

I want to get to a question today. Let me pose it here and then begin to approach it from a current news item that you may or may not have become aware of. The question is this: If at the resurrection, as our gospel puts it, “all flesh saw the salvation of God,” then how is it that we still continue in such a state? If at a moment in history everything changed because God came to earth in the man Jesus Christ, how is it that we find ourselves continuing to await the Coming in Glory of God’s reign of justice, peace, and love? and engage each year in this Advent pattern of preparation?

I want to take as a model in making my approach to this question not the familiar if strange figure of John the Baptist but the less familiar, though every-bit-as-strange, figure of the Archbishop of Canterbury. If you have seen pictures of Rowan Williams, then you know what I mean. He is a ringer for Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series, his hair reminiscent of Einstein long and white, around his eyebrows that make him look like a great horned owl whose white feathers are alert standing straight surrounding his smallish, bespectacled face. A gifted theologian—the ABC has been called the most brilliant incumbent ever to hold the office—Rowan Williams as leader of the Anglican Communion has proven himself to be a disappointment to all sides.

Recently, I believe he enjoyed his finest moment. Some background. You may have heard that the Pope, formerly one Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (his very name is a tip-off to his role in my narrative), offered to Anglicans a renewed invitation to “come as you are” over to Rome while keeping some of our liturgical forms and allowing married clergy under certain circumstances. You can imagine that Anglicans might be a bit offended by this apparent attempt to take advantage of certain family unpleasantness among members of the world wide Anglican Communion.

Even the secular media like Katie Couric reported on it. Such Comedy outlets as the Colbert Report titled the segment “Holy Water Under the Bridge.” The Daily Show with John Stewart called theirs “Ecce No Homo” and drew out a wonderful analogy likening it to an attempt by a cell phone company to get us to change our service but allow us to keep our old number. From the church there were calls for the Archbishop to speak out, to tell the Pope off, especially since the Archbishop had only been informed of this Papal proposition hours before it was released to the press.

Well, ironically, it happens that Williams had been invited to address, in the week following this announcement, an ecumenical conference at the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome as guest of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity that came into existence at Vatican II and has since then promoted a number of official dialogues with other churches and produced a very considerable number of agreed statements related to faith and doctrine as a foundation for Christian Unity. In the typically understated language of a theologian the Archbishop pointed in his remarks to this record itself, to the official position of the Catholic

Church in conversation with other Christian traditions including Anglican, Orthodox, Reformed, and Lutheran, as his response to the Pope's recent overture.

He said this: "The strong convergence in these agreements about what the Church of God really is, is very striking. The various agreed statements of the churches stress that the Church is a community, in which human beings are made sons and daughters of God, and reconciled both with God and one another. The Church celebrates this through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion in which God acts upon us to transform us 'in communion'."

Since there is such clear agreement about what the church is and what its mission is, about all of the bigger issues—what he calls "our basic understanding of salvation and communion"—how is it that lesser issues, issues like the primacy of the pope or relations between local churches and the universal church in making decisions like the ordination of women for instance, how is it that these "second order" issues "still stand in the way of fuller visible unity?"—like intercommunion. Specifically about the Pope's invitation, Dr Williams told the meeting of senior priests, bishops and cardinals: "It does not build in any formal recognition of existing ministries or methods of independent decision-making, but remains at the level of spiritual and liturgical culture. . . (Damning with feint praise) . As such, it is an imaginative pastoral response to the needs of some; but it does not break any fresh ecclesiological ground."

In other words, I repeat, If we have seen "the salvation of God," how is it that we still live and act as if we were alone without God in the world? As if we were in competition for the blessings of life, hoarding and excluding, through fear and violence, trying to control life to our own advantage at the expense of others? Vatican II was such a moment of clarity and vision when the possibilities of Christian unity were visible and palpable, when anything seemed possible. So this is the question I would like to pose for us on our journey into Advent. It's not so much about the church; that's just an example of the way this question confronts us. And it confronts us over and over.

How is it that having seen the Glory and faithfulness of God we continue to be determined by the fear of a world that has no hope? There is something very simple about it: the apocryphal book of Baruch puts it quite simply: "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction and put on the beauty of the glory from God." By entering into the joy of our remembered Christmases, and preparing for them at Advent, we bring this vision of salvation close to be shaped and encouraged by it.

I spoke with a friend and colleague recently who has been less than a year in a parish much larger than his last one. He told me of how important it had become to him to manage his fears, buffeted as he is by unfamiliar expectations and demands. He said he has developed a practice of turning inward to remember and feel how much he is loved, by his family, by his friends, by God.

There is a tribe in the forests of North America that has a practice of initiating its boys into manhood, of becoming a warrior, by having their fathers take them out alone into the woods to a rocky precipice or a tree stump where they are blindfolded and made to sit awake all night alone until the dawn comes the next day. Sitting there silence at the time they are left alone

becomes a cacophony of night sounds, frightening sounds, but they continue to sit still to prove their courage their warrior spirit. Then as dawn comes and the sounds of night change to day, the light penetrating through the darkness, they can remove the blindfold. It is only then that they see that the entire time sitting at a distance was their father watching over them.