

Seeing Salvation

Ezekiel 43:27 – 44:4; Luke 2:22-40

Nearly twenty years ago the peerless Neil MacGregor, then director of the National Gallery in London, presented a BBC series called 'Seeing Salvation.' It showed us how Jesus has been depicted in paintings over the centuries, and gave a wonderful insight into faith. Our faith is so often dominated by words, and words are important. But faith can be communicated in many different ways.

Music, for some, is a vehicle for faith, putting into sound what words cannot easily say.

Nature, for some, is a vehicle of faith. The quiet of a woodland walk, the beauty of a garden, the grandeur of the mountains, the vastness of the sea.

Here in Church there is much to remind us visually of what faith can be about. So often we don't stop to look at things because we think we are familiar with them. But when we pause and look, really look, and pay attention to what has been before us maybe for a very long time, then we can be surprised to see salvation.

Last week I started the Believing and Belonging course. Not a huge turn out (does nobody new want to make a commitment in faith?), but one person came. She is already a believer, from a different Christian tradition, and she wanted to learn more about her faith from a different perspective. At the first evening I spread out on a large table a vast number of postcard images of Jesus. There are over a hundred. It's quite bewildering when you first look at them. Nativity scenes, scenes from Jesus' life, people meeting Jesus, crucifixion and resurrection scenes, miracle scenes. Old images and new images of Jesus. Postcards of paintings and sculptures from churches and art galleries. Each one is a different picture of Jesus.

I ask people to work their way round the collection, and pick two images of Jesus they like, and two that they don't like, and then talk about them. For people who find words difficult, and for people who are a bit nervous about speaking about faith, I've found this a helpful way to encourage people to begin to talk. But first they have to use their eyes.

When we look at images of Jesus, in postcards or paintings, sculptures or stained glass, what do we see? Do we see the person? Do we notice the background? Do we remember the story that the image relates to? Do we think about what the artist who made the image was trying to convey? Do we notice if there are plants and flowers, or animals and objects? Do we notice the different colours used? Do we look at the big picture? Do we see the tiny details?

Looking at some of these things, do we begin to think about what they say about Jesus, and what we think about Jesus? As we look, and notice, and wonder, and pay attention, do we see salvation, and what Jesus means and offers? Do we free Jesus from the one dimensional, and invite Jesus into the multi-dimensional world in which we live? Do we see salvation, in Jesus, and the relationship He wants with us?

At the Wednesday coffee morning I spoke to someone who was having a challenging time in life. I remembered how, in my last church, I spent some pastoral time with someone who was going through difficulties and found it difficult to express what they were feeling and thinking. That person was a regular church-goer, and I asked them why they came and what they liked about church, if anything. "I like the windows."

It gave me an idea to use the windows in that church and get the person to talk about what they saw. It helped the person first of all to look outward, not ignoring their life and their problems, but to look out and notice what was going on outside. I remember it was a window of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, walking with a couple of sheep, and carrying a lamb. I asked the person what the window made them feel. Did they identify with anything in the window? Could they apply anything they saw in the window to their lives? It's not rocket science, and it was not the only help that was needed, but for that person, and for others later on, it gave an opportunity not to look inwards and worry, and fret, and despair, but for a little while look outwards, and engage with something that they could see, and begin to talk about. Was that seeing salvation?

It can involve remembering, it can involve imagining, it can involve reframing situations in life and looking at them in a different way. It starts with pausing, calming, looking, and noticing, and wondering, and thinking.

A healthy life today is about making sure a healthy body is related to a healthy mind. I believe it is also about ensuring our spiritual well-being, something that chaplains in hospitals, universities, prisons, schools, the armed forces, industry and other places recognise too. Our spiritual well-being is not only found in churches, chapels and temples. It has enormous relevance beyond holy walls and outside, in the world where we work, and rest and play. If we are to see salvation, we need to see it in every aspect of our lives. It is vital, literally.

The nudge to see salvation in the everyday world for people of faith will often come from the sanctuaries where they worship. Someone who attended worship last week told me that for this one hour, it was an opportunity to put the mobile phone away, stop the daily grind and routine, and be encouraged to look, and listen, and reflect. In the Old Testament prophecy of Ezekiel, the prophet is taken around the sanctuary of the Temple, and was invited, by God, to look in through the door. On looking, Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord filling the holy place, and he was given hope.

What I love about part of the recent new building work here are the glass doors, which allow people to look into the sanctuary and see what we're up to on Sundays. Or at night-time, coming in a little closer and seeing the windows illuminated by the floodlights. They shine, and people are surprised at what they see, and it makes them think.

In Luke's gospel Jesus as an infant is brought to the Temple for a special part of the Jewish ritual after childbirth. As His parents brought Him, the holy family encounter two older people. Simeon, who had waited all his life to see God's promised return would come true, and Anna, who had longed for the freedom of God's children to come. Anna told anyone who would listen about what was happening. Simeon sings of peace and salvation for the world, because God, in Jesus, had come to bring hope:

“Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Thy people Israel.”

Seeing salvation. Seeing peace promised and realised. Seeing salvation. Seeing light for the world. Seeing salvation. Seeing glory is **still** something to be encountered.

In sitting down and talking over coffee, with people you know and people you don't know. In helping an older person come to church, and seeing them home safely. In listening to a child read a prayer and praying along with her. In looking at windows that have surrounded you for years and noticing the details of God's story that speak to you. In hearing music and singing songs, and being lifted up, or calmed down. In offering money, and giving thanks that God's Church will be supported and others will be blessed. In arranging, delivering and receiving flowers, and thinking about the connections that flowers make. In coming into this sanctuary for the first time or the umpteenth time, and understanding that those others alongside you are part of the comforting, challenging, believing doubting family of God.

All around us today, and in the days of this coming week, there are signs of salvation.

Do you see?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen