

In or Out- Saved or Doomed?



“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” John 3:16.

What does it really mean for Christians to be saved? Are we protected by God, or fenced in like the hens above?

At our baptism we are each made, “a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” We have an amazing identity with great potential. But what about those who are not baptised, do not believe in Christ? Will they really be thrown into the eternal flames of hell, like the tumbling naked bodies seen in medieval depictions of the Last Judgement? Can this be even a symbolical view of life after death for people who are not Christians?

Some years ago, a woman told me how she grieved for her father who did not believe in Jesus and therefore was destined for hell when he died. He was a good man who cared about others and loved his family. I find it difficult to

believe that the God I know from my limited experience and have read about in the Bible, would condemn such a man. Instead, could the problem be a restricted perspective or understanding of what the Bible says?

In Genesis, we are told in story form how God loves the world and everything in it. God created the world to share the fullness of life in God's love with others. In a sense, every human being is a child of God, made in God's image and able to experience something of the wonder, pain, beauty and challenge of God's love.

If we turn to Chapter 1 of John's Gospel, we read about the Word, Jesus, who was with God and was God from the beginning. This Word was involved in God's act of creation. Through the Word everything created received life, "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people". This same Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, revealed God's love clearly in our world.

In John 12:32, Jesus declared, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." On the cross Jesus drew all people to himself, lifting them up to God, including a criminal hanging beside him.

When explaining how we are to love our neighbour, Jesus, in the parable in Luke 10, chose the caring act towards an unknown person in need performed by a Samaritan, a person despised by Jews, as an example.

In the Bible we continually find contradictory statements, about who is loved by God and who is saved. It can depend on the context and writer. We humans can only ever know a small portion of God's mysterious and great love and must accept that others also will only have a limited view of God. In the end God is love—a concept far beyond our imagining.

So what is the Church for, if God's love includes everyone? Are we just members of an elect club who believe we will be 'saved' when we die? I don't think so. As the Body of Christ, we are called and empowered by God to follow Jesus and serve the world in the place and time where we find ourselves. We are directed to do this by the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, strengthening and refreshing us when we worship together, particularly at Services of Holy Communion when we share bread and wine, Christ's body and blood.

But, as the Bible indicates, God is not restricted to working only through the Church. We are told of God's inclusive love for all creation, and the work of the Spirit in its life. God loves not only members of the Church, but also people of other faiths and none. Christians are not the only people indwelt by the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God blows where it wills. It is like the wind and may surprise us by working in and through those we think of as unlikely people.

In John 4, Jesus unexpectedly met at a well a Samaritan woman with an immoral reputation. He asked her for water. In the ensuing conversation, Jesus crossed many cultural boundaries. The woman was open to this unexpected encounter with a Jew and gradually grew in her strange relationship with Jesus. Finally she left her water jar and hurried off to tell the people to come and see Jesus—is he the Messiah?

Can we, as the Church and individually, open ourselves to be propelled by the Spirit of God along unknown risky paths, and to recognise and work with that same Spirit in others?

Australia is described as an example of a multicultural country where values such as equality and mutual respect for one another, along with a freedom of thought, speech and religion, are upheld. For Christians, these values are encompassed when we share God's love with others, our neighbours, especially those different from ourselves, and work for their well-being.

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