

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (Part Two)

Reflection 28 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

When Paul saw the resurrected Christ on the Damascus Road, resurrection power flowed into him. Our message is always about resurrection. For all everywhere who’ve hit bottom, or who are running on empty, or who are just hanging on and hanging out, Jesus is saying: You can be radically reborn from above. You can start over. You can regain your lost innocence. You can be resurrected now and in the world to come. If you’re a sinner, I came for you.

That is our message, on all the roads that go out from Jerusalem. Lives can be resurrected, whoever you are, whatever you may have done, however bad things are, however dead you feel. Lives can be resurrected. So what does this church believe? In one word – resurrection! But almost no one is saying this. Or if they say it, they say it just on Easter Sunday.

Even churches, buried beneath centuries of tradition and decades of complacency, carcasses of another time and place, can be resurrected. Marriages can be resurrected. Joy in work can be resurrected. Gifts long dead can be resurrected. Friendships can be resurrected. Dreams can be resurrected. Love can be resurrected. And one day bodies will be resurrected. And that’s our message whether it’s mid-summer or the cold, bleak days of mid-winter. And the clouds begin to lift. And the sun begins to warm the human soul. The fears melt away; the tiredness recedes. The truth soaks deep inside. And for the first time in a long time, you begin to feel whole again.

But – and here is the catch – this is a message for sinners. Again in 1 Timothy 1:15, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.” If you’re not one of those, then what can be done? I think back to that day when Jesus called our brother Matthew away from his tax collector’s booth (Matthew 9:9-13) and the dinner Matthew threw that night: out in his courtyard under the open sky, moonlight over Galilee, laughter, all that razzing about “Old Matthew getting religion.” All his friends were there. His friends were tax collectors and sinners. And when the Pharisees protested, do you remember what Jesus said? “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” It drips with irony. Jesus is saying: You are so busy judging others there’s nothing I can do with you. You are so busy tithing mint and dill and cumin, so busy propping up your own respectability, so busy trying to look good and righteous, so busy focusing on the sins, the mistakes, the failures, of others there’s nothing I can do with you. There is something so terribly hard about you. Do you have any idea of the look in your eyes? There’s nothing I can do with you. I have come for those who know they need me, who know they are sinners, and who know they need salvation. And for those who know this, I offer salvation.

So Paul, once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, becomes one who warns Timothy against quarreling about words. He becomes one who warns Timothy to have nothing to do with foolish and stupid argument, and “Timothy, dear, dear Timothy, do take something for your stomach,” he writes. Mylanta or something! But Timothy, peace, peace, peace. What a change! A soul resurrection!

And all that can be said is (1 Timothy 1:17):

Now to the King eternal,
immortal,
invisible,
the only God,
be honor and glory for ever and ever.
Amen.

And the heavens open.

It’s all about resurrection, now and in the age to come. That’s the gift for all who are conscious of their neediness, resurrection. It’s the meaning of Christian baptism, a burial, a rising, a starting over, a new life. It’s an offer to take what is broken and dying in your life. Take a moment. In some dark recess of your life, maybe far away from public scrutiny, there may be a whiff of something dying. Jesus offers to take whatever is broken and dying in you and resurrect it, if only you will confess the truth that you need him.

– Dale Pauls