

## **SERMON – 24/7/22**

Titus 3:1-7

“When the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us.” (Titus 3:4)

It seems a long time since I have seen a wayside pulpit announcing 'Jesus saves'. You sometimes used to see the same message painted on rocks at the side of the road in some out of the way places. My recollection of visits to Northern Ireland some years ago is that they were even more common there than on this side of the North Channel. Perhaps they are less fashionable these days, although I have to say I'm not sure what message most passers-by would take from these proclamations unless they had at least some background understanding of the Gospel. Jesus saves!

Within some church circles the question 'Are you saved?' is not uncommonly posed to visitors or newcomers appearing at the church door. For those with the right background the question is expected and the correct answer immediately forthcoming, but for others I suspect the question would be utterly mystifying. Are you saved?

Just now we have sung (I hope with gusto!) the words: 'We have heard a joyful sound, Jesus saves!' In the last three editions of the Church Hymnary that hymn has had a place, and so many of us will have sung it throughout our lives, but what is this joyful sound of which we are singing? Jesus saves!

We read earlier: “When the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us.” Interestingly this passage is one of the lectionary readings for Christmas Day, but since we tend not to go in for extended teaching sermons on Christmas morning there isn't much opportunity to reflect on this theme so I'm glad we can stop and think about it this morning.

The thrust of this sermon fell surprisingly quickly into place for me earlier in the week – an exploration of the theme of salvation (another buzz word that is heard in churches but I suspect many people are also a little vague about). Salvation is about being saved – but what is it that we are saved *from*, who is it that we are saved *by*, and what is it that we are saved *for*? Can't you just feel a three-point sermon coming on?

So let me pose that (to many ears) strange question: Are you saved? Many people today (many within the church included) have absolutely no sense that they are in need of salvation. They feel no need to be saved. What Paul has to say here helps to make more sense of the question. "At one time, he writes, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." (v.3) He is characterising the kind of life that is all too common amongst human being. How much foolishness do you see around you on a daily basis, in the things people say, the attitudes that we allow to guide our behaviour, in the decisions we make about the big things and the little things of life alike? How much routine disobedience goes on in relation to everything from the highway code in Kinross High Street to lockdown regulations in Downing Street, much of it accompanied by an attitude of self-justification – well it doesn't really apply to me, it won't matter if I bend the rules a bit, everyone is at it. But disobedience it is. How many of us are completely unaware that we are deceived, enslaved even, by what on the face of it seem like perfectly harmless pastimes? And most seriously of all how many of us are actually ruled by malice, envy and hatred, holding grudges against those we have been called to forgive as generously as we have been forgiven in Christ?

Don't we all need to be saved from all of that? I know I do. What have you been saved from and what do you *still* need to be saved from? Are you saved? Or is the reality that you are no different from the neighbour who doesn't profess to be a Christian? At one time, writes Paul to Titus, we were *all* enslaved by the ways of the world.

*But...* - what a great word that is for a preacher - "But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us." (v.4) The apostle gives us three incredibly important headlines about the accomplishment of our salvation – firstly that it not something we can achieve for ourselves but that secondly it is the gracious and merciful gift of God in Jesus, applied to us thirdly through the Holy Spirit in whom we are washed and reborn or (in the words of the hymn-writer) ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

None of us stands here this morning, holy in the presence of God, because of anything that we have accomplished in and of ourselves. We are here because of what *Jesus* has done, coming as He has in kindness and love like a good shepherd to seek us out when we have got lost, giving up His life for us so that we might be redeemed, and unleashing the unstoppable life of the Holy Spirit in those who would follow Him that we might die to self and rise to new life.

Just like the unfortunate individual who has perhaps fallen into open water and is being dragged down by waterlogged clothing or carried away by currents that they are powerless to resist, there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, we need a life-saver, a Saviour, and in spiritual terms we need the renewal and rebirth that only the Holy Spirit can give. A story that had a huge impact on me when I was a teenager was of a young girl about the same age as me who fell off a boat in the dark at a party. Hearing her screams, someone jumped in after her and managed to guide her to shore, saving her life, but in so doing he himself was drowned. That is what Christ did for me, and for you. Christ died for us. Do you know that your salvation is of God alone in Christ and through the Holy Spirit? Or are you still flailing around trying to save yourself? We have heard a joyful sound – Jesus saves!

Finally, in his letters, Paul always moves from teaching about what Christ has done to exhorting his readers to let that impact on the way they live their lives, and this letter is no exception. In the context of this passage we are urged to think about why we have been saved – what it is that we have been saved for – and there are a couple of themes I would like to tease out today in closing. Firstly the apostle reminds Titus that if we have been saved then we have become heirs of a great inheritance, recipients of the promise of God that we share in eternal life. Last Sunday in one of our hymns we sang the line 'live tomorrow's life today' and that, I think, is a really helpful way to think about how we should live out our salvation. We're not talking here about 'pie in the sky when you die' – some wistful hope to keep us going in midst of this world's struggles – but rather the motivation to be proactive in exhibiting the ways of God's perfect Kingdom (that one day we will enjoy fully) as a

beacon of the way God longs for things to be even in the half-light of this world.

And the apostle puts some flesh on the bones of that in what he suggests here to Titus: "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no-one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle towards everyone." (vv.1-2) I think in recent years many of us have struggled with aspects of the behaviour of our civic leaders but when you look at the kind of worldly leaders that existed at the time this letter was written it puts Paul's exhortation to Christians to be obedient citizens in some kind of context. What does it mean for you to do your civic duty and what potentially transformative example might that give in our society at a time of widespread disquiet at our political system? Or perhaps there is something you can take up specifically to focus on this week – get yourself ready to do good, choose your words carefully and speak well, surprise yourself with how patient you can be with family or friends, take your ranting to God in prayer rather than to social media, and surprise others by how at peace you can be even in the midst of conflict, how considerate you can be even in the face of provocation, how gentle you can be even when the behaviour of others leaves a lot to be desired.

In a moment we will sing ancient words from Psalm 106 which are surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly) very appropriate by way of response to this morning's Gospel message. Let me encourage you to make them your prayer of response today.

My friends, are you saved? What have you been saved *from*? Examine yourself and consider if there is a work of salvation still to be effected in you. Who have you been saved *by*? If you think it's by your own good living, think again, and throw yourself on the kindness and mercy of God in Christ as you open yourself to the renewal of the Holy Spirit. And go from here today thinking about what it is you have been saved *for*. Rejoice in the hope of eternity that is held out to you in Christ and let that prompt in you the eagerness to do good here and now that we were thinking about last week, or as Paul exhorts us in today's reading to be exemplary citizens in this world and to go the extra mile in goodness, peace-making, consideration and gentleness. That's why you have been saved. Now go and live it!