



Salvation: individual or corporate

By The Very Revd Dr John Shepherd
Dean of Perth

SALVATION is corporate, not individual, we say. It is when we are worshipping in the context of a community that we experience salvation fully, not when we are independent of each other. Matthew is strong on this. It is when two or three are gathered together, he insists, that Christ is present. Being alone is not enough. Alone we can get off course, prepossessed with our own instincts. Christianity isn't a do-it-yourself religion we can pursue on our own. Jesus isn't our personal Saviour, relating to us only as individuals. The corporate aspect of church life is crucial. We need constantly to be worshipping and relating to our parish community, not just turning up when we think our individual faith journey needs a top-up.

But this idea comes with a caution. We need to ask ourselves, what exactly is it in the community that facilitates salvation more than if I were to go it alone? We could draw up a list.

Shared insights into the interpretation of scripture. Mutual discernment concerning appropriate Christian behaviour. Shared wisdom regarding principles for belief in God. And the common experience of welcome, generosity, forgiveness, acceptance.

It is this last category which tests the idea of corporate, as distinct

from individual salvation, because it is possible for communities to become debilitating communities, stifling of salvific initiative, as though the idea of being a community in which salvation is experienced gives permission for critical and harsh opinions to be expressed in the name of Christian honesty which in reality compromise the generosity and love of God.

Between 1718 and 1726 Joseph Butler was preacher at the Rolls Chapel. Perhaps his most celebrated sermon was entitled "On the Government of the Tongue."

In it, he says that a good Christian "will never be disposed to speak evil of any, unless there be some reason for it, besides barely that it is true." In other words, we are not morally justified in saying something simply because it may appear to us to be factually the case. Under the guise of 'not mincing matters,' harm can be done. In the context of a Christian community, freedom of speech is not an absolute right.

Priests should "only hint at failings that they see," said the poet George Crabbe (Advice, 1812) – a warning for all us who like to think salvation is most authentically experienced in community, rather than as an individual act of grace.