

The man who can't save himself saves others Good Friday
Psalm 22:1-31 & Matthew 27:41-42

“Jesus saves!”

Ask a dozen people what that means and you might well get a dozen different answers.

“Well, we all have to these days. If you don't save anything then when you retire you won't have enough to live on. This Jesus sounds sensible – planning for the long term.”

“Well, he's got to be better than Rob Green. Mind you I wouldn't want to be a goalkeeper – hero to zero very quickly. One minute you save a stunning attempt on goal, the next, the ball is past you and in the back of the net and you've let everyone down.”

“He'd be mad not to! If you don't regularly save all your work by backing up onto an external hard drive, then when your system crashes – you'd loose everything!”

But ask the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders 2000 years ago whether or not Jesus could save and they would mockingly tell you what they had said to Jesus himself as he hung on the cross; “He saved others, but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”

You see, Jesus was their sport, their Friday afternoon fun - what a disappointing failure this “saviour” had turned out to be, after all he seemed to be able to sort out all sorts of other people - he healed some, cast out demons from others, fed the hungry, he even claimed to forgive sins but now here he is nailed to a cross; the “saviour” unable to save himself. How ironic.

And here's the greatest irony – his name; “Jesus”, it's the Greek form of “Joshua” which means “YHWH (the LORD) saves”. Well, it doesn't look much like it, does it?

But looks can be deceiving because Jesus is the one through whom God saves and it is at the cross that he does it.

Horrific and terrible as it is, quite frankly none of this should surprise us. Have you ever read a novel which is so good that you want to re-read it? You start again at the beginning and suddenly you discover a little episode or sentence which is much more significant than you realised, but which, when you first read the book, you'd missed?

Perhaps that's not quite as true for us when we read the accounts of the birth of Christ, but it is certainly worth going back to Matthew's first chapter and reminding ourselves of the announcement the angel made to Joseph to reassure him that the child Mary was pregnant with was really God's Son. Listen to what the angel says; “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Did you see that? God's instruction is that this child is to be specifically given the name “Jesus” why? Because he will save his people from their sins - his name describes what he will do – “The LORD saves”! And how can someone be saved from their sins? Well any Jew would have been able to answer that 2000 years ago; sins could only be paid for by sacrifice.

But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders just don't see it – perhaps they are in this religion business simply for themselves, they are looking after number 1. And if that's the case then the most important person to save is yourself.

So Jesus' situation wouldn't make sense to them - he might have helped other people, but now he can do nothing for himself – the nails hold his hands to the wooden cross, the soldiers keep any hope of a rescue at bay; as a religious leader Jesus is an abject failure.

But Jesus isn't a religious leader, he isn't in it for himself – he never was. No Jesus came expressly to die; to be the one pure, holy and acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the world in order that he might truly save his people.

So here, as the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders mock Jesus we see the difference between religion and Christianity. Religion says you have to be in control, you have to be doing the thing which looks right – essentially you have to save yourself.

But Christianity is totally different. Christianity is faith based, it is all about accepting that you can do nothing to save yourself, but that Jesus has done it all for you. In some senses it's no easier because you have to accept that Jesus died the most agonising, cruel and unjust death imaginable, that he was brutally nailed to the cross and hung there gasping for breath as your sin was poured into him.

Now you didn't ask Jesus to do that for you so it's slightly awkward, it offends some people because it means that we are in his debt. And whilst a lot of us are happy to be in debt to Lloyds for our car loan, or Mastercard for our weekly spending or the Halifax for our mortgage some of us just don't like the thought of being in debt to God, because if God saved us, if we owe everything to him, then that means there is nothing he cannot ask of us in return.

We might have to talk to people about Jesus. We might have to welcome outsiders into our churches and fellowships – and they might change things. We might be branded as Christians. We might have to stand up against things other people do. We might have to stop doing some of the things we do.

No, it's far easier, far safer to try to save ourselves; to be good, to come church, to do the "right thing" – it certainly impresses other people more, people like chief priests, teachers of the law and elders. But ultimately it is futile because it doesn't impress God.

The only person who can save from our sins is Jesus and at the cross that's what he does.

By dying for our sin, paying our penalty Jesus takes us and transforms us from sinners and enemies of God; condemned and separated from the holy and just LORD and he saves us – Jesus restores us; he cleanses us from our sins, he makes us new, he takes upon himself the punishment we deserve and so makes it possible for us to come into God's gracious and merciful presence.

And yes, God might just ask us to do anything which serves and glorifies him. But how can we refuse? How can we not be thankful that whilst we were rebels, wrecked by sin, separated by pride, lost in our selfishness the man who couldn't save himself saved others – and in fact, saved us.

“And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die—I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!*”