

4 Sunday of Lent, B

One of the worst things that can happen to any religion is to get disconnected from life and become a separate, specialized category of its own. Such an occurrence, unfortunately, is not at all uncommon. Most religions, it seems, have a tendency to become preoccupied with themselves and lost interest in the everyday lives of the people whom they claim to serve.

Such was the sad situation of the first-century Judaism with which Jesus had to deal. It had taken the moral and ethical message of the prophets and reduced it to a system of strict doctrines and little rules that had virtually no relation to the hopes and fears and needs of the people. This was the reason that Jesus parted company with the scribes and Pharisees. He would have nothing to do with a religion that had nothing to do with life.

Looking back across the centuries, we can see the good sense of that. What is the use of religion if all it does is live in a little world of its own. We applaud the down-to-earth convictions of our Lord and would like to believe that our position is somewhat the same as his. But dare we apply this test of practicality to our own faith? Could it be that our religion has this same tendency to lose its relatedness to life?

A good place to start asking that question is in our use of the word “salvation.” What does that word mean to you? It is one of the most prominent words in our Christian faith. We preach about it. We sing about it. We pray for it. But what does it mean? When we speak of Christ as our Savior, what have we got in mind? In what sense does he save us?

Let me, to provide the answer to my own question. I fear that for most people the word salvation applies primarily, to what happens to us after we die. To say that Christ saves us means that we end up in heaven instead of hell. With that kind of thinking, we divorce the saving work of Christ from this life and postpone it until the next.

It is the same tendency that we mentioned a few moments ago - to disconnect religion from daily living and make it a little category unto itself. We have no right to do that. Anyone in the right state of mind hopes to eventually end up in heaven; but for that moment, it is not our most pressing problem. We need to be saved right now.

Today's Gospel reading deals with this great theme of salvation, and almost the entire passage is written in the present tense. It begins with an illustration from the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. They were on their way to the Promised Land; but along the way, there were problems, one of which was snakes. They were being bitten, and many of them were dying. According to the story, God told Moses to make a snake of brass and mount it on a pole in the midst of the camp. Then those who were bitten could look to the bronze serpent and be healed. Salvation took place then and there, not later in the Promised Land.

Jesus applied that illustration to his own ministry; saying: "So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that all who believes may have eternal life in him. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

Now, why should we take that message of salvation and postpone it until heaven? It is good to know there is a promised land out there, but what we need is a snakebite remedy that works right here in the wilderness of life.

I am going to mention three very practical ways that you and I need to be saved right now.

First, we need to be saved from the smallness of a self-centered world. Every one of us entered this life as a tiny bundle of selfishness. Babies are like that. As far as they are concerned, the world revolves around them. They care about nothing or no one but their own needs and desires. When they are hungry, they want to be fed right then. It doesn't matter to them whether anyone else eats or not. The only thing that counts is the satisfying of their hunger. It is the same way when they are thirsty, or tired, or sick. If a baby gets sick, everyone else in the house could be burning with fever, and it would make no difference to him. With a loud voice, he will demand that someone come and make him feel better right now.

Such behavior, of course, is normal for a child; so we accept it, work with it, and wait for them to grow out of it. The tragedy is that some of them never do. All of their lives, they live in that same, little, self-centered world where the only thing that counts is the meeting of their personal needs and desires. If you have ever been around or dealt with such a person, you know how tragic that can be. And I am not speaking now of someone whose mental development is arrested early in life. We feel the same understanding for that person as we would for a child.

I am speaking of the man or woman whose soul never grows. They never discover the rest of the human race. They never learn that there are other needs, just as urgent and even more than their own. They never pack up and move out of their childish world into the adult world, where other people count just as much as they do.

Well, let's get honest. I have been speaking in the third person, talking to "you" about "them." But in truth, we are really talking about ourselves. To

some extent, we all live in a self-centered world. A degree of that is necessary; we cannot serve others unless we give some attention to caring for ourselves. But that is not what most of us are doing - taking care of ourselves in order to be of service. What we are doing is looking out for number one.

We have expanded our world a little bit, but it is still too small. When we and our families are fed, we tend to forget those who are starving. When we and our families are healthy, we forget those people who are sick and have no access to medical care. What we need is a saving relationship with Christ that can save us from such smallness and make us citizens of the world. The only hope for the human family is for enough of us to start caring about the rest of us. And I don't know anyone who can give us that kind of compassion except the One who died for all of us.

The next thing we need to be saved from is the fear of an uncertain world. Let's face it - these are frightening times. Our lives seem to be at the mercy of circumstances and events that are beyond our control. Someone, whom you don't even know makes a decision; and suddenly you are out of a job. It happened to others; it could happen to you. In another country, some angry person plants a bomb that explodes and kills innocent bystanders. We watch that kind of thing and wonder how long it will be before the same frustration breaks out here. Interest rates are so high that few people can buy a house; and it is increasingly difficult to afford an apartment. Many are wondering when it will change and how they can hang on until it does.

Well, how are we to lead stable lives in the midst of all this uncertainty? I only know of one answer, and that is faith in God. Jesus also lived in a dangerous world. His life was in constant danger at the hands of angry and unprincipled men. But he believed that God was with him, and that was

good enough. With that kind of faith, he held a steady course in a stormy sea. You and I need a saving relationship with him that will enable us to share that same faith.

Finally, we need to be saved from the cynicism of a hopeless world. Bertrand Russell used to advise his students to build their lives “on the firm foundation of unyielding despair.” Such, I suppose, is the only logical conclusion for one who does not believe in God. If there is no God, then ultimately there is no hope. Nothing is left but despair; and the best we can do is keep a stiff upper lip and refuse to cave in.

Surely there must be a better way. I, for one, don’t want to become cynical about life: cynical about people, cynical about myself. And it is Christ who convinces me that this is possible. If ever there was a man who had legitimate cause to become cynical, it was Jesus; but he never did. His way of life was rejected, but he believed it would ultimately succeed. His friends denied him and betrayed, but still he trusted them. On the cross, he felt forsaken by God; but he trusted his spirit to divine keeping and rose from the grave.

Many in our world today are stuck in cynicism. We do not have to join their ranks. Available to us is a saving relationship with the hopeful Christ that can lift us above it and keep our spirits floating.

Salvation is not just a question of heaven or hell; it is a matter of here and now. Only one life to live - we need not live it in selfishness, fear, and cynicism. Christ has come “that the world might be saved through him.” That salvation can be ours today. **Amen.**