

***“Save Yourself”***

**(Luke 23.33-43)**

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***Introduction***

It's part of the folklore we Australians grow up with... that the hardest thing for surf lifesavers to deal with when affecting a rescue, are the desperate attempts, the flailing around, of the drowning person trying to save themselves. Whereas what is needed, is for the person to give-up their attempts at self-preservation, and relax into the safe hands of the lifesaver... the one who knows what is necessary to return to safety on the shore.

***Save Yourself!***

*“Save Yourself!”* Luke repeats this three times in four verses in today's gospel. First it's the Temple elite, the gang who orchestrated Jesus' execution. Then it's the soldiers... And finally it's one of the other rebels, crucified alongside Jesus as an enemy of the Roman state.

*Save Yourself!* It's intended as mockery and it's based on the assumption... that *if* Jesus is the Messiah, the King, then of course he will use his kingly power for self-preservation... he'll use it to escape death. He'll come down and save himself from the pain... and turn the tables on his torturers... He'll win! And it's a reasonable assumption they make – after all, it's what we'd do wouldn't we?

But their assumption is wrong. As Jesus says in his prayer of forgiveness – they don't get it; they don't know what they're doing. Jesus *is* the Christ, the Special One of God... and he does indeed carry divine power... but he has no intention of escaping this cross that life (and his own faithfulness) has brought to him. Jesus is the man who taught, *‘Those who try to save their life will lose it, but those who let their life go will save it.’* (Luke 9.24) This is the way he follows and he stays true to it even now.

Instead of self-preservation, Christ chooses the path of surrender... of self-offering... of total openness to whatever comes... trusting that God's love and mercy holds him... and that there *will* be life, even in this suffering and death.

With the eyes of faith we look at this crucifixion scene and see beyond the horror and the chaos... We see that Jesus *is* being saved by God, for this suffering and death is the doorway to Paradise. And... through this action of love and self-offering, the door opens for the whole world to be saved. In refusing to save himself, Christ is opening the door to *our* salvation.

### ***Saving Ourselves***

'*Save Yourself!*' Much of our dysfunctional behaviour... that behaviour marked by compulsion and obsession, comes from an unconscious desperation to *save* ourselves. It might be a direct need for self-preservation – to keep ourselves safe from a range of threats... like pain, loneliness or poverty. Or that common desire to run away from pain and unhappiness. Or even that desire to escape the life we're in, for a more ideal or perfect one. As it is with the drowning swimmer, self-preservation is a powerful human instinct. And consumerist culture is always screaming '*Save yourself!*' ... and making all sorts of price-attached suggestions about how we can do that.

Christ, however, teaches that this impulse and the behaviour that flows from it, is total illusion. *Real* life doesn't come that way! Christian faith says that we *can't* save ourselves... Only God can save us!

### ***Salvation?***

But what does it mean to be *saved*? The old language fails most of us, especially when we rely on distant interpretations of salvation... maybe from Sunday School, or perhaps an evangelical preacher at a meeting... or even a bible study back in the day. What *does* it mean to be saved... especially if like me, you reject the childhood notion that it means I'll go to heaven when I die while others miss out!

To the crowd calling out '*Save yourself!*' it means getting off that cross, escaping that pain and living happily ever after. But we've already been told that they have no idea! So, what does it mean for Christ... this business of *being saved*?

### ***Paradise***

The final words in today's text give us an entry point... Christ says to one of the others being crucified, "*Truly I tell you, today you'll be with me in Paradise*'...

*Paradise* is a word rarely used in the New Testament, so its use here is all the more interesting. *Paradise* refers back to the Garden of Eden – that image of the full beauty of life as God created it... before we wrecked it and were forced to leave... the gates locked behind us... forever it seemed. But now, the Gospel says, the gates have been opened again... by Christ Jesus... the *new Adam*. This is *being saved* – that we are now able to rediscover the full beauty of life as God intended for us. *Salvation* is the opportunity to enter the full beauty and abundance of life. And it's not waiting until we die... It's *today*... here and now!

### ***Colossians 1.11-20***

It's what Paul writes about in our second reading today... In our version (NRSV) he says, "*Christ has rescued us from the powers of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son.*" Eugene Peterson translates this, "*God has rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son... the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.*"

God's action rescues us from where we're stuck... the shackles of our old behaviour. God's grace breaks the repetition of our addictive behaviours, including our compulsive need for self-preservation. The Spirit establishes in us *new life*... that abundant life that Christ Jesus described as the Kingdom. *This* is salvation.

## ***Christ is the New Beginning***

Through his total openness to God, seen most dramatically in his acceptance of the Cross... his willingness to offer everything even his blood... Christ Jesus has shattered the 'spell' that humanity was caught in. We *were* trapped in darkness, but now in his light we can see *true* reality. He has re-opened the doorway into Paradise. We call it *new life*... resurrection life. Paul says, "*He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.*" (18) Peterson has fun with this, saying... '*Christ leads the resurrection parade!*'

It is what my favourite James McAuley hymn is saying, "*By your kingly power O risen Lord, all that Adam lost is now restored...*"

## ***Conclusion***

So, what do we do if we are ready and willing to follow Christ into Paradise?

We need to stop practising those self-preservation behaviours, and instead open ourselves... to God... to *all* of life... to each other in relationship... to *whatever* comes... even pain and suffering. The *movement* is clear... Instead of rolling into an echidna-like ball, (spikes bristling), every time we sense fear or threat, we intentionally move in the total opposite direction. We open our arms wide, exposing our chest... our heart in vulnerability... Arms spread wide... open and undefended... just like Christ Jesus on the cross.

When the faith paints Christ as King, we almost always paint him as king on the suffering and dying timbers of the cross.