

The Journey and the Destination

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor

Chris Cheah

Easter 5A, 22 May 2011

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5,15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; 1 John 14 :2-14

Let's start with a little thought experiment. This has not happened to me personally, but I have heard that it does happen, so the experiment might even be useful! Imagine you are sitting on a bus, quietly minding your own business, and an earnest chap sits down next to you, introduces himself as "Steve" and then tells you he is a Christian. He then goes on to ask you whether you know the Lord. Being a church-going Anglican you of course say that yes, you are a Christian, maybe thinking that will settle the matter. But Steve smiles encouragingly and says "that's great, but are you *saved*?" So ... how are you going to respond? [PAUSE]

You might have an easy response. But I admit, I would probably feel uncomfortable. So just in case, here's a multiple choice ranging across some of my own reactions. Response (a) : try to change the subject. Response (b) : ask Steve what he means. Response (c) : try and answer his question.

Sadly, I suspect my default would be the rather tragic option (a) of avoidance. But really this is not at all satisfactory. I would probably leave the bus resentful, Steve would be dissatisfied and, worst of all, it may confirm the stereotypical views about Christians held by other people on the bus, who are by now of course listening in.

Option (b) – asking Steve to explain what he means – has some attractions. It may help to know where he is coming from. But while it may buy some time, it may also just dig me in deeper. I am not sure I want to take the risk of getting a pat evangelical four point answer.

So, I have little choice but option (c) and try to answer question. Actually, thinking about it further, the deeper problem here, as it so often seems to be in these resentment situations, is with me. Probably the real reason I feel awkward in this situation is that I simply don't have an answer to hand that I am happy with or that I have articulated to myself – and deep down I don't like being shown up. But actually Steve has asked a reasonable question of a person who claims to be a practicing Christian. Surely, for my own benefit if nothing else, I should be able to explain what I think salvation means?

Oh my goodness, I think I am going to have to admit that Steve's question is actually, well ... useful! Let's start working towards an answer.

First, Steve's question contains an embedded assumption. The very way the question is framed suggests he thinks salvation is a yes/no thing : we are either saved, or not saved. Do you think that? Confusingly, I both do and I don't, partly based of today's readings.

St Peter starts off today with one of my favourite lines of Scripture. He says, "like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation". While St Peter definitely thinks Jesus died for our sins, it is also pretty clear that he thinks that salvation is something we *grow* into. Salvation is a process as much as a destination. It seems converted Christians are not so much immediately saved once and for all eternity, as new born babies in need of spiritual milk.

The gospel is even more on topic. Jesus starts off by explaining that his destination – and by implication the point of the exercise – is that he is going to the Father. But he pointedly does not explain what this means. All he tells the disciples is this : "You know the way to where I am going."

Now most humans, especially when investing in big projects, want some certainty about their goal – what it is they are working towards. It is not surprising that religious people do this too and this seems to have been there in Christianity from the beginning.

So when Jesus says that they know the way to the Father, St Thomas complains to Jesus that “but we do not know where you are going to”. Implication : so please tell us. To which Jesus says that he is the Way (and the Truth and the Life) and that knowledge of the Father comes from knowing Him. Implication : that is all you need to know just now and that is your job. Rats. Foiled again!

So at this, our own St Philip becomes even bolder about this whole destination business : “Show us the Father and we will be satisfied”. Can we *please* see what the end of the journey and ultimate fulfilment looks like. Now. Interestingly, Jesus gives what is perhaps his longest and most complicated answer in the gospel to any question, which I will not attempt to unstick. The main point of his answer, though, is to hammer home variants on the message that “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”.

So, Jesus is the Way, and the Father is the ultimate destination. But the destination and the path are intertwined or *contained within each other*. We don't just walk the path to get to the destination. The aim of the journey is the destination, but the reason for the destination is the journey.

If all that sounds a bit paradoxical and maybe enigmatic, then sorry that is how Christian theology often works and why it is deep. Many of our ideas are not “either/or” choices, they are often abundant “both/ands”. The Trinity – that God is both three and one. The Incarnation – that Jesus is both fully human and fully God, for example. But it is not surprising that people simplify and even substitute their own ideas, which is how many heresies start. Sadly, an example often seems to be a dumbing down of the idea of salvation to an either/or proposition about a destination : that Jesus died to save us from going to hell for our sins. Even if the fact is true, this is a very long way, I think, from the much bigger vision of the Christian project that Jesus was painting at the last supper.

By the way, if the point of Steve's question was indeed to ask whether or not I think I am going to hell or not for my sins, then the answer to that question is pretty easy, I don't. The parable of the Prodigal Son suggests that a likely consequence of an unrepented life is that I will die alone in a pointless existence, far from home wallowing with pigs having squandered my inheritance. That's bad enough, I think. The parable suggests the Father loves his wayward children who are always welcome to come home, - it is they that have the problem. But to the extent there are issues with possible eternal punishment, then I have turned to God, and I am justified, to use St Paul's words, which means “put right” with the Father by Jesus. Conversion and justification are just two aspects of the journey to Salvation. Correction : the journey that is Salvation.

Conversion and Justification are mileposts of this journey, albeit important and high profile ones, but they are not the point of it. So if salvation does not just mean not going to hell, what does it entail?

We still need to take a journey of discovery and transformation. Not always easy, and not without detours and maybe some backtracking, but a journey taking us to new places and new vistas. In fact, as I have started walking the path, I have come to realise deep down that the path really is the point. It is by walking it that we learn to love and are transformed from the inside. As you may know, in the early years of our faith Christians did not call themselves Christians, they called themselves “Followers of the Way.” You can see this in the Book of Acts. I will quickly touch on just a few aspects each of which need several sermons in their

own right.

We need to walk the path to be healed and cleansed of our deep-seated hurts, sins and fears and this can only happen with time, effort and help.

We walk the path because we still need to grow in insight. In his second letter St Peter talks about a new day dawning and the morning star rising in our hearts. Part of the journey of salvation surely is a growing enlightenment of our souls.

We walk the path because we still need to repair our relationships and find ways of including others. Thinking of salvation just for ourselves starts to feel both selfish, and just unworkable. Could the prodigal son really live in his father's house while his older brother hated him?

Which brings us to the most important aspect of all, we need to learn how to love. And therein lies a particularly big story in itself.

With all that under our belts, I think I am ready to attempt an answer Steve. When he asks me "are you saved?" I think my answer might run something like this.

"Steve, great question. I think I am at the same time both saved but, as St Peter puts it, I am also growing into salvation. I do not think that God intends to punish me, but I do think I am still on long but necessary journey home. This journey is the essence of salvation, and it is a journey of transformation I am coming to love. I am still a spiritual infant who needs to grow up and I still wander a bit. Walking this path is healing and cleansing me of my hurts, fears and sins. This journey is fostering the inner spiritual sight God has given me. This journey is teaching me how to embrace others and draw them into the vision. Most importantly, I am hoping this journey will deepen my capacity for love. My transformational path is Jesus who is rescuing me and freeing me to be who I am truly meant to be in a growing sense of a deeper truth about the glory of the Father. He has called me onto this path, is pointing the way, helping me and walking it with me."

Now, assuming I can remember at least some of that, I wonder what Steve, and the listeners on the bus, would make of it? Who knows, it may lead to an interesting conversation and some real evangelism! You don't have to agree with my approach, but can I suggest you do need your own answers about the nature of this Christian project.

I am not going to apologise for that rather theological and dense talk, because these are the things I think we are being asked to ponder as the Easter Season comes to a close. Remember, Jesus' very last post-Resurrection words in John's gospel are "follow me".

Let's finish on a more poetic note with two short poems from J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of the Lord of the Rings about the point of journeys. Tolkien was a very committed and deep Christian, which maybe this explains why I think they resonate so strongly with today's themes of how journey and destination – and indeed story – are inseparable. We hear this poem near the beginning :

*The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.*

Which by the end has become this one :

*Still round the corner there may wait
A new road or a secret gate
And though I oft have passed them by
A day will come at last when I
Shall take the hidden paths that run
West of the moon
East of the sun.*