

### Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2022 – ‘The Hope of Salvation’ (Romans 8:18-25, Luke 4:14-21)

In the summer of 1989 I went to Earls Court, along with thousands of others, to hear Billy Graham speak. I was 16, nearly 17, and already a committed Christian. But I was intrigued to hear one of the world's most famous Christians, and quite a number of our church were going that night. It was a remarkable evening: partly because of the sheer size of the crowd, partly because of its simplicity – Graham's formula varied very little over the many decades he travelled the world and his message was always the same: come to Jesus and give your heart to him.

Mostly, though, what made it remarkable was that I was one of many hundreds who went forward to pray and (in my case) re-commit my life to Jesus. I'd done this before, but there was still something – or I should say Someone – drawing me forward. The chap who prayed with me was lovely, and in the autumn I attended a course at my church exploring the commitment I'd made.

Fast forward 30 years and what is now called 'stadium evangelism' is very much out of fashion. There are many criticisms of it, some of which are justified, and it is vital that the church is able to re-imagine mission to make it relevant for every generation. It's possible that we'll never see the like again of those huge gatherings in 1989, which, apart from a brief return to Edinburgh in 1991, were the last of Graham's missions to the UK. But I must say, regardless of how these events are now viewed, Billy Graham remains one of my heroes – someone of both enormous integrity and incredible effectiveness; as it happens, I also know of at least two other people in our congregations even today who first came to Christ at a Billy Graham meeting.

But if we pause for a moment to reflect on the nature of the message you might expect to find at a big gathering like a Billy Graham mission event, we find ourselves asking a very important question. **What is salvation?** If you've ever been to a big event like this, you'll know this is the primary focus: the message of Jesus is preached so that people like us can be *saved*. And the idea of Jesus as Saviour runs throughout the pages of the bible, it's another foundation stone of everything we believe.

But what actually is it? What does it mean? Often we like to boil it down to a simple prayer: you may have heard it said: 'pray this one prayer and you will be saved.' And we have to admit that at one level this is true: as even St Paul said, 'if you confess with your lips "Jesus is Lord", and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved.' The great preacher Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones used to say that unless there was a hint of scandal about the gospel, it probably wasn't being preached properly. 'What?? I only have to believe one thing and declare one thing, and that's enough? It can't be that simple, surely? Where's the catch?!'

This is why the word gospel means 'good news'. The reason it really is that simple is that it rests not on the amount of our faith, or our moral goodness, but on Jesus' perfection and on what Jesus has done for us. In other words **it relies on objective realities of history**, not on some pass mark in the exam of life or subjective assessment of how much faith we have. The truth is that none of us deserve it: but that's not the point. Jesus has intervened on our behalf: coming as one of us to demonstrate God's perfect compassion and identification with the humans whom he had created and loves, dying in our place to satisfy God's perfect justice (which now no longer needs any further recompense) and then rising from the dead to show that he is both victorious over all our spiritual enemies, and the true author of life who can give this life to all who come to him.

The human condition is that, however hard we try or however much we want to, we cannot escape our twin enemies of sin and death, and all the pain and trouble that come with them: but **in Jesus Christ these can both be defeated. This is why we can say that we are 'saved'.** We have enemies we can't defeat but someone else comes to defeat them for us. These enemies would ultimately triumph without this divine intervention: and so, the rest of the world might say it's a cliché, but Christians throughout the generations have declared with joy and thanksgiving: 'Jesus saves!'

But, remarkably, we can go further still. To be forgiven our sin, to be set free from guilt and separation from God, to be united with Christ and to receive his presence with us, to have the hope of eternal life to look forward to: these are all amazing, wonderful gifts. But it doesn't stop there. One of the criticisms of big tent evangelism is that it reduces God's good news just to the idea of saving souls – as if nothing else matters but getting people the right side of the line. Actually Billy Graham himself didn't believe that, his own theology was much deeper and more well-rounded, albeit he focused on one thing because that was what he felt the Lord had called him to do. **But it's a fair question to ask: is that all salvation is?**

**Thankfully the answer is no!** Let's go back to our bibles to get the answer. And what we find there is that the word 'salvation' is much bigger than we often realise. It means 'to make whole', so includes lots of other things apart from forgiveness: healing, restoration, unity, reconciliation, peace, maturity, wellbeing. In fact, the gospels use the same word for 'save' and 'heal' – we just translate it differently depending on context. Which makes the point: God's plan for us is way bigger than just forgiving sins and getting us into heaven – although that is a great start – it is to **transform each of us towards complete wellbeing, maturity and fullness of life:** in other words to exercise our true God-given humanity, lived in union, peace and joy with God and each other.

So when Jesus comes to Nazareth and reads from the prophet Isaiah, he describes salvation as including not just the proclamation of good news, but also release for prisoners, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, the righting of wrongs *and* the day of God's favour. A few years later St Paul (writing in Romans) goes even further when he says that **God's plan is not just the transformation of humanity, but the renewal of all creation,** that it might also enjoy what he calls 'the glorious freedom of the children of God.'

So salvation might start with being forgiven – and let's never underestimate how amazing that is – but it doesn't stop there. God's plan for us is to become fully like Christ, as his Spirit dwells in our hearts, and slowly transforms into Jesus' likeness. And the reason is that God doesn't immediately take us to heaven as soon as we are 'saved' is that we have the rest of our lives to start this process of transformation, and also to bring that transforming love and power to other people and even the rest of the planet. **We are not just saved from, we are saved for....**

If you've come to Christ in the past, give thanks today that God has not only saved you, but is still continuing that process right now. If you're not sure you've ever come to Christ, why not take a moment after this talk to pause the service and ask Jesus to come into your life. Invite his Spirit to live in you and to set you on the path to this transformed life. And wherever you find yourself today, let's all commit ourselves again to be bringers of salvation, in its fullest and deepest sense, in the places God has put us. Amen.