

## **Will Jesus Save the World?**

Sermon

Robert Tulip

Kippax Uniting Church, 19 September 2021

Readings: <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=220>

A recent book I read on Christian history compared the early church to several other religious movements of the time. It claimed a feature they all shared in common was that their members were primarily motivated by personal salvation. This means these religions claimed that if you joined up and became a member in good standing, you would personally be saved from hell and would go to heaven after you die. This is still a popular version of Christian faith. I confess it has never made any sense to me.

I have always tried to approach scripture from a scientific viewpoint. That has led me to read teachings about salvation in terms of how we can make the world a better place, not about personal benefit. Our lectionary readings today are from Psalm 1, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Epistle of James and the Gospel of Mark. They all support an understanding of salvation as a teaching whose primary purpose is to save the world. That produces a very different meaning of Christianity from the traditional focus on personal salvation. In this alternative approach, our personal salvation is fully integrated with the work of faith to save the whole planet by changing social values.

The church is now celebrating the Season of Creation. Today is Sky Sunday, when we reflect upon the presence of God within the air, in the wind and clouds and rain, in the beauty of dawn and the terror of storm, in the glorious expanse of the stars on a freezing winter night or the calm promise of new rising growth in a warm spring day. The turning of the seasons reveals the stable order of our planetary home, hardly changed from time immemorial.

In the past, people have taken our planetary atmosphere for granted as a gift of divine providence. Yet science is now showing us that in fact our climate is far more fragile and sensitive to shock than was traditionally assumed. Tiny changes of atmospheric chemistry are enough to destabilise the climate and put our whole future planetary security in peril.

The many impacts of global warming on biodiversity loss are a breach of a sacred trust between humanity and God. Reckless indifference is destroying complex natural systems that we should hold as divine and priceless, a planetary spiritual heritage. The rising rate of species extinction from human causes reflects a spiritual depravity in modern culture. We are failing in our duty of care to protect ecologies that have evolved over millions of years.

The Bible tells us God established the everlasting covenant of the rainbow with Noah after the flood to protect all living creatures of every kind on the earth. We are now break the divine covenant of the rainbow, and climate change is bringing ever more extreme weather and the expectation of catastrophic sea level rise in this century. This context makes it essential as Christians to decide whether our faith is more about our personal salvation or about saving the world, and how these relate to each other.

Our Psalm today tells us to delight in the law of God. As we meditate upon this teaching, we can see that the law of God seeks the salvation of the world, enabling life on earth to flourish in ways that can endure and grow in abundance for ever. By contrast, the Psalm says the wicked hold selfish values that cannot be sustained, and as a result are blown away like chaff in the wind. In the

Wisdom of Solomon, we hear how evil corrupts peoples' values, leading them to a perverse psychology that denies and ignores the truth of God.

Jesus tells his disciples in our reading from Mark that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He says to be saved we must recover the innocent grace of children, instead of the selfish corruption that we learn from worldly experience. This paradox of the last as first means there really is no place for ego in Christ's vision of salvation. We face an existential choice between the gracious selfless values of God and the corrupt selfish values of the world. Salvation requires a shift away from worldly values of personal greed to divine values of enduring moral principle, living under the eye of eternity to see and do what is good for all.

The underlying idea is that the world is in a mess, on a pathway toward destruction, fallen from grace. We need a vision of the good of the whole planet in order to find salvation. The faith in God that supports this vision of Christ is about transforming our world, away from the human values of selfish personal benefit toward the divine values of universal love.

This message of living for others is obviously enormously difficult, as Jesus explains with his call to take up the cross. His own efforts to pursue this vision led him first to execution on the cross and then to resurrection. But rather than seeing Jesus as a model for how we should all live, the church turned his death into a magical story, somehow suggesting that merely believing was enough for salvation. It is understandable in a world of turmoil and grief and ignorance that people have sought emotional comfort and support in belonging to the church. But as a result, the popularity of the early church gradually came to rest more upon what the church could give to the believer than on what Jesus said the individual had to sacrifice.

The church gradually moved away from the Biblical vision of social change toward the idea that salvation is all about orthodoxy, correct doctrine, with the idea that if we believe the creed we will go to heaven. But in the Gospels, Jesus warns against this individualistic model of faith, saying if you try to save your own life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for his sake you will find it. The complicated relationship between self-denial and salvation in Christian tradition is not just about escaping into a life of personal holiness, but calls for a full engagement between Biblical values and political life. In this way, Jesus brought his vision of transfiguration on the holy mountain down to the plain, and then to the hill of Golgotha.

The theme of saving the world is picked up in our reading from the letter of St James, with his call for a life of good works done with gentleness born of wisdom. James tells us that envy and ambition lead to disorder and evil, whereas love and service lead to steady improvement. He implores us to follow the pure and peaceable divine wisdom that is entirely without bias or hypocrisy. In seeking divine wisdom, we live not for our own sake, but to embrace God's purpose that the whole world should flourish by embracing good values.

The theme behind these teachings is the need for faith in a high ethical vision of planetary salvation, seeing the meaning of life as the good of the future. Rather than asking what I get personally in return for helping others, the wisdom of the Bible sees improvement of the world as intrinsically good. This is a psychologically difficult message for people to accept, in view of the major focus within religious tradition on a personal afterlife. We are constantly tempted by a more easy and popular path than the way of the cross. And yet as the Bible explains, individualistic attitudes have serious moral problems.

The idea of salvation as escape is an example of an unbiblical individualism. It often means that rather than fix up our planetary home we instead hope for a supernatural fantasy of personal

immortality with God in heaven. The most extreme version of this delusion is the rapture fantasy popular in the USA. That psychology unfortunately enables its believers to ignore the evidence of climate change and the logical arguments about how we should respond.

You may have heard that the renowned American theologian, Bishop John Shelby Spong, died this week. Bishop Spong once wrote that “death is ultimately a dimension of life through which we journey into timelessness.” This path out of the realm of change into the changeless offers a new way that we can think about eternal life and salvation, challenging our religious conventions.

To close, the Letter of James promises a harvest of integrity and purity for those who make peace. James offers a path to end conflicts and disputes by saying that when we draw near to God, God will draw near to us. The message for today is that personal salvation is only possible through action to save our world, building upon the profound messages in the Bible of the need to transform our common home, inspired by the love and grace of God.

Robbie Tulip  
Kippax Uniting Church, Sunday 19 September 2021

## Prayers for Others

As we reflect on the meaning of Sky Sunday in this Season of Creation, let us join in prayer. Eternal God of all creation, you are our source of salvation. As we seek safety and stability and security in our lives, we pray that we may always be open to your saving word in the gospel of Jesus Christ. May our own stability and security not be at the expense of those whose lives are unstable and insecure.

As Australia enters a new security pact with the United States and the United Kingdom, we pray for decision makers involved in these policies, and for ongoing peace in our region and the world. As we reflect on our hopes for lasting security and stability, we pray for strategic vision, grounded in faith in God. We pray that the voice of Jesus Christ our prince of peace may influence our leaders, calling for ongoing dialogue and mutual respect based on the universal love of God for the whole world.

We pray for the United Nations Climate Conference in Glasgow in November. The global warming emergency grows ever more fraught. We pray for responses from leading nations including Australia that will save the world from the grave risks of planetary disruption caused by rising temperatures, fully addressing our global responsibilities to restore a healthy climate for future generations.

We continue to pray for nations who are suffering political crisis, including Afghanistan, Myanmar, Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Let us now all join together to say the shared prayer of blessing that our Minister Karyl Davison shared in our bulletin this week.

Order of Service – Sky Sunday

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Worship

Indigenous Acknowledgement

Hymn: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYiRYDR9i1A> One Love

Readings: Psalm 1, Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22, James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

Sermon

Hymn 238 tune 106

Prayers

Hymn 587 tune 310ii

Benediction

Call to Worship

As we celebrate the dance and song of the brolga in the light of the morning sun, we give thanks and praise to God for the seasons of creation, for the beauty of the earth, and for the fragile stability of our life together, under the grace of God. On this Sky Sunday in the season of creation, we give thanks to God for the fragile stability of our planetary atmosphere, and pray that humanity may be able to sustain our shared lives together through love for all. We acknowledge our deep connections of relationship, to each other and to our planetary home. We praise God for the complex abundance of diverse wild living creatures whose health is our own health. We acknowledge and respect the relationships that indigenous people in our country have now and have had in the past to each other, to native plants and animals, and to land and sea and sky, since time immemorial, over countless generations, handing on the ageless wisdom of sensitive caring and wise stewardship to current and emerging elders.