

Matthew 16^{13–20} ; Exodus 1:8—2:10; Romans 12: 1—8

27th August 2023

Ballarat Cathedral

How would you respond to an interested enquirer who asks what it means to describe yourself as a Christian?

In the church in which I grew up, there was one simple answer. A Christian is someone who has been saved. That was the long and short of it.

I know some Christians are wary of using the term 'saved', as they associate it with some branches of the church in which over-enthusiastic believers are obsessed with a passion to try to save the whole world. But, despite some reservations we may have, it is a legitimate description of us as Christians. John's gospel reports Jesus saying, "I have not come to condemn the world, but to save the world."

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy,

Here is a saying that you can completely rely on, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.

The only reservation I have with thinking about the emphasis on being saved is that it largely focusses on what we have been saved **from**: eternity in hell. This has become a ghoulish fascination for some Christians over the centuries. I'm sure you are all familiar with those mediaeval pictures of unsaved souls being sent to hell where they suffer terrible torture by demons.

Photo: the Wicked shall burn in Hell

You won't be surprised to hear that, in my childhood church, being saved always meant escaping eternal damnation.

This morning, for a few moments at least, I'd invite you to think about your faith in terms of being saved, but let us shift the emphasis. Let's not focus on what we have been saved **from**—what we have escaped, what is behind us—but what we have been saved **for**—what are we to do, what is in front of us.

We have just heard what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. He mentions nothing about what they've been saved **from**, not a word about the torments of hell or eternal judgement. Instead, he uses a very striking image of what they've been saved **for**: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, to offer your bodies as a **living sacrifice**."

He is reminding them, of course, of the sacrifices in the Temple, in which the dead body of an animal was surrendered to the priest and completely burned to ashes. Paul is urging Christians to surrender themselves and be utterly consumed, not by a literal fire, but by the fire of passionate devotion. They have been saved so as to be totally transformed, and Paul's message is as stirring for us today as it was for those 1st-century believers.

We have been saved **for** a life of total dedication to the service of one another. He says we all belong to one another, like the many different parts of a human body. Each part has its own role to play and thus contributes to the health and vitality of the whole body. Every one of us Christians has, Paul says, been given a role to play as part of the church, the Body of

Christ. If your gift is preaching or teaching, then use it for the benefit of all. But it is not about a few particular individuals with specific talents. Your gift may be to encourage others, to show particular kindness, to help those in need. Whatever the gift is, he says, exercise it wholeheartedly; let the fire of passionate dedication consume your whole being as you serve one another. That is what you have been saved **for**.

We are powerfully reminded of this a description by Jesus of the final judgement day, but not in terms of the horrors of eternal damnation—not what we have been saved **from**, but in this way:

The king will say to the faithful, come into my kingdom and receive your reward for what you did for me. When you saw I was hungry, you gave me food, and drink when I was thirsty. I was naked and you dressed me; you visited me in prison.

“But just a moment,” they reply, “We never gave you food or drink or clothes; we never visited you in prison.” Jesus’ response sums up the whole driving force of the gospel, what we have been saved **for**:

Insofar as you did anything for one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.

We have been saved so as to forget our own needs and wants, and to live for Our Lord by serving others, to be a living sacrifice.

This central truth of our faith is reiterated in various ways throughout the Bible. For instance, in the reading from Exodus, we heard the first episode in the longest and most detailed life-story in the Bible: the story of Moses. He was the greatest leader of ancient Israel, taking them from slavery in Egypt to within sight of the land God had promised to give them as their own. Moses' achievements were legendary, but not in the spirit of kings and emperors. His entire life was spent, not seeking power and admiration, but in devoted service to his people. He is described as the humblest man on earth. He is an ideal model for us as we give ourselves as a living sacrifice to God through his people.

Let us take this message with us into the day-to-day world of the week ahead, and let us meditate on it as we approach [DATE], when our Sunday mass will focus on stewardship. This is not only about giving money; it is also about what we were saved for: what we can do to serve the Body of Christ. As St Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

There are different gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them; different kinds of service, but the same Lord; different kinds of working, but in everyone it is the same God at work. To each one the gift of the Spirit is for the common good.