

17th September 2023 – Good News #3 ‘A Promised Rescuer’ (Ezekiel 34:11-16, John 10:11-18)

Last week a devastating earthquake hit Morocco, near the city of Marrakesh (somewhere we've visited – it's an amazing place). I'm sure many of us saw the terrible pictures of the effects of the earthquake – and even if you didn't, you'll have seen them elsewhere. As is often the case, attention turned very quickly to the rescue operation, a race against time to find survivors. Four countries sent rescue teams to help, including the UK. For some disasters, such as floods, the focus is often on moving a great crowd of people to safety. Earthquakes are unusual in that rescue efforts are usually focussed on individuals. As teams search for survivors, sometimes they see something or hear a call and everything zeroes in on getting one person or family to safety

I was heartened to read this week of one such rescue, not in fact by a specialist team but a neighbour. IT programmer Abdelmajid Idfrazen was able to run from his house as the walls started to crumble – but then dug his 70-year-old neighbour out of the rubble with his bare hands. Abdelmajid related: "His breath was very short, he had one hand sticking out. We were grabbing things with our hands or any tool we could find. It was late at night and dark, but we kept digging for three hours. We got him out and a helicopter took him to hospital in Marrakech. We hope he is okay."

What an amazing story – and it's a telling reminder, that **when disaster strikes, we need a rescuer.** And rescue comes in many forms. An earthquake requires a spontaneous response, but at other times rescue can be very well-planned. Some of our best friends used to work for International Justice Mission. James is a top lawyer, and he and his family spent two years in India working with IJM to free slaves. This kind of rescue takes months of planning – preparing the case, getting local judges and police on-side (many are bribed to turn a blind eye) and then swooping at dawn with a team of police, prosecutors and also care workers to arrest the bosses, and take the bonded labourers (who are slaves in all but name) to safety and aftercare.

I remember one exciting morning in 2009 when James had asked us to pray, as there was a raid about to happen. He was leading the team and hoping to free 20 slaves, and I asked the students at the college where I was studying to be a vicar to join me in praying – we decided we'd pray in faith for 40, not 20. We got the good news mid-morning that 46 people had been rescued and were taken to a refuge. There are few things as inspiring as a rescue story – our films and media are full of them, and it's even better when those stories are real.

But there's one rescue story which is greater than all the others – it's the greatest rescue story ever told. And, even better, it's true. And it's the story of the bible. (At church) this term we're looking at the heart of the Christian faith, a series called Good News – and in essence, the good news is that it's a story of rescue. Not just of one neighbour, or a group of slaves, but of the whole of humanity.

Last week we looked at our basic flaw as human beings: our ego – or, you could say, our selfishness, and innate rebellion against God. We are created beings, but we want to live as our own bosses. And this basic flaw spoils everything. Yes, there are great things about being human, but we also know that stuff always gets in the way, spoiling our relationship with each other, with our planet, with ourselves, and ultimately with God. It's human nature, and it's not a problem we can solve by ourselves. Trying harder can make a modest difference, but usually only temporarily and for certain things. Forcing people to do good can also stop some problems but it usually creates much worse others.

So, if you're God and you've created a good world, and in particular you've designed humans to be people that you be close friends with, to share this world with, what do you do? Do you start over again? That doesn't fix the basic problem.

A better option was to choose one particular group of people and show them special favour, give them a great set of rules to live by, protect them when things went wrong, keep giving them second chances and the occasional kick up the backside, and see if their influence could spread across the world.... that's the story of the Old Testament by the way, and that didn't fix things – because the heart of the problem is the problem of the human heart.

So, God has one option left – come and sort it out himself. Now, let's imagine for a moment that you're God and you're planning how best to do this. First things first – this intervention, this rescue mission, needs to be received by humankind. So that rules out aliens (obviously)! Clearly, the best way was if he came as a human so we would accept him, but with the power of God so we could see what life could be like. This human would be like us, but with so much more – they would model a better way to live, with better teaching than anybody else, but also would get us to understand that it's the heart that has to change – get the heart right and the actions will follow.

This human also needs to arrive at the best point in history. Too early, and the lack of infrastructure would mean the message couldn't spread. Too late and the population would be too big and cultures too diverse. So, let's aim for the one point in history with a broadly accepted culture and language (that was Greek) but the most powerful and well-organised empire that had been seen up to that point (that's Rome) – with good roads, global trade, reasonable literacy. Let's also make sure that this person was born in the place that was specially favoured by God, but ideally in the north of the country near to the world's most important crossroads, where two great continental roads intersected, and therefore from where you could get to Asia, Africa and Europe quite easily.

There's plenty of evidence already that any other alternatives don't work – but it would also be a good idea to signpost the arrival of this divinely anointed rescuer. You've got a network of prophets to whom you give words – most of them are ignored but if you say it often enough then at least some people will be ready and waiting. Even better if, when this person arrives, some of the specific points of these prophecies are seen to be fulfilled, so that there's no doubt this is the person humanity has been waiting for.

That's a plan, right? **And that, my friends, is exactly what happened. The reason Christians get so excited about Jesus is because he is the fulfilment of God's great rescue plan for humanity.** Our first reading makes it clear that this plan is God's plan – God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel and says: I'm coming to shepherd the flock myself. And by the way, when I come, I will not just tend the flock, I'll go looking for the lost ones, I'll heal the wounded ones, and I'll sort out the predators.

Fast forward 500 years and a Galilean rabbi starts doing extraordinary things. And saying even more extraordinary things, like: 'I am the Good Shepherd' – in other words, that promise from Ezekiel which you all know (and the crowd he was talking to would have known), that's me. I'm the one who has come to tend the flock, to find the lost, to heal the wounded, and to protect the sheep pen. That divine plan – it's me. I am the promised rescuer, the promised saviour.

And, just like that neighbour in Morocco, the one matters to him. Elsewhere Jesus tells a story about the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one. **Every person matters to this shepherd, to this rescuer.** (BAPTISM INSERT) And this rescuer will carry out his mission, even at the cost of his life.

Last week we reflected on how God comes looking in the Garden of Eden – today, we give thanks that God came looking *again* – looking for us, like a shepherd looks for a lost sheep. And he's still looking. This story didn't end 2,000 years ago. That is why it's still the best news I ever heard. May it be the best news you ever heard, too. Amen.