The Evangelism and Ecumenism Working Group

Renewal of all things and personal salvation-a Pacific Island Perspective
(a paper by Rev Tevita M Siuhengalu of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga serving at High Wycombe Methodist Circuit, England)

The Centrality of Salvation

The message of the Methodist Church according to ‘A Catechism for the use of the people call Methodists (No 68) may be summarized as:

- All need to be saved
- All may be saved
- All may know themselves saved
- All may be saved to the uttermost

Salvation is very central in defining the faith of the Methodist Church as well as defining the faith of the Church universal. It is no exaggeration to say that Christianity is a religion of salvation. For the God of the Bible is the God who has kept coming back to the rescue of his people, who has taken the initiative to save. That saving activity is embodied in his son Jesus Christ. In the same document (No 8) ‘salvation is the forgiveness of our sin, deliverance from guilt and the gift of new life in Christ. It is a process that begins now, gives victory over death and is completed with God in heaven’. Salvation then, stems wholly from the free grace of God. Therefore, no one has any claim to the least of God’s mercies. In his book John Wesley’s Theology Today Collin Williams insists on one hand, that man cannot move himself toward God, being entirely dependent on God’s enabling grace and on the other, that man is responsible before God for his own salvation, being free to accept God or reject him. In Wesley’s own words, ‘Salvation begins with what is usually termed preventing grace; including the first wish to see God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency towards life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God’s (Sermon LXXXV ‘Working out our own Salvation’, Works of John Wesley, Vol VI p509). The major point however, is that by the operation of prevenient grace one is enabled to face salvation as an option, but an option which wins the person no merit. The person is neither inevitably lost, nor inevitably saved. Choice is before the person, but only as a gift of grace. This insight provides the alternative both to Calvanistic pessimism and Pelagian optimism. It is a major clue to Wesley’s doctrine of Salvation.

Central to Wesley’s life and preaching was ‘the order of salvation’, how individuals and communities can experience the fullness of God’s prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Holiness was what Wesley desired for himself and for all people, and his work reflected such a passion formed and driven by the grace of God. ‘Grace’, as he puts it, ‘is the source, faith the condition of salvation’. (John Wesley’s Sermons: ‘Salvation by Faith’- preached at St Mary’s, Oxford before the University, on June 11, 1738 p.179 Witness of Faith ed. Owen,M 1984). Since the author of salvation is universal, salvation is for all in Wesley’s thinking. This is of course an Armenian doctrine as opposed to Calvin’s doctrine of predestination and preselection. John Wesley preached this doctrine of salvation for all, for more than half a century. It was against all or any who thought predestination as an essential article of faith. To him, the idea of solitary religion meant the destruction of Christianity.
Salvation and the whole Creation

Salvation in the Old Testament is focussed on two major events of the Exodus and the return from the exile in Babylon (Exodus 15:1b-2a; Zechariah 10:6). God is the one who delivers his people out of bondage and captivity. It is he who makes them a people, who were not a people. It is he who gathers them when they were scattered far and wide. So salvation is first and foremost a community concept. The descendants of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and Miriam and those who returned from Babylon, found their identity together, in the covenant with Yahweh. This covenantal relationship may give us little doubt to see that life itself is life together. The life of the individual is made up of a web of relationships with others and with God. However, from the Old Testament perspective, the covenant which God makes is not just for the Jews. It is something embracing more than the Chosen People. In the word-pictures of the prophets, God’s covenant with the Jews is not just for the descendants of Abraham, but for the whole of the human race. It includes the animal kingdom as well which among them they would not usually live together and between them and human beings:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9)

God’s covenant is made with the whole of creation. The Book of Genesis sets the creation of human beings within the context of the creation of the universe. So life is something lived in relationship with God and with one another; but more than that, it is lived in relationship with the whole created universe. Covenant brings community into being, therefore when human beings fail to keep God’s covenant and think that they know better than God how the world should work, their relationship with God suffers. Human relationship with each other and the rest of creation break down as well. The essence of sin in fact endangers the harmony which should exist between God and his people, between members of the community, and between communities. It also upsets the harmony which ought to take place within the created world. It creates deserts in places which should be fertile and fruitful. It destroys the very eco-system which is designed to support and enhance life. That is why the covenant that God inaugurates with Noah guarantees the continuance of seed time and harvest (Genesis 8:28) and that is why the prophetic vision of God’s ultimate restoration of his creation includes not just human beings but also the whole created world (Isaiah 35).

Salvation then is about the restoration of the whole into the relationship with God which was founded on his love for all that he has made.

Salvation and the Mission of Jesus

The mission of Jesus in the New Testament cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the Bible. As “God” and “Saviour” are synonymous throughout the Old Testament, the same could be said in the New Testament. Six times in the Pastoral he is called ‘God and Saviour’. So the mission of Jesus is a rescue mission. He ‘came into the world to save sinners’ (1 Timothy 1:15). ‘The Father has sent his son as the Saviour of the world’ (1 John 4:14). His very nature embodies his mission for ‘Jesus’ means ‘God the Saviour’ or ‘God is Salvation’ (Matthew 1:21), and his full title is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Life is very central for the mission of Jesus. As mission is ‘missio Dei’, it is ‘God’s sending’ in its original meaning. But what does God send? The fourth
Gospel tells us that God sends his son not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him. ‘I came that they may have life and have it to the full’ (John 3:17; 10:10). The Synoptic Gospels also tell us, that their sick were healed, saddened were given fresh hearts, neglected were accepted and captives were freed. So the mission of Jesus is nothing other than the movements of life: the movements of healing, of liberation, of righteousness, of justice and peace. ‘Jesus did not bring a new religion into the world. What he brought was new life’ (Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Bethge, E trans Fuller, R H 1971)

The goal is not the inauguration of any rule, not even a moral or a religious one. The goal is ‘the new creation of all things’. This is God’s last word according to Revelation 21:4 ‘Behold I make all things new’. The Final Judgement can only be something penultimate. It is only the new creation of all created being that is final and eternal. So Christian mission, as J Moltmann puts it, isn’t concerned about christianity but the life of men and women. The church’s mission isn’t concerned about the church but the Kingdom of God. Evangelization isn’t concerned about spreading the doctrine of faith but the life of the world (article ‘The Mission of the Spirit- The Gospel of Life’ presented to the biennial conference of the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies at St Stephen’s House, Oxford, 1999).

The Spirit and the Renewal of all things

The Spirit did not come into being or move into action for the first time at the Christian Pentecost. What had previously been experienced in a more implicit mode was then experienced more explicitly, because it was now possible to identify the Spirit as ‘the Spirit of Christ’ (Romans 8:9). In the Book of Genesis 1:2, the same spirit hovered over the face of the waters of chaos at the beginning of creation. Behold life began to flourish from the very breath of God Himself hence the Spirit of God from the very beginning gave life to all things. He continuously unfolds the will of the Creator through creation and recreation of all things. Christian theology does not treat the universe as being God’s puppet theatre. There is a genuine openness within which creatures are allowed to be themselves and to make themselves what they ought to be. It is not a world whose creator is a deistic absentee landlord either. The Spirit is secretly at work in a very personal way guiding human history in which the physical world as well is included.

One of the most astonishing passages in the New Testament in which Paul has something to say that is relevant at this point:

_we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words._

(Romans 8:22-23, 26 NRSV)

There is a passion that creation is undergoing before its eschatological redemption, and the Spirit is party to that passion. Here we may see how essential it is to understand the Holy Spirit in terms that are profoundly personal. The God of the Bible is a ‘fellow sufferer’ who understands not only because of divine participation in the life and death of Jesus Christ, but also because faith in the Spirit involves a belief in the Spirit's continued sharing in the travail of the whole creation. To illustrate from my own context may clarify my perspective.
The Spirit and a National Renewal: A Pacific Perspective

The evangelization of the islands of Tonga, my home country in the 1820s reached its peak in July 1834, to what was called ‘the Pentecost of Tonga’. The two missionaries by the names of David Cargill and Peter Turner, were sent to assist the mission in the second largest island of the Tongan group, called Vava’u. It is quite important to know that these two new recruits from Britain had experienced evangelical conversions. Cargill was a Master of Arts of the University of Aberdeen. It was while he was a student at King’s College (1826-30) that he attended a Wesleyan revival service in the city of Aberdeen and experienced an evangelical conversion. Turner, a powerful and revivalist preacher. In one occasion he rebuked and suspended the new ruler, Taufa’ahau of Vava’u, from membership because he had taken some of his predecessor’s (Finau ‘Ulukalala) attractive wives. This was of course part of the old pre-Christian customs, but it was a grave offence against the christian rules of morality and monogamy. However, in Vava’u, the missionaries initiated prayer meetings for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and their intercession was answered on July 23, 1834 at the small village of ‘Utui. A native local preacher, Isaiah Vovole, was preaching on the discourse of Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, when an overwhelming spirit of contrition came upon the congregation. It was reported that every soul was prostrate before God; many cried aloud in agony, some making open confession of their past sins. Through the whole night there was weeping and prayers for God to pardon their sins. In the morning, there was rejoicing in the assurance of God’s forgiving love. Nothing like this had been seen in the islands before; an entire village population became converted and from village to village it was like a holy epidemic. (History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Findlay D.D & W.W Holdsworth MA; BD London Epworth Press 1921 Vol III p306ff)

It was reported that, ‘In a single day, there was reason to believe more than one thousand people was truly converted to God. The change was not from dumb idols merely, but from sin to righteousness, from the power of Satan unto God... the whole island of Vava’u bowed before the power of God. The Society in a few months increased to three thousand members’.

It also spread to the island of Ha’apai and the mainland Tongatapu. Apparently, no such Pentecost was seen in any other missionary District of Methodism at this period. That a whole population should be affected by the Spirit of God as happened in the islands of Ha’apai and Vava’u, was an outstanding feature of this spiritual awakening.

The place of the King is quite significant in this event. Taufa’ahau and his queen, Lupe Pau’u happened to be at Vava’u at the time and were caught up in this joyful experience of the ‘Knowledge of Salvation through the remission of sins’. The Queen was baptised and trained to be a class leader. The King became a local preacher. As a result of the change in him was the lowering of the royal pew in his home church in Lifuka, Ha’apai. For it was a custom in all Tongan assemblies that the King should sit above his subjects. The year after (1835) he built a chapel at Ha’apai as the largest in Tonga. The communion rail was formed of spears used formerly by Taufa’ahau and his family, and carved clubs once regarded as gods were placed at the foot of the pulpit stairs. The King’s conversion made the greatest impact upon the people of Tonga. Cargill wrote that the King was a ‘humble, devoted man of God’.

The Pentecost of Tonga was the power and the movement of the Spirit in transforming the nation inside out. It started through the commitment, dedication and courage of individuals, and turned out to be a collective prayer of repentence and cry for God’s mercy. So the renewal of all things is the extension of God’s transforming grace through the lives of believing men and women in their participation in Christ’s life and mission.
Discussion questions

1 How is the transforming and renewing grace of God visible in the life of the Church (e.g. The Methodist Church of Tonga) this twenty-first century in relation to the socio-political and theological climate of each respective region?

2 There is still a huge tendency to see the renewal of the physical world outside the realm of the Spirit, i.e. in wars and terrorism, in poverty and epidemics. If there is co-relation of everything in Creation, how can these be reconciled as one whole?

3 Can it be simply put that when there is personal renewal there will be its collective outcome, leading to the making of a renewed community/nation. Discuss.