

Brackenhurst Methodist Church 19 July 2009
Why Jesus is Not my Saviour: Part 1

Opening Statement

- Welcome as we look at my second topic under the heading of “God is Bigger than”
 - And the statement that I’m making this morning is “Why Jesus is not my Saviour”
- Some folk may be horrified to hear that:
 - “How can this guy, a Methodist minister, make such a statement?”
 - Other may say, oh well, a Methodist minister, what do you expect!
- I would remind you that as we look at this sermon series we’re doing it in two ways
 - Firstly, we’re looking at topics in the context of my journey
 - * Which may not be your journey, and that’s okay — engage me!
 - Secondly, we’re trying to keep Christ central to our discussions
 - * So even while I say Jesus is not my saviour, I’m not wanting to exclude Christ from the picture
- Christ has been an important part of my life since before I was 16 when I stood up at an altar call and walked down the aisle choosing to follow him.
 - But as I’ve journeyed since then and have grown in the Christian faith I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the explanation of Jesus being only Saviour.
- You see there has been an emphasis in the church that the gospel is all about how Jesus died for my sins and I have found this increasingly difficult to believe.
 - I’ve expressed this in preaching in Warmbaths that Jesus didn’t have to die
 - * God didn’t send him to die, but the reality was that he would die
 - Also in Warmbaths some young people from Youth for Christ — own experience with YFC — came to share I remember them telling a story that I was horrified by
 - * There are various versions, but the one they told goes something like this
There once was a man who was a drawbridge operator and he took his son to work one day. While he wasn’t paying attention, he son wandered away. A ship was approaching and he needed to raise the drawbridge. Horror of horrors he saw that his son was playing in the cogs of the mechanism and he had to make a choice: Sacrifice his son in the gears, or destroy the bridge, and cause the sinking of the ship and loss of many lives.

He chose to sacrifice one life so that many could be saved, and this is what God did for us in sending Jesus to the cross

- I'm sorry, but that is just sick
 - * I don't want to serve the kind of God that is explained by this story
- But I've journeyed with these tensions until Easter this year.
 - As I sat listening to the different preachers on Good Friday I realised that I cannot believe this story any more.
 - * In fact, as the preachers were talking about how Jesus died for my sins, frankly, I found it to be repulsive, and if this is the focus of Christianity then I didn't want to be there any more.
- So what now? What does a minister do when what is apparently a central tenet of the Christian faith becomes unpalatable?
 - I could have resigned — maybe some of you are thinking that I should have
 - * But call, as Brian mentioned last week
 - I could stay and preach what I don't believe, couldn't do either
 - * I just went into 40 Days of community where I didn't have to think too much!
- But as I've journeyed and struggled and looked for answers (and it's important not to run away) I've come to see that there is a third way:
 - One can be a Christian and follow Jesus faithfully without 'his blood shed on the cross for me as an atoning sacrifice' being the most important aspect of one's faith
- And I'm very grateful to a number of authors who helped me in my thinking
 - Marcus Borg — leading Jesus scholar
 - John Shelby Spong — Bishop Emeritus of Episcopal
 - Brian McLaren — Conservative Evangelical who calls himself "generously orthodox"
 - * I have quoted extensively particularly from Borg and Spong in this sermon, won't always mention their names, but are referenced in notes
- So then, Why Jesus is not my Saviour, or Why I believe God is bigger than Jesus just being my Saviour.
 - First thing that I need to say is that this is an enormous subject, and I soon realised that I wouldn't be able to say all that I wanted to say in one sermon, so I've split it into two
- This morning I'll be looking at who is Jesus
 - Why is Jesus bigger than Saviour
- And then next time I'll be looking at salvation

- Why is salvation bigger than the often very narrow meaning we assign to it as in 'Jesus saved me from my sins'.
- A few months ago, in the midst of my questioning somebody asked me this question, and I wasn't able to answer it:
 - "Who is Jesus for you?"
- Upon reflection the best answer I could come up with was, "The Word made Flesh"
 - This is the theme of my sermon this morning, so let's turn to scripture

Scripture:

John 1:1-18

Message

INTRODUCTION

- Robert Capon, a contemporary Christian writer, suggests that the way Americans really view Jesus is like Superman, and he quotes those well known words describing the man of steel: [quoted by Borg. Jesus: Two Visions, pp 303-304]

"Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. It's Superman! Strange visitor from another planet, who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never ending battle for truth, justice and the American way."

 - Capon continues:

"If that isn't popular christology [way of seeing Christ], I'll eat my hat. Jesus —gentle, meek and mild, but with secret, souped-up, more-than-human insides — bumbles around for thirty-three years, nearly gets himself done in for good by the Kryptonite Kross, but at the last minute struggles into the phone booth of the Empty Tomb, changes into his Easter suit and with a single bound leaps back up to the planet Heaven. It's got it all — including, just so you shouldn't miss the lesson, kiddies: He never once touches Lois Lane."

* I would want to add, that our Jesus as a Saviour sweeps down from heaven, lifts us from the miry clay and takes us back up into heaven with him
- I think, if we're honest, that's how many of us see Jesus
- And so the burning question that we need to ask of ourselves honestly, and answer, is "Who is Jesus for me?"

- This ties in with what I spoke about last time when I contrasted how the disciples and Bartimaeus saw Jesus.
- Our picture of Jesus determines how we understand Christianity and the gospel
 - When we tell the Jesus story with an emphasis on his death on the cross, and the primary purpose of Jesus' life being to die for the sins of the world
 - * When we buy into the evangelical model of "Jesus died for my sins. He shed his precious blood on the cross of Calvary for my salvation. I have been washed in the blood of the lamb. Through the sacrifice of Jesus I have been saved. The stain of sin on my soul has been cleansed" model [Spong, p 83-84]
 - And this is the image I want to get away from when I say that Jesus is not my Saviour
- When we tell the story this way we distort who God is, and we distort who God is by painting him primarily a lawgiver and judge whose commandments we have violated
 - And Jesus as the sacrifice who makes forgiveness possible
 - * (We've told the story that way too)
 - And the reality is that if we were asked to give a nutshell understanding of Christianity this is probably how most of us would answer
- But this emphasis upon Jesus as substitutionary sacrifice leads to a Christian life that is centred in sin, guilt and forgiveness.
 - Its strength is that it does emphasise the importance of trying to follow the teachings of Jesus and the Bible BUT it also highlights our repeated failure to do so [last points from Borg, Two Visions, p 302]
 - * [Spong p 90] And so consequently this understanding, in the west at least, has given the religious — historically leaders, but laity as well — the power to understand and manipulate the sense of human inadequacy that expresses itself as guilt
- So religious empires have been built, on the one hand to reinforce the sense of guilt, and on the other to help people live with it, and, to a certain extent, overcome their guilt
 - We have things like confession, penance, masses for the dead and so on.
 - * Which reminds me of the story of young Johnny O Brein who goes to confession and he says, Forgive me Father for I have sinned, I have been with a loose woman. And the priest says to him, Well, now Johnny and who was that you were with. Johnny, says, well, now father I can't be telling you that.
 - * The priest says was it Mary O Hagen? Father my lips are sealed

- * Well was it Suzie O Connor? Father, I'm not willing to besmirch her name
- * Johnny that's admirable, but was it Sarah Murphy? I'm sorry Father, he says, I'll not tell.
- * Well, Johnny, what about Jenny Smith? I cannot tell
- * Well, what about Molly Brown. I've told you father, I'm not willing to tell you that.
- * Well, Johnny you're a young man of character, I'll give you that. Now go and say three Hail Maries, no mass for two weeks, and do not sin again.
- * So Johnny goes back to the pew and his friend says to him, so what did you get? He replies: Two weeks vacation and five good leads!
- The church: sin, guilt and punishment — that's the way so many people see the church,
 - and of course the joke illustrates the connection particularly between guilt and our human sexuality which the church has used so powerfully to achieve this sense of power over people [Spong p 90]
- I'm not going to go into the reason and history of how this whole "atonement theology" came into being
 - Simply to say that while it had its roots in the New Testament theology of Paul, it only really began to be developed by St Augustine
 - * Who had his own issues with his physical desires
 - In fact in all four of the gospels, while Jesus is only called 'Saviour' once, atonement theology only became prominent about 1100 years or so after his death
 - * And the idea of giving one's life to Christ as Lord and Saviour at an altar call is really a very recent development
- So is there an alternative way of seeing Jesus that is equally valid and equally biblical?
 - Yes! And this morning I only want to suggest two ways, there are probably many more ways, but for me these lie at the heart of who Jesus is
 - * Jesus as Word
 - * Jesus as Lord

(1) Jesus as Word [A lot of Borg, Heart of Christianity]

- I said earlier that my eventual answer to the question "Who is Jesus for you?" was "The Word made flesh".
 - What did I mean by that?

- As John begins his gospel he calls to mind the opening words of the Hebrew Bible, “In the beginning...”
 - And as we hear those words no doubt we are supposed to remember the story of creation as God spoke the cosmos into being
 - * “And God said...” And there was.
 - It was through God’s spoken word that creation was brought about
- And so by identifying Jesus as the Word of God, and indeed, as the same as God, John is making the powerful statement that Jesus as the Word is the expression of everything God is
 - And it is this point that John expands upon in his beautiful and eloquent prologue to his gospel as he describes Jesus as the one to bring the light, grace and truth of God
 - * Indeed, the very presence of God
 - Into the world which God himself has created.
- Jesus, for Christians then, is the decisive revelation of God [Borg Heart p 80-81]
 - And therefore Jesus reveals what can be seen of God embodied in a human life
 - * He is the revelation and incarnation of God’s character and passion
- Jesus, the Word made flesh, shows us what God is like and what God is most passionate about
 - Jesus shows us the heart of God
 - * And it’s not about dying — it’s about living fully
- And so conversely while Jesus shows us what God looks like he also shows us a human life filled with God looks like
 - And it is this affirmation that defines what not just what it means to Christian,
 - * but also what it means to be fully human
- As Son of God, Jesus reveals God
 - As the Word become flesh, he embodies what can be seen of God in a human life
 - * And as the Light of the World he enlightens us about the nature and will of God and the way to life [previous, Borg, Two Visions, p 300]
- But how can Jesus, a man, be described by his followers as God?
 - You know, if I had to stand up and say listen to me everyone, I’m God, you have to listen to me
 - * I don’t think that I would have much of a following!
- So here’s his man (Categories given by Borg: Heart) who starts working, ministering in Judea as someone who is close to God, who appears to be a mystic
 - He does some healings, some teaching

- Someone who appears to be a prophet
 - * Someone who even appears to some to be starting a revolutionary movement as Messiah (who historically was never going to be God)
- How does he become God?
 - And I think that this is how it happens:
- The first followers of Jesus, when he was alive, and soon after the resurrection — Jewish people — realised that what they saw in Christ perfectly epitomised what they understood about God
 - Jesus was the human expression of what they knew about God
 - * Jesus was the Word made flesh
 - And the Word was far more than sacrifice
- And when we keep this Word central to our lives , and begin to take him seriously, and begin to confess him as being God
 - We start to realise that the language of confession is also the language of commitment
- So when we confess that Jesus is the Word, or Jesus is the light we are making a bold statement, not just as to who he is, but also how we respond to him
 - And so for the first Christians it was because they were convinced of the presence of God revealed in this amazing person that in the midst of persecution they were able to live out the second understanding of Jesus that I want to speak about today:

(2) Jesus as Lord

- The very first of all the Christian Creeds — a Creed, of course, being a measuring standard to which we compare all subsequent beliefs
 - Was a very simple, three word statement:
 - * “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:19)
- There was no mention of Jesus being Saviour, although the statement was often set in that context (unpack what that salvation meant next week)
 - And interestingly in both the Apostles’ Creed and the earliest version of the Nicene Creed there is no mention of Jesus’ work as rescuer
- But this simple, basic statement of belief, of who Jesus was, and is, was never intended as we mean it today when we say it.
 - We will often say, “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour”?
 - * Today there is a personalised meaning to it
 - * “My Lord” — as if we can own God!
- Now, I want to tell you something:
 - In Roman times nobody was ever persecuted because of a personal belief.

- When the early Christians were persecuted it wasn't because they called Jesus a personal Lord and Saviour
 - It was because when they made the statement, "Jesus is Lord" they were saying Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not
- It was a statement of subversive, revolutionary intent
 - They were challenging the authority of the Roman empire
 - * And they were able to state this confidently in the face of persecution because they believed that in Jesus they could see God
- I think that this is the first meaning of the cross for Jewish followers of Christ in the face of Roman persecution
 - And so I want to unpack some biblical meanings of the cross in the light of the statement 'Jesus is Lord' for the first followers — you'll recognise them, but problem is we get them all confused and mixed up with 'atoning sacrifice' [as explained by Borg, Heart, pp 92-94]
- Firstly, Jesus, who was put to death for his politics, for his passion for God's justice, was vindicated by God.
 - The authorities rejected Jesus, but God raised him up (Acts 2:36): no mention of atoning sacrifice!
- When Jesus is Lord, secondly, no powers are able to overcome him because he has defeated them on the cross
 - They (the principalities and powers) tried their best to put him to death, to shut him up, but he triumphed over them (Col 2:15)
- When Jesus is Lord we choose to follow him because he has shown us 'the way' to life in dying to an old way of being, and being raised to a new way of being (Gal 2:19-20)
 - Baptism
 - Again — no mention of sacrifice, but we get confused and say that the way we do that is by giving life to Christ and making him Saviour
 - takes our own responsibility away, and focusses on end result as salvation for heaven, not a new way of being for today
 - * Last week — Bartimaeus was willing to leave cloak behind and follow Jesus on the way.
- The fourth biblical way of seeing Jesus' death when Jesus is Lord is as a revelation of the depth of God's love for us, and the power of God's love — not about sacrifice for our behalf as something that needs to be done
 - How much does God love us (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8)
- Then finally, the familiar sacrificial understanding which I'll unpack further next week

- So as we journey today
- Can we make
 - not the statement that Jesus is my personal Saviour,
 - not the statement that Jesus is Lord of my life
- but the statement that for us as Christians there is but one power that we will answer to
 - and that is Jesus
- And friends, when we do that, that, for me, is when the gospel being radical and powerful, and life-changing
 - not when I say Jesus is my Saviour so I'm going to heaven one day when I die

CONCLUSION

- The second commandment cautions against making an idol (Exodus 20:1-6) of God
 - In other words, picturing God in a way that he is not, and we're all guilty of that in one way or another
 - * But particularly, I think we're guilty in the way in which we have painted Jesus as only a Saviour when he is so much more
- What I am saying this morning is that there are other ways of seeing Jesus
 - Ways that shouldn't cheapen who he is, but rather that enrich who Christ is for us
- And really I don't think it matters so much how we speak of God, what matters is how we hear him (Neil paraphrasing Martin Buber, quoted by Borg, God, p50)
 - And in my journey I've needed to start hearing the Christ in other ways.
 - * I'm not saying that I don't need salvation
 - * I'm not saying that I'm too righteous to need Jesus
 - I'm saying there are other ways of understanding Christ, and other ways of understanding salvation
 - * We'll look at salvation next time
- And I'm very happy if you're comfortable to call Jesus Saviour, but for me I've had to let go of that image.
- As I conclude I want to quote both Borg and Spong
 - I would rather celebrate the sacred who is right here and the God who yearns to be in relationship to us, than a lawgiver and judge whose requirements must be met and whose justice must be satisfied
 - I would rather live out a faith in which the central dynamic is relationship with God, and the world, and each other, than one in which the central dynamic is sin and guilt

- I would rather celebrate a Christian life which is about turning toward and entering into a relationship with the one who is already in a relationship with us
 - * the one who gave us life, who has loved us from the beginning , who loves us whether we know it or not and who journeys with us whether we know it or not
- I can no longer follow a superman Jesus who swoops down from heaven to lift me up out of the world and carry back into God's arms.
 - Rather I seek to follow the Word who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn14:6)
 - * Jesus, the way into the heart of God, the Ground of all Being (Tillich)
 - * Jesus, the truth through which my life can be lived with theological and human integrity
 - * Jesus, the life who has made known what the meaning of life is.
- And in the words of Spong, being a disciple of this Jesus only requires me to be empowered by him to imitate the presence of God in him by living fully, by loving wastefully, and by having the courage to be all that God created me to be.
 - May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen

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