

Study 1 - The Saviour Promised Long

Richard Dadd, The Flight out of Egypt, 1849



Say or sing together:

*Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long;
let every heart prepare a throne
and every voice a song.*

Icebreaker:

Is the continual retelling of the Advent and Christmas story still a vital part of what we are as individuals and as church?

'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.' (Luke 24:27)

The Promise of a Saviour

There is perhaps a natural inclination for human beings to believe that we are in control of our destiny. The Bible begins with a breakdown in the relationship between God and humanity, preferring independence and disobedience, and sin enters the vocabulary, in wrongdoing and wrong thinking in what has become an imperfect world. God wants this precious relationship to be restored, but we cannot ignore sin, and there is a cost.

The bottom line is that humanity cannot do this by itself, and although animal sacrifices by the Hebrew people made amends for a time, they were not enough.

The Bible reveals it is through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the Cross, and true repentance, that salvation comes freely offered to all. God rescues humanity because humanity cannot rescue itself.

Back in 1874, the great preacher and theologian Charles Haddon Spurgeon said this;

'In some shape or other, all natural men seek refuge in self, and fly thither again and again and again, though often driven from it. Their so doing is useless and foolish, dishonouring to God and defiling to themselves. If men would but believe the truth, they would know that they can no more save themselves than they can turn evil into good, or hell into heaven!

It would be a grand thing done if they could be made to understand that they have abundant power to destroy themselves, but that all their help for salvation lies wholly in Jesus Christ; when they are convinced of this, they will cast themselves upon the Redeemer, and peace and joy would fill their spirits.'

Questions:

Q) What do you think of Spurgeon's words, and how relevant are they today, so long after being written?

Q) Is a yearning to be in control of our lives a natural inclination for humans, and does that sit well with your understanding of the relationship between God and human beings in the Old Testament?

The Voices of Old Testament Prophets

(Read Jeremiah 23:5-6; Isaiah 9:6-7; Malachi 3:1)

The Assyrian Empire is weak, the Babylonians gaining power. Josiah, the young king of Judah, has come of age and is looking to lead the people back into the covenant relationship with God that they have sadly broken. Jeremiah brings God's Word into this window of opportunity, warning the people of hard times and impending exile.

It's not an easy message, but the people must face God's judgement before restoration will come. Then, out of sorrow will come joy, as God reveals his new covenant.

At the beginning of chapter 23, Jeremiah is chastising the leaders of Judah during Zedekiah's time for destroying the unity of the nation and scattering its people like sheep. But God will bring them back, placing shepherds over them before the coming of the 'righteous Branch', The Lord, who will

reign as a true king, and bring salvation to his people.

Isaiah paints a similar picture. Despite Israel's rejection of God's word through the prophet, God plans to bring light into their current darkness, and Isaiah brings us the image of a child and more titles for this new king – Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah's excitement at this revelation spills over into his words as he says the guarantee of this blessing is 'the zeal of the LORD!'

Malachi brings us familiar words that the New Testament writers saw fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist, quoting Jesus using these very words as a testament to how central he was in the bigger picture of God's salvation.

Questions:

Q) How do you view the use of Old Testament prophecy to point toward Jesus?

Q) Take another look at Isaiah's prophesy and the names that this child is to be known by. What do they say to you?

The voice of New Testament Writers

(Read John 1:1-4, Hebrews 1:1-5, Matthew 1:18-23)

Powerful words from John introduce his Gospel message, and his first words link to Genesis 1. Here is Jesus as 'the Word', and just as Genesis 2 talks of God breathing life into humankind, so John tells us that 'In (Jesus) was life, and that life was the light of all mankind'. He continues in his gospel to show that the words and actions of Jesus are indeed those of God.

The book of Hebrews carries this theme of Jesus not only as Word, but as creator working in creation and addressing the problem of human sin at Calvary. But we also have a division of time, between the past and present, the sharing of God's word by prophets and teachers of old, and more recently through his Son. In the last verse, the writer emphasises the relationship between Father and Son.



Master of the Vienna Adoration, Adoration of the Magi, 1410

Matthew brings us familiar Advent words, and Mary and Joseph's stories (it was important for Jews to see the Davidic link through Joseph), along with a precis of the situation Joseph found himself in, emphasising that this child is to be called Jesus (the Greek form of Joshua, which means 'the Lord saves') and fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah, 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (God is with us)' (Isaiah 7:1:14).

Questions:

- Q) What do the verses from John's Gospel tell you about the writer's understanding of Jesus and his relationship with God?
- Q) Hebrews talks about God speaking through the prophets at many times and in various ways. How do you hear God speaking in your everyday life?

Quotes:

'God never gives someone a gift they are not capable of receiving. If he gives us the gift of Christmas, it is because we all have the ability to understand and receive it.'
(Pope Francis)

'God gave you a gift of 86,400 seconds today. Have you used one to say 'thank you?''
(William Arthur Ward)

Jesus' Words and Actions

(Read John 5:16-21,24; Luke 5:20-24; Philippians 2:5-11)

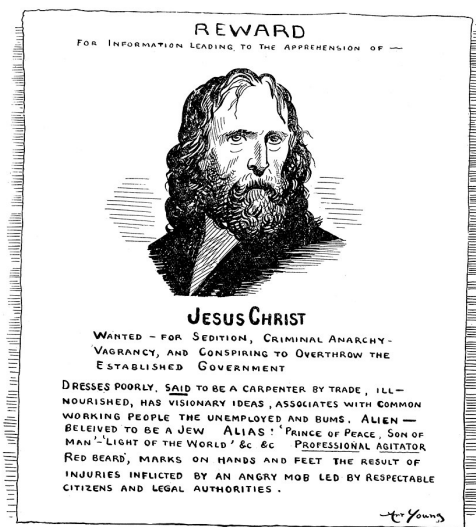
John gives an insight into how Jewish leaders saw Jesus as a dangerous person. First, in their eyes was his habit of breaking the laws and traditions of the Sabbath, which certainly merited punishment.

The Jews fully understood that God didn't take a day off each week, so Jesus' answer to the first complaint was, 'My Father is still working, and therefore so am I'. However, claiming equality with God was something they could not tolerate. And calling God his own father effectively made him equal to God, which was plainly blasphemous.

We might struggle to understand the concept of Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Spirit) but to Jesus, his relationship with God was one of sonship, which covers many aspects, as seen in verses 19-21.

Luke brings us a similar theme, with Jewish leaders accusing Jesus of blasphemy for forgiving the sins of someone – who can forgive sins but God alone, they ask? In his answer, Jesus asserts his authority to do this, as Son of Man, which can mean an ordinary man, or as in Daniel 7:13-14 a heavenly figure who, in the end times, brings God's kingdom to the oppressed.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, talks of the nature of Jesus, who refused to use his equality with God to his own advantage, and chose servanthood and humility instead, which, says Paul, is an example to us all.



Art Young, Arrest this Man, 1920

Arrest This Man

Questions:

- Q) How difficult do you think it might have been for the Jewish leaders to accept Jesus for who he said he was?
- Q) So, was Jesus really as dangerous to the status quo as the authorities believed?
- Q) How easy is it for people today to see through the tinsel, busyness, and anticipation of Christmas, and acknowledge Jesus as their Saviour?

Pause for prayer:

Pray for those who feel that they have no need of a Saviour, or who have had unpleasant experiences of organised religion, and want no part in it.