

May 2006

Dear Friends,

Happy spring-is-here and summer-is-just-around-the-corner. (For those of you who live with year-round warmth and beauty, it isn't a big deal. But for the rest of us, the return of summer is a VERY big deal!).

Last year a friend of mine gave me a copy of *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius, an edition which also carries with it a wonderful forward by C.S. Lewis. I've been enjoying the book, and the forward, immensely. But it was one of the opening lines that caught my attention, and I've kept returning to it again and again. Talking about the role Jesus played in our salvation, Athanasius writes, "We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its Maker, for the first fact that you must grasp is this: *the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word who made it in the beginning*" (his emphasis).

What stunned me was Athanasius' view of salvation as *renewal*. Here is an early patriarch of the church, a brilliant and devoted man, offering what he believes is a matter of foremost importance: salvation is renewal. Restoration. The recovery of creation, especially the originally magnificent creation man is.

It caught my attention because, for the most part, that is *not* how the modern church understands salvation. Simply watch your own thoughts as they react to the word "salvation." What do you hear? What synonyms would you put in its place? I asked a group of friends this and they responded exactly as I thought they would. Salvation means "forgiven," or "the atonement of Jesus for our sins," or "heaven when you die." And those things are all true of course. However... they are a very incomplete view of salvation, an *impoverished* view, and one that has not been shared by the church down through the ages.

In the introduction, Lewis urges us to read "old books," and to read them often. The reason is that we have so many assumptions about God and life and salvation, and our assumptions will go unchallenged because they are the assumptions of our age.

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books...Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes.

That was the immediate effect from page one of Athanasius' work – to reveal a mistake we've been making about the nature of our salvation. What jumped off the page at me was Athanasius' view of salvation, because it so transcends the prevailing view of our times and because it seems far more consistent with Jesus and Paul, and many Christian authors down through the ages.

We understand salvation to be “forgiveness and entrance into heaven through the death of Jesus Christ for our sins.” And *it is*, to be sure. Thank God. Only, *there is more*. And that “more” is so beautiful and so necessary it simply must be recovered.

Salvation is *restoration*. “The renewal of creation.” The story of man doesn’t begin with sin, in Genesis chapter three, but with a glory and dignity bestowed upon us, the image of God, right there in chapter one. God cares too much for his creation to leave it in ruins:

Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all... This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished... This he did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection... Thus by his own power he restored the whole nature of man. (Athanasius)

God offers a salvation which involves *the resurrection* as much as the cross, a salvation that brings the restoration of the whole nature of man. Look again at the miracles of Jesus. Notice the *theme*. The blind see. The deaf hear. The lame walk. The dead are raised to life. Renewal. Wherever, however humanity is broken, when God comes and touches the person they are restored. Now, the miracles are not random proofs that Jesus was the Son of God. They are *illustrations* for the sermon. This is what God is offering mankind. Salvation is renewal.

The same message is played out right before our eyes every spring and summer. For seven months the scrub oak in our yard looks dead. Completely and totally dead. And then, one day, little green buds appear on the tiniest branches, and within a week the bright, tender green leaves are bursting forth. Soon the whole mountainside is covered in green – in *life*. The world is undergoing its renewal. Nature is God’s word to us, is it not? Scripture makes that quite clear that God speaks to us through the world he created. And what is he speaking to us through the return of spring and summer? Better, let me ask you – what is the effect upon your soul when you see the flowers blooming, the trees a brilliant canopy of green, when you take your shoes off and run through the lush grass?

It is the message of life, of restoration. The renewal of creation by the one who made it. Dallas Willard says, therefore, that a perfectly legitimate synonym for salvation as used in the Bible is simply the word, “Life.” So, let this thought linger with you as you enjoy the earth’s splendor this summer: “My salvation is my renewal.” God is restoring me, all of me. His life has become my life, and when his life has its way with me, I shall be fully alive.

Yours with Hope,



John