

If you are looking for a Saviour, look where salvation is happening. That seems to be the message of today's Gospel. But I suppose that is not very relevant unless you believe that salvation is something that is still going on and unless you want it to happen for you.

We can imagine that as John carried on his ministry of preaching in the southern part of the Jewish nation, he listened with great anticipation to the news of the things Jesus was doing up north in Galilee. Then John got into trouble with the governor, Herod, and was thrown into prison. He must have known that his life was in danger. Then he was even more eager to know if, in fact, the Messiah for whom he was hoping had indeed come. He sent some of his followers to ask Jesus if he was the one who was to come.

Jesus did not answer directly. Instead he said, Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me. (vv. 4-5). These were things that the prophet Isaiah had said would happen when the Messiah came to bring in God's new possibility. Jesus knew that John would understand (Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:7; 61:1).

Should we be looking for a Saviour? And if so, where should we be looking? We need to consider that question. The Old Testament says very little about going to heaven, but says a great deal about salvation. They present God as one who works in this life and in the history of this world to save God's people from the danger and distress of this life to a new and better possibility here and now. For them, salvation was something that was always going on.

In the New Testament, the words that are usually translated as "to be saved" actually come close to meaning "to be healed" or "to be made whole." We notice that most of the signs that salvation was happening to which Isaiah and Jesus referred had to do with healing. And these different kinds of physical healing can represent several different kinds of spiritual healing. To be made able to see or to hear can mean to be made able to understand the real shape of reality and to understand the meaning of life. To be made able to walk can mean to be empowered to stand up and move out to live life fully. For a leper to be cleansed can mean to have those things taken away that cause a person to be alienated from the community and to be accepted into human relationships. For the dead to be raised can mean for those who are spiritually dead to be made able to become fully alive. All of these things can be ways of talking about being made truly whole, to have the kind of life that God wants us to have. Throughout the Scriptures, the saving work of God had to do with God saving us from those things that cripple our humanity, things like greed and fear and hate as well as from external oppression. It has to do with God saving us to a new kind of life, life in which the image of God is renewed in us. The simplest explanation of the life that God wants to save us to is to say that God wants us to learn to love. God wants us to learn to love as God loves. That is the objective of God's saving work. All of that adds new dimensions to the question about looking for a Saviour, doesn't it? Well, how about it? Do we want to go looking for a Saviour?

We don't have to spend much time watching the evening news on television to see that lots of things are going wrong in our world. There is so much violence, corruption, and human suffering. Lots of people and movements seem to be offering themselves as saviours. But most of them don't seem to be making salvation happen.

When we look within ourselves, do we find real wholeness? Are there any things that you need to be saved from, things that may be crippling your humanity and keeping you from living life as fully as you could? I suppose the best question to ask is: Are you able to love? Are you able to love yourself, not with a greedy selfishness, but with a joyful, healthy self-affirmation that allows you to say 'yes' to yourself and 'yes' to life and to live fully and freely? Are you able to love life?

Think seriously about that. Are you really able to love life as you have it now and get excited about life as it can be? Are you able to love God and others with the same kind of love you have for yourself or could have? Are you really happy with even the love you share with those who are closest to you? And how wide is that circle within which you love? That is what will make real fullness of life possible for us and will finally make survival possible for humanity as a whole. How about it? Could we interest you in some salvation? Do you need a saviour? Don't answer right now. Just think about it.

The people who wrote the Scriptures told stories of how God worked through Jesus to save them to fullness of life. We can read the story of Jesus and learn how God saves. Here is something interesting. Many of the names by which Jesus was called in the Scriptures actually represent stories that some of the early Christians told to witness to the saving works of God that they experienced through interactions with Jesus. The stories were different because Jesus found people in different situations of need and related to each of them in ways that were appropriate to their situations. Those who called him the Word experienced him as one who told them the secret of the meaning of life. Those who called him Son of Man experienced him as one who had shown them the need for change and called them to repentance. Those who called him Messiah experienced him as the one who brings a new possibility.

And here is the key. God is still at work in our lives and in our world to do the same kinds of saving works that God did through Jesus. When we see those things happening, either in our lives or in our world, we will know that the Saviour is at work there. We can open ourselves to that saving work and let it happen to us and through us.

Then where should we look to find the saving works of God happening? Some think it can happen only in some spectacular event when some awesome being crashes through the skies, does something that violates six of the laws of nature, and then disappears in a postlude of ethereal music. That doesn't happen very often. If we know how to recognise what God is doing, we can find him at work to save in many of the down-to-earth happenings of our lives.

For example, have you ever come to a time in your life when you realised that things just were not working the way they used to work before? Perhaps there is something wrong with the way in which you are thinking about things. That realisation may break in upon you in the midst of angry frustration. But it can force you to come to grips with the fact that some changes must be made. It can be helpful in that situation to remember that Jesus sometimes confronted people with a need to change. Jesus came preaching the same message that John preached: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). There is that word 'repent.' It means get ready to make some changes. And for Jesus, it was a part of the good news that God was opening a new possibility for humanity. That recollection may make you wonder if some new and better possibility is being made available to you. Could this unhappy situation actually be one of the saving works of God? It is worth asking the question.

Or imagine a happier situation, one in which you enjoy being in the circle of a loving family or a circle of good friends. In that set of relationships, you feel yourself being accepted as you are, valued as a person, and loved. In that kind of situation you can experience forgiveness, healing, and enablement. You can experience your own person emerging. That is definitely a saving work of God, the work that church people call grace. We can remember Jesus did that sort of thing for people whom he met during his ministry, and we can recognise it as a saving work of God.

If you are worried about all of the bad things that are going on in the world, look for some of the movements that are practically making things better and bringing hope. Yes, there are some. God may be calling you to become a participant in some of those movements. That commitment will give new meaning to your life. Can you remember Jesus calling people to follow him and become his disciples? That too is a saving work. If you are looking for a Saviour; and we all need to be looking for a Saviour. Look for the places where salvation is happening. Go there. Open yourself to it. Let it happen in you and through you. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton