increasingly secularised. Modern people, including religious people, have come to be less concerned about their eternal fate, or the fate of those around them, than they are about the exigencies of their daily lives. Even in conservative Christian circles, occasional trumpet blasts from the pulpit regarding the eternal destiny of 'the lost' will tend to pale into unreality by the time the Sunday roast is served. In the modern world, apocalyptic anxieties no longer take an equestrian form, but have been transposed onto the many grave threats facing humankind. Thomas Malthus and his dire predictions of 'gigantic inevitable famine' due to over-population is an archetypal example: the threat of nuclear apocalypse during the 'cold war' period constitutes another. Today, more than ever, we are continually being made aware of the destructive threats facing the world: climate change, loss of biodiversity, soil pollution, deforestation, the population explosion, the threat of nuclear and biological terrorism, and the impact of pandemic diseases. Against this litany of imminent woes, the addition of a further threat, the precarious destiny of the human soul, sounds as implausible as it is unwelcome.

But the secularisation of salvation is equally a temptation for churchgoers who may feel they have enough to deal with in their everyday lives without having to resuscitate a medieval hell in order to appreciate the good news of the Gospel. A kind of mental gymnastics can take place in the contemporary church: we labour the seriousness of sin in order to reap the emotional rewards of salvation. But typically our conception of sin is too slight to bear the weight of the joy of our salvation. Too often, sin is still sex and swearing. No wonder we are tempted to feel that the real calamities from which we need to be saved are 'out there': militarism, inequality, environmentally unsustainable lifestyles, tribalism, and so on. And perhaps we are right, if only we knew it. No wonder then that our joyful songs of salvation so often ring hollow. It is hard to sing with your tongue in your cheek.

Moreover, many in today's liberal society are ignorant of the Christian message of salvation; and those who are not find it an embarrassment to talk about. Anxiety about salvation has been exchanged for anxiety about talking about salvation. Perhaps for such a delicate subject this was always the case, to some degree. But the question, 'Are you saved?', or even 'How can I be saved?' is nowadays guaranteed to cause acute embarrassment at the polite (Episcopalian?) dinner parties of Morningside or Bearsden.

Why has such reluctance to talk about spiritual salvation emerged? Perhaps we feel a legitimate sense of discomfort at the legacy of medieval images of hell. If salvation is part of that whole gory system, we understandably want none of it. Alternative images of salvation seem more appropriate: reconciliation, restoration, healing. Perhaps too, and perhaps especially in Scotland, we have grown up with disagreements between Protestants and Catholics over the means of salvation – as if the Reformation debates were still at large in our living rooms. And, again understandably, we no longer want to go there. Perhaps, furthermore, for a younger generation, we dislike the kinds of boundaries that salvation implies: delineating those who are in and those who are out, those who carry the correct membership badge, those who have the right jargon.

If the Christian message of salvation is now somewhat taboo, however, its secular counterparts carry no such stigma. Contemporary threats, and their secular saviours, are the very stuff of political discourse. We don't have to look far to find them. A self-proclaimed saviour from the threats from global terrorism has appeared in the early twenty-first century in the guise of the US military, shored up by the Bush administration's peculiar ideology of freedom, and the American myth of redemptive violence. Likewise, modern technology has swept over the globe like Superman, promising deliverance from the untamed forces of nature (cancer, earthquakes, climate change, disease). And at the level of the individual, salvation has come to the troubled house of the unconscious through the contemporary 'subjective turn', and the secular religion of therapy. Furthermore, deliverance from scarcity has arrived in the doctrine of economic developmentalism, which has commodified the world and enthroned the free market as the solution to every ill, from road-pricing to carbon-trading. In short, then, the human anxiety for salvation has not abated, but has rather become secularized, as both the threats and their solutions have been transposed to the level of the worldly and the mundane.

Where does this leave a theological understanding of salvation? Are we right to feel more anxious about climate change than about death and judgment? Or could it be that these threats are more closely connected than we have hitherto allowed? The fact is that many, within and without the church, hold to a popular view of salvation that is little more than a caricature. On this view, salvation is merely a future event that involves the individual being saved from the consequences of their sin. However, as this essay urges, salvation may be considered to be not only a future event, but a present experience. It concerns not just the individual, but is corporate and cosmic in scope; and it is not just about what we are saved *from*, but

also what we are saved *to* and *for*. Put this way, a Christian understanding of salvation need not be so far removed from the kinds of secular instincts and longings for salvation described above.

Just as Jesus announced that ‘salvation has come to this house’ when Zacchaeus, a chief tax-collector, repaid his debts fourfold to those whom he had exploited, so too our own acts of repentance make way for God’s saving action. The striking thing here is that repentance is an *action*, not merely a word: it is not a ‘sinner’s prayer’. Zacchaeus repented not just from his heart, but from his wallet. This suggests that our ongoing repentance needs to take the form of practical action: taking bold steps to reduce our carbon footprint, taking seriously our part in environmental degradation, addressing the causes of the population explosion, campaigning for our taxes to be spent wisely and humanely, educating ourselves about the links between our wealth and others’ poverty, and so on. If salvation can come to a house in response to such practical repentances as these, then perhaps some contemporary political activists are nearer to the Kingdom of God than many who are merely complacent churchgoers. Perhaps by making salvation a this-worldly concern, contemporary people have inadvertently stumbled upon a crucial dimension of the true meaning of salvation.

Salvation, in any case, is only a metaphor – and only one metaphor among many – for describing God’s action in the world. It tends to be grouped with other, similar metaphors, which are concerned to deal with the consequences of sin. These include the notions of justification (being rendered righteous before God), sanctification (the progressive transformation of character away from sinfulness), and atonement (satisfying the demands of justice). Yet there are many more such metaphors describing God’s action that are less about dealing with sin, and more about remaking the world. These include the ideas of redemption, reconciliation, deliverance, healing, heralding freedom, glorification, liberation, cleansing, and clothing. Getting ‘saved’, in other words, is only a start. Getting caught up with God’s purposes is the real story, and that need not be a cause for anxiety.

The child who asks ‘will my rabbit go to heaven?’ is asking an innocent enough question. But, sadly, the question is meaningless. Nothing, and no-one, in scripture ‘goes to heaven’ in that sense. Instead, we are promised resurrection and judgment; a new heaven and a new earth; the liberation of all creation from bondage to decay. Salvation, then, is surely not about rescuing us from this imperilled world to join the angels in the clouds. It must be to do with incorporating us within the new

community who are looking forward to the redemption of all things, and who in faithfulness to that calling work towards that end in the old heaven and the old earth in which we now live.

If this is the case, anxiety about salvation, whether secular or religious, is misplaced. The question is not whether I am 'in' or 'out', saved or damned. Nor is it whether or not we can save the earth from ultimate destruction: we know we cannot. The question open to us is simply whether or not we choose to accept the invitation to live a repentant lifestyle, to live in a way that looks forward to the age to come, and to pursue a life that is consistent with the scriptural vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

6. SCIENCE AND SALVATION

We continue our exploration of salvation as a present experience, rather than a future one, with a discussion of science – a discipline, or way of thinking, which some have seen as offering its own particular way to salvation.

6.1. *Scientism – idol of our time*

In the 1920s, the intelligentsia of a self-consciously weak China launched a *kēxué jiùguó* movement: ‘science rescuing (the) nation’. The word for ‘rescue’, *jiù*, is also used of salvation in religious contexts. Thus, Jesus is referred to as *jiùzhǔ*, the ‘saving lord’, who achieved *jiùshú* (redemption; literally, saving-redeeming) for humankind. To popularise this message to the masses, the noted public intellectual Hú shì personified science, (*kēxué*) as ‘Mr. Kē’ (*Kē xiānsheng*).

Two decades later, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, said:

It is science alone that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening custom and tradition, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people. ... Who indeed could afford to ignore science today? At every turn we seek its aid. ... The future belongs to science and to those who make friends with science.

Moving on a further two decades after Nehru, we hear the same rhetoric from Harold Wilson:

This is our message for the 60s – a Socialist inspired scientific and technological revolution releasing energy on an enormous scale and deployed not for the destruction of mankind but for enriching mankind beyond our wildest dreams. ... in all our plans for the future, we are redefining and we are restating our Socialism in terms of the scientific revolution. But that revolution cannot become a reality unless we are prepared to make far-reaching changes in economic and social attitudes which permeate our whole system of society. The Britain that is about to be forged in the white heat of the revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated methods on either side of industry.

Fast forward yet another two decades, and we find Wilson's successor at the other end of the political spectrum, Margaret Thatcher, still in the grip of 'the white heat of the [scientific and technological] revolution'. Her education secretary Kenneth Baker's 1988 national curriculum directed schools to devote virtually half the day to mathematics, science and technology in order to deal with the perceived 'crisis' in the supply of trained personnel in these areas. Two further decades on, and we find ourselves in today's world, where Alex Salmond speaks of 'putting science, modern languages and technology at the heart of the curriculum' in the SNP's 2007 Scottish election manifesto.

To Hu, Nehru, Wilson, Thatcher and Salmond, it appears that the abundant life foretold by the Hebrew prophets comes from science. Indeed, Nehru and Wilson made clear that they saw science as the *sole* means to human thriving: 'science alone ...'. In this belief, politicians receive generous support from some scientists. In fact, as the philosopher Mary Midgley has documented in her Edinburgh Gifford Lectures (published as *Science and Salvation*), the rhetoric of some scientists goes well beyond that of the politicians, in two directions. First, they take the science-enabled abundant life well beyond planet earth, and engage in what can only be termed fantasy about intelligent life taking over the entire cosmos. Thus, the cosmologists John Barrow and Frank Tipler write:

At the instant the Omega Point is reached, life will have gained control of *all* matter and forces not only in a single universe, but in all universes whose existence is logically possible; life will have spread into *all* spatial regions in all universes which could logically exist, and will have stored in infinite amount of information, including *all* bits of knowledge which it is logically possible to know. And this is the end.

Second, to accompany this expansive *outward* journey, the same scientists claim that science is also solely sufficient in humanity's *inward* journey in search of meaning and self understanding. Thus, for example, according to the biologist Richard Dawkins:

We are machines built by DNA whose purpose is to make more copies of the same DNA ... That is EXACTLY what we are for. We are machines for propagating DNA, and the propagating of DNA is a self-sustaining process. It is every living object's sole reason for living.

In other words, science alone is sufficient to solve all our problems, outward and inward, now and always. This totalising vision of science has a name: *scientism*.

Mikael Stenmark, a Swedish theologian, defines scientism as ‘the view that science alone is sufficient for dealing with our existential questions or for creating a world view by which we could live’. Tzevetan Todorov, a leading scholar of twentieth century totalitarianism, defines it as the belief that ‘no fragment of the material or spiritual world, of the animate or inanimate domain, can ultimately resist the grasp of science’, and goes on to spell out the consequences of acting out this belief:

If human science can indeed unravel all the secrets of nature, if it can identify all the causes of all facts and all beings, then it should be possible to modify the processes involved and to steer them in a more desirable direction. Science is a tool of knowledge, but it underpins *techne*, a tool for changing the world. ... [And] if the transparency of the real includes the human world, then there is nothing to stop us from imagining how to create “new man,” a human species without the blemishes of the original strain. ... Alan Besançon sums up the cult of science thus: “[K]nowledge opens the gateway to salvation.”

Put this way, it becomes clear that scientism has at least a family resemblance to *Gnosticism*, the early Christian heresy that the human condition is due to ignorance, and that salvation comes by access to esoteric knowledge. Significantly, it was another noted twentieth century political scientist with much to say about twentieth-century totalitarianism, Eric Voegelin, who has insisted on this parallel in his work.

Scientism is the idol of our time. George Bernard Shaw first used the term with the meaning of ‘science totalised’ in 1921 in the preface to his play *Back to Methuselah*, in which he wrote of the cult of scientism having its own ‘iconography and hagiography’. Like all idols, this one promises much. Indeed, this idol’s power derives from its comprehensive promise – nothing short of the whole ‘abundant life’ package: ‘enriching mankind beyond our wildest dreams’. But to deliver this package to its followers, this idol (again like all others) demands total obedience: ‘that revolution cannot become a reality unless we are prepared to make far-reaching changes in economic and social attitudes which permeate our whole system of society.’ And if it demands sacrificing sea birds in Prince William Sound or humans in Bhopal and Chernobyl, so be it! When the idol appears to fail to deliver, its priesthood simply asks the people to redouble their sacrifices.

All live in thrall and in fear of the very thing that their own hands have created.

Of course, there is no doubt that science, and the technology associated with it, has achieved much in enabling human thriving. In terms of physical well being, life expectancy (to quote just one statistic) has doubled (from 40 to 80) since 1800 (we may note here that living to a ripe old age and not dying ‘before time’ is firmly part of the biblical picture of the ‘abundant life’); and much of the credit for this increased longevity has to go to scientific medicine. We no longer burn witches, a step towards being set free by truth that, as the noted British-Australian astrophysicist Hanbury Brown reminds us, is in no small measure due to the rise of the scientific worldview. This worldview has helped to situate humans as part of the cosmos, coming as we did from stardust and emerging from the processes of organic evolution. Such human embeddedness sits comfortably with a theology of stewardship of the earth and other living creatures.

There is one snag, however, to which Harold Wilson alluded but deftly glossed over. He wanted the ‘scientific and technological revolution [to release] energy on an enormous scale and *deployed not for the destruction of mankind* but for enriching mankind beyond our widest dreams’. But how are we to guarantee the italicized part? In point of fact, Prince William Sound, Bhopal and Chernobyl all happened *after* Wilson’s optimistic pronouncements, and all witness to the destructive potential of the ‘scientific and technological revolution’. Merely *saying* that we do not want science deployed for human destruction does *not* make that sentiment come true. Part of the trouble is that totalised science not only provides *means*, but insists that either it is the sole arbiter of *ends*, or that since science progresses according to its own logic, the question of end simply disappears. Todorov puts like this:

To what end should the transformation of humankind be directed? Who is authorized to identify and understand both the imperfections of the present, and the kind of perfection to which we might aspire? ... Scientism has its own answer – namely, that henceforth science alone will provide the solution. The ends of humankind and of the world become a secondary effect, an automatic by-product of the search for knowledge – so automatic, in fact, that followers of the cult of science often don’t bother to formulate them.

Not formulating the question of ends is what most followers of scientism have done. A few, however, believe that science generates its own ends,

and have loudly proclaimed what they think these ends are: eugenics, the 'selfish gene', space colonization are three examples. The underlying science in each case has much potential for good, but their destructive potential (and reality!) is equally clear.

6.2. Science redeemed

St John's visions on Patmos ended like this: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.' (Revelation 21.1-2) The significance of this vision for a discussion of salvation cannot be overestimated. Note, first, that it was a *city*, and it came from heaven *to earth*. There was no turning back the clock to the Garden of the beginning of Genesis – redemption will involve *all* the achievements of human culture, broadly defined. This point is made explicit a little later in the same chapter: 'the kings of the earth shall bring their glory (*doxa*) into it' (v. 24). There is no need for John to elaborate on the *doxa* of the kings, for Isaiah, one of his predecessors, has already done that. In (third-) Isaiah's vision of the new Jerusalem (Isaiah 60), he gave us a long list of the glorious riches that would enrich the city: camels of Midian, cedars of Lebanon, ships of Tarshish, and so on. Interestingly, the things Isaiah mentioned in Chapter 60 had all made earlier appearances, notably in Chapter 2, where the *very same* items were destined for destruction by God's wrath: 'For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; ... against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft.' (2.12ff)

To understand what is going on, it is important to note that the cedars of Lebanon were used to make siege engines, Midianite camels carrying riders made up the equivalent of a tank division, and the ships of Tarshish were the best naval troop carriers of the day – these were directed at making war, and were judged accordingly. But there is nothing intrinsically evil about these activities and products of human skill (*techne*). Indeed, the good news (*euangelion*) is that *all* of these will be brought into the new Jerusalem, that is to say, redeemed. Now, for instance, we find that 'the ships of Tarshish ... bring your sons from far, their silver and gold with them' (Isaiah 60.9). In other words, they and the other activities and products of human *techne* are 'deployed not for the destruction of mankind but for enriching mankind beyond our wildest dreams.'

It is startling, and encouraging, to find Harold Wilson's vision of science and technology fulfilled at the climax of both Old and New

Testament eschatology! The Church is called to bear witness to that, and to give a foretaste of what it may mean. Engaging with science and technology is not an option we may choose to ignore, because the redemption of these areas of human endeavour is central to the biblical vision.

7. SALVATION AS ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

In what some call the postmodern world there is a growing sense that, despite the promise of science-driven progress, and the consequent growth in human longevity and material comfort, humanity still stands in need of salvation. However, in a secular age the threat to humanity is not perceived as divine judgment on human sin, but as the earth's judgment on the heedless consumption, profligacy and waste of industrial civilization. The ecological crisis, and in particular climate change caused by human activity, represents a real threat not only to other species on earth, but to the human species itself, because the industrial emissions of our society are undermining the stable relationship between the earth and the sun that humans have enjoyed for millennia. Humanity is living on a 'sinking ark', in which species are being extinguished in the growing tide of pollutants, and the rising temperatures and waters that industrialism spreads in its wake. To use another image, the earth is a planetary spaceship in which the rivets – the other species, which help order and regulate earth's ecosystems to make them beneficent for human life – are gradually being pulled out and thrown away. Humanity is hurtling through space on a planet whose unique life-sustaining capacities are irreplaceable by human ingenuity alone: yet they are being gradually destroyed. In the most apocalyptic (and yet science-based) scenarios, humans are threatening the survival of future generations on the planet, with predicted temperature rises of 6 degrees centigrade by the end of the twenty-first century, if present levels of greenhouse gas emissions continue.

Some argue that the roots of modernity's ecological alienation from the nonhuman world lie within the Christian tradition. On this account, humanity has been trained by Christianity's doctrine of salvation that human destiny does not lie in identity with the earth. The salvation offered by God in Christ addresses the soul of humanity, rather than creation as a whole. And salvation on this account is only addressed to the human part of the creation. According to the political theologian John Locke, nature is redeemed in the divine plan of salvation by the work of humans. Apart from human labour, the earth remains under the curse of the Fall, even after Christ. This Lockean perspective provides a significant ideological root for the modern dominion of the earth by the economy of industrial capitalism. It also nurtures the modern secular eschatology of progress which suggests that economic growth – and societies dedicated to that growth as their primary goal – will deliver the good society.

While it is unarguable that this emphasis on 'soul salvation' has been a legacy of the Western tradition, particularly since Augustine, there is equally

another strain of Christianity in East and West, represented by (among others) Irenaeus, Symeon the New Theologian and St Francis, which has maintained that the divine work of creation and redemption includes the destiny of the whole body of creation, not just that of the human soul. In this perspective the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ reverse the effects of the Fall in bringing sin and evil into the world. As St Paul puts it in Colossians, 'all things are created through him and for him,' and through him God purposes 'to reconcile all things to himself, on earth and in heaven' (Colossians 1.16, 20).

St Paul here suggests that the reversal of the effects of the Fall by Christ, as the second Adam, has effects which are felt through the whole creation and not just in human society. And he inaugurates the belief that Christians, unlike Jews, have mostly held since his day: that the fall of Adam and Eve, and the eating of the forbidden apple, indicates not only a change in the relations between humans and the creator, but the entry of evil and wickedness into the whole created order. The early Christian fathers shared with Plato the belief that human beings were a microcosm of the whole cosmos, and that the destiny of humans therefore has central significance to the destiny of all creatures. But this unique status does not make humans the centre or destiny of creation. Rather, all life, all being in time, is in motion from life to death and from creation in time and space. It is set apart from the eternal infinite divine, only to return to God. In the sense that the Fall of Adam and Eve disrupts this pattern of emanation and return, the Fall may then be said to have ecological consequences, since it disturbs the original goodness and harmony of the created order. In this perspective, the modern ecological crisis is the outcome of this sinful disturbance to the cosmos and is as much a moral and spiritual crisis as an economic and scientific one. Salvation from this crisis then cannot simply be concerned with human survival. Instead, it involves a reorientation of human life and society towards the new reality of reconciliation between God and all things that the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection set in train in the history of humanity and the earth.

Irenaeus of Lyons, building on St Paul's ideas, interpreted the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection as indicating a renewal and redemption of the whole creation and as presaging a recovery of the original goodness of creation before the fall of humanity, whose effects mar and pollute all creation. This sense of the redemption of embodied life finds notable expression in the lives of the fourth and fifth century desert fathers who are said to have achieved harmony with the divine, and a new companionship with wild animals, through their ascetic practices. This is illustrated in accounts of the fifth century St Jerome plucking a thorn from a

lion's paw: in the rule of St Benedict, in which agrarian work and related crafts are redeemed from the effects of the Fall; and in the life and traditions of St Francis of Assisi, who preached to birds and animals and who taught, like the Hebrew Psalmists, that human beings participate in the celebration and praise that all creatures offer to the Creator.

The ecological crisis has provoked a renewed interest among Christian liturgists and theologians in the healing of creation. Many of the new liturgies written under the influence of the liturgical movement in the past forty years have given a more prominent role to the doctrine of creation and to the place of nonhuman creatures as revelatory meeting points with the divine Spirit. Many modern hymns and songs – including a number of those from the hymn-book *Common Ground* – also reflect this new ecological consciousness. And many congregations and ecumenical associations, both locally and regionally, have been endeavouring to find ways to practice creation care in their material relations with the nonhuman world. In Scotland, this has led to the eco-congregations initiative; and church buildings on every continent may now be seen displaying solar panels, as a symbolic witness to their members and to the communities in which they are set to the need for modern humans to live within the present carbon budget of the planet, rather than to burn profligately stored carbon in ways that damage the earth for present and future generations. There is also a growing involvement in secular ecological initiatives by Christians, as they overcome their suspicion that such movements represent not only a turn to the earth but a denial of the role of the Creator in birthing the earth.

This ecological turn indicates a recovery of the early Christian sense that the salvation wrought by God in the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection was so apocalyptic in significance that all creatures, not just individual believing souls, are caught up in its restorative effects. The recovery of this ecological understanding of salvation is also important for the renewal of Scottish Christianity, since it may have significant echoes in earlier traditions, such as those recorded by Alexander Carmichael early in the twentieth century in the prayers and songs that he gathered in his *Carmina Gadelica*. When crofters laid three pieces of peat on the fire in the blessed name of the Holy Trinity, and when they invoked the divine names, and the communion of saints, at the gathering in of oats and barley in the summer, they held fast to the ancient Christian belief that the story of salvation has implications for all creatures and for every aspect of human life – material, moral, social and spiritual.

8. SALVATION IN ART, LITERATURE AND FILM

The theme of salvation has always fascinated the creative artist. Visual artists, novelists, poets, composers, and most recently film makers, have all made their own contribution to the theological articulation of the doctrine of salvation. This is because the media in which they work are shaped to the task of healing, reconciling and redeeming the time: arguably we look, read and listen precisely to 'find salvation' even if it only be, in Primo Levi's words, in 'moments of reprieve' in a confused and confusing world. In the earliest Christian literature, the Passion narratives of the Gospels are presented in powerful and vividly realized images couched in narratives that are among the masterpieces of world literature, directly inspiring the first great Christian poem in English, *The Dream of the Rood* from the early eighth century. In the first great novel in English literature, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Christian's progress towards salvation and the Celestial City is within the terms of the author's Puritan theology, but the religious allegory is the basis of a vivid narrative that imprints itself on the imagination through its characters and episodes. In our own time, in the visual arts the remarkable breaking down of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art in the extraordinary popularity of work of major artists like Bill Viola, or the huge crowds who queue to see exhibitions by painters like Velasquez, El Greco, Caravaggio and Rembrandt, may perhaps relate to their ability to communicate through their visions something of the deep need in us for a sense of salvation, and a belief in its possibility, often despite rather than because of what reason and common sense suggest.

It is thus not surprising that theologians, often with some puzzlement, have frequently explored the theme of salvation within art, literature and film. A recent book by Patrick Sherry, entitled *Images of Redemption* (2003), argues that 'art and literature can make a real contribution to religious understanding (of salvation history)'. The artist van Gogh, it has been suggested by Anton Wessels in his book *'A Kind of Bible': Vincent van Gogh as Evangelist* (2000), explored in his greatest paintings our experience of the breaking through of light 'which for him could not be dissociated from the Risen Christ'. Finally, the growth of studies in the field of film and religion has give particular focus to the drama of salvation as played out in the popular cinema from one of the greatest of all Westerns, *Shane* (1952), to blockbusters like *Terminator II: Judgment Day* or more 'art house' films like the Danish *Babette's Feast*.

To begin with the visual arts, evidence from as early as the mid third century of the Christian era in the Syrian desert city of Dura Europos

indicates that the Christian community there was decorating its church building (probably a converted private house) with paintings of incidents in the gospels which illustrate Christ's power to heal and save: notable is a remarkable image of the healing of the paralysed man in Mark 2.1-12. In the West, the development of painting through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is almost unthinkable without the stimulus of the narratives of the Passion and Resurrection; and at the end of almost two millennia of Christian art, the National Gallery in London and the City Art Gallery in Edinburgh celebrated the contribution of painters to our understanding of Christ's work with exhibitions entitled, respectively, 'Seeing Salvation' and 'Light of the World'. Just to take one example of the power of such art, the awesome depiction of the crucifixion by Matthias Grünewald at the centre of the Isenheim Altarpiece (c.1515: see also Grosvenor Essay No. 2) is terrible in its gruesome realisation of bodily suffering – but deliberately so, since the original setting for this painting was in the context of a chapel set in a hospital for sufferers from skin diseases. The painting reminded patients that Christ too suffered as they were suffering – and on a wing of the altarpiece is an image of the resurrected Christ in glory, all suffering left behind. In all its terrifying realism, Grünewald's Crucifixion is an image of Christ's work of salvation for suffering humanity, and in the images of art we can even catch a glimpse of the paradise of the life to come.

It may be that the structure of narrative also precisely grants us such glimpses, for it has been remarked (by the philosopher Wittgenstein, though story tellers and novelists have long perceived its truth) that every story told is but a prelude to a new and as yet unarticulated story. At the end of Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866) the murderer Raskolnikov has been convicted and transported to Siberia, followed by the faithful Sonia. That is the end of the book – but not the end of Raskolnikov's story, for the last paragraph of the novel reads:

But that is the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual rebirth of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his gradual passing from one world to another, of his acquaintance with a new and hitherto unknown reality. That might be the subject of a new story – our present story is ended.

There is a similar, if rather more ambiguous, ending to Tolstoy's last great novel *Resurrection* (1899). Here, by way of comparison, is the last paragraph of that book:

That night an entirely new life began for Nekhlyudov, not so much because he had entered into new conditions of life but because

everything that happened to him from that time on was endowed with an entirely different meaning for him. How this new chapter of his life will end, the future will show.

Novelists and poets know instinctively that stories end in silences which entertain hope, however distant and deferred. In their journey into nothingness there is hope for Lear and Cordelia, 'Vex not his ghost: O! let him pass.' There is hope for Oedipus; and there is even hope for Beckett's tramps at the end of *Waiting for Godot*, if they could but realise it, for the play allows it. There was a fashion some years ago to seek to identify 'Christ figures' in literary narratives: those who give their lives for others or who die, like Herman Melville's Billy Budd, in the light of a transforming moment of glory. But one should not be too literal in such ways of reading. More persuasive is the muted, but still powerful, recognition expressed by F. W. Dillistone in his book *The Novelist and the Passion Story* (1960) that 'the movement of the story corresponds, we know, to the movement of human life everywhere and it is always possible that the goal towards which the story leads may find its counterpart within the circumstances of a wholly different age.' The story told then keeps alive the Christian hope of universal salvation as we wait in time for the promised end.

The most recent contributor to this theme of salvation realised in the human participation in the drama of art and literature (and we have not even mentioned music, though one might think of Bach's two great Passions, or the music-dramas of Wagner, or Mahler's Resurrection Symphony just as a start) is the cinema, perhaps the most powerful popular entertainment medium of our own time. Hollywood, of course, loves the 'feelgood' movie, and the cinema-goer, seeking an hour or two's respite from the demands of the 'real world', needs to be reassured that good will triumph over evil and that true love conquers all. At the same time we might ask whether the extraordinary and enduring popularity of a film like *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), based on a story by the popular American writer of horror novels Stephen King, with its tagline, 'Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free', is actually tapping in to something very deep in our society and makeup. Or is it simply using a vocabulary borrowed from the Christian tradition to tell a story that, with good acting and directing, assures the producers of a good box office return? Yet it remains fascinating (and still largely unreflected-upon), that the great – and *complex* – salvation narratives of the Bible, and of the Christian tradition, continue to reside as both perplexing and inspiring within the medium of the popular cinema. The taciturn hero of Clint Eastwood's later Westerns brings both retribution and salvation, though it is not always comfortable as he disappears, as mysteriously as he had first appeared, and leaves the

world a wiser, sometimes sadder, and yet, somehow, a better place. The still unresolved debate over Mel Gibson's violent film of the last hours of Jesus on earth is over the offer of salvation, but at a cost that is too much for many film watchers.

The theme of salvation has never sat easily within literature and art. As early in the Christian tradition as 1 Timothy 4.7 we are warned to 'have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales.' In the seventeenth century the poet Andrew Marvell feared that one of the greatest poems in the English language, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), a 'rewriting' of the story of the first three chapters of Genesis, would lead to the 'ruin of sacred truths' as the poet oversteps the mark in his retelling of the biblical narrative. And indeed, although Milton deliberately sets out, as he puts it, to 'justify the ways of God to men', he comes up with a story of redemption that sits awkwardly with the traditional Christian reading of Genesis. For his is a *poetic* story of salvation even in its account of the fall from primal perfection. At the very end of the poem, Adam and Eve leave their Paradise Garden, hand in hand, and set out on their journey together into a world of labour and adult responsibility. Here are words of one critic, David Daiches, in his book *God and the Poets* (1984), on this conclusion – words suggestive of salvation in the poetry *in spite of* everything:

It is not the effortless peace of the Garden of Eden. It is something more interesting and more testing. And ultimately, to Milton, so the poetry if not the argument tells us, it is more satisfying. Good comes out of evil not in the theological way of the *felix culpa*, the 'fortunate fall', but more obliquely in the emergence of a world that in spite of everything is the world we want and need. So God is justified, in a way that might have surprised him.

It is a timely reminder that alongside the theologians and the narratives of the Christian faith, there are stories in literature and art that suggest forms of redemption that are, in some sense, quite other, and of which our religious sensibilities can be forgetful or even disapproving. For literature and art are often stubbornly resistant to our assumed categories of sacred and secular, and perhaps it is proper that we should not be allowed to forget this. Is the languishing sensuality of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1859) the vehicle for a genuine, if deeply tragic, story of redeeming love? What does the mysterious smile of John Steinbeck's character Rose of Sharon at the end of his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) signify? A moment of true redemption, a moment of reprieve in a cruel world – or a moment of scandal? Does our Christian theology embrace such moments – or reject them as profane and improper?

Nor is such unease the exclusive property of 'high' art. There are conservative Christian circles in which the Harry Potter stories of J. K. Rowling are rejected as dangerous and profane – but in what sense are they 'stories of salvation', alongside *The Lord of the Rings* or even the novels of Philip Pullman? The Christian story of salvation does not, it would seem, have an exclusive claim on the human imagination, and art, literature and film, from the profound to the kitsch, from the deeply moving to the sentimental, continually remind us of dimensions of the human which Christian theology cannot afford either to forget or neglect.

9. CONCLUSION

Within the confines of this short essay, we have attempted to illustrate some of the many ways in which the idea of salvation is alive and continuing to be developed, both within and beyond the Christian Churches, in the twenty-first century. An idea explored by the biblical writers of Old and New Testament times, and by Christian theologians through the centuries, it retains deep and powerful meanings for people today, through its secular manifestations as well as in its elaboration in the rituals and sacraments of the Church. For as long as human beings possess a sense of a need to act in response to the situation in which they find themselves, to better or even to transcend that situation, so the language and imagery of salvation will continue to inspire, enthuse, and embolden us. And given the innate capacity of humans always to strive further in their explorations of their environment and of themselves, it is clear that the idea of salvation will retain a permanent claim for a place in all human visions for our individual and collective futures.

FURTHER READING

As with earlier essays in this series, we hope that readers of this fifth Grosvenor Essay will be inspired to read further around themes which we have touched upon. To facilitate this we list below some books to which we have referred, or which we particularly recommend to interested parties, together with a brief comment on each.

J. D. Barrow and F. J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford University Press 1987)

A classic exposition of the ways in which we may interpret the observation that nature is remarkably 'fine-tuned' to permit the emergence of conscious life in the cosmos we inhabit.

David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Clarendon Press 1999)

Focuses on the way in which stories from the Bible have not stood still, but are continually subject to imaginative 'rewriting'.

H. Brown, *The Wisdom of Science*, (Cambridge University Press 1986)

An eloquent plea, from an outstanding astronomer, for the integration of science into culture and religion, for the benefit of humanity.

Jean Corbon OP, *The Wellspring of Worship*, (Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1988)

A presentation of the theology of liturgy inspired by the witness of Scripture and the Syriac and Greek traditions.

David Daiches, *God and the Poets* (Oxford University Press 1984)

A wide-ranging study of how poets in the Christian tradition have treated the question of the nature and existence of God.

F. W. Dillistone, *The Novelist and the Passion Story* (Collins 1960)

A classic study of five modern novels in which the Passion narrative, and the idea of redemption, shapes the story.

Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (WileyBlackwell 2000)

This book brings Christian theology and creative literature into dialogue on the theme of 'the end'.

David Hay, *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit* (Darton Longman and Todd 2006)

An exploration of reports of religious experiences, drawing on the author's original research and on material from the Religious Experience Research Unit set up by Alister Hardy.

John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (SCM Press 1997)

A discussion of the sacramental principles, and of the seven sacraments individually.

M. Midgley, *Science as Salvation* (Routledge 1994)

A moral philosopher summarises and gives a trenchant critique of the loose, but seductive, soteriological talk repeatedly engaged in by some prominent scientists.

R. J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids 1983)

A brilliant exposition of Isaiah's vision of redemption on the broadest canvas. Also has the virtue of being very short (77 pages!).

R. Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'* (Oxford University Press 2004)

A highly illuminating analysis of historical and philosophical ideas in this most powerful and compelling of operas, in which redemption is a major theme. Scruton also explores the sources behind the mythic material used by the composer.

Patrick Sherry, *Images of Redemption* (T & T Clark 2003)

A useful discussion of how art and literature help us to understand religious concepts like salvation and redemption.

Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Penguin 1971)

A classic text examining popular beliefs in 16th and 17th century England. It was first published nearly forty years ago and is still in print. It has been criticised for an overly sociological view of belief, but remains a popular and readable introduction to the spiritual beliefs and practices of the period.

T. Todorov, *Hope and Memory* (English translation by David Bellos, Atlantic Books 2003)

This book by a political scholar gives a poignant discussion of the role played by a totalised science (scientism) in the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century in the opening chapter.

M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge 1992)

This essay, first published in 1910, argued that there is a relationship between certain aspects of Calvinist thought, and the emergence of styles of thinking that favoured the growth of modern capitalism, the chief of which was the idea that we have a duty to make maximal use of time and money. These insights caused both excitement and controversy, and sparked a debate within social science which even today remains unresolved.

Anton Wessels, *'A Kind of Bible': Vincent van Gogh as Evangelist* (SCM Press 2000)

A discussion of the art of van Gogh in the light of his early piety and of his work as a preacher and evangelist.