

## Universalism

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O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers  
of your people who call upon you:  
and grant that they may both perceive and know  
what things they ought to do  
and also may have grace and power  
faithfully to fulfil them.

My text may be found in Paul's First Letter to Timothy, chapter 2 and verse 4:  
'God our Saviour who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge  
of the truth.'

Are you a glass half-full or a glass half-empty person? For me, my glass is  
always half-full, especially if the bottle is in reach! People can be divided by  
temperament into optimists or pessimists. I think of myself as an optimist, taking  
a positive view of things, looking on the bright side of things, confident ultimately  
all will be well. It must make me extremely irritating to those who are markedly  
the opposite: gloomy realists, expecting the worse and never surprised if and  
when that is what happens!

My faith and my understanding of Christianity gives shape to my optimism: a  
loving God who knows me and loves me and calls me to be his son by adoption  
through the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord and our Saviour.

It is, however, perfectly possible to assume a very gloomy view of our sinfulness, our wretchedness in the sight of God, our unworthiness to come into his presence and our ultimate condemnation to outer darkness where it is either very hot or very cold depending on your view of hell. But the circles I have moved in throughout my Christian life mean I rarely if ever personally come across such a negative view. But thanks to the kind offices of our Librarian, Dr David Norris, I have in literature. David kindly recommended the first volume in a series by a man called C J Sansom. 'Dissolution', set at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries in England under Henry VIII, sat unread on my shelf for months but feeling guilty at its neglect, I picked it up and was immediately hooked by an authentic, historical, murder mystery. As a result for my birthday, I asked for and received a couple of other books by Sansom in the same Matthew Shardlake series and it is in his fourth volume, 'Revelation', that I came across Adam Kite, an extreme example of a pessimistic view of the fallen, imperfect nature of mankind. Clinically depressed and suffering from a form of religious mania, poor young Adam, an apprentice stonemason, is profoundly convinced of his own sin and that God has rejected him because God has not personally assured him of his salvation. Poor young Adam spends his time curled up in a ball on the floor, refusing to eat and piteously crying out to God to justify him with the personal assurance that he is indeed saved.

In his wretchedness, our text from 1 Timothy 2 and verse 4 might have been of help: 'God our Saviour who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.' The God we worship is a God of compassion who seeks

to bring us all to salvation. Poor young Adam cannot believe he is saved because he believes in an angry God who condemns the unrighteous sinner to endless perdition. But that is a very sad misrepresentation of the optimistic picture of a forgiving God who is reaching out to fallen humanity through the Incarnation and the Crucifixion and Resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

I believe that all can be saved. That position is called universalism. I believe in the possible redemption of all mankind; that all people can respond to the grace of God and be saved. But I'm not sure everyone is saved. The heart of the question is as ever free will; free will means that we do have a choice. Love cannot be forced. It can only be freely given. God has given us a choice and it is possible to reject him and thereby condemn ourselves.

As Christians, we have a duty to help people on their journey but we cannot force belief on anyone. We can offer and share what we have but ultimately everyone has a choice. However mad or maddening, everyone has the right to choose and the possibility of choice. That is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. God is there for us; but do we want to be there for him?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist  
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