

For once you let life go its own way you have no guarantee that it will take the safest and most pleasant routes; you have no guarantee that it will not run into serious danger; you have no guarantee that it will ever choose to find its way back to you again. And seeing the life you have given making huge mistakes, getting badly hurt, moving far away from where you are is the most painful experience you ever have. Giving life means taking huge risks. It is part of the deal.

And tonight in our drama, we saw the risks that even God had to take. We believe that God, in some way, gave life to the human race. And if God gave life then God loves that life. But because God gave life, even He, who is God, could not keep total control over it. Because he loves us, he has to let us go. He has to allow us our freedom to live and develop and think and feel and believe and choose for ourselves. He can talk to us but we do not have to listen. He can show us what is good but we do not have to take any notice. He can let us suffer the consequences of our own wrongdoing and that of other people but we are as likely to hate him for that as to love and respect him. And so God, too, endures all the pain and agony and anger and frustration of someone who loves, who creates life, who freedom and then is forced to see those whom he loves turning away from him, making huge mistakes, suffering terrible pain and inflicting pain upon others. This means that for every pain we suffer, God suffers more and if you are talking about the whole human race then that is one hell of a lot of pain.

So why does he not do something about it, we ask? It is all very well to sit there sobbing- on your stepladder- but God is God is he not? Surely he must have more clout than your average human being. But if God cannot control by force without depriving us of life, what can he do?

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Life is not easy for anyone and for many people it is appallingly difficult. We have to struggle with pain and sickness, with dangers and deprivation, with people who put us down and social structures which squeeze us out. We have to cope with big disappointments in life, with being let down by people we trusted, with the frustration of knowing our own limitations. We have to live in a world which is hugely complex and grapple with an understanding of life that we shall never sort out. We have to live with the knowledge that we shall all die and that some will scarcely have a chance to live. When my mother was born she cried, as new babies do, and the midwife said. *“That’s right my love, you cry. It is a hard, cruel world you have come into.”*

So, in this hard, cruel world, what is our salvation? What is it that can keep us going, that makes us creative in the face of difficulties, which enables us to pick ourselves up when we get knocked down?

Ask almost anyone and they will say that their ultimate salvation has been love. Maybe the love of parents who have always been there supporting them, no matter what happens;
 Maybe the love of a partner who has given them happiness and confidence in themselves;
 Maybe the love of a good friend who has carried them through an appalling crisis;

Tonight we tell God's love story. We recognise the love which gave us life. We acknowledge the love which gave us the freedom to live. We praise the love we saw in Jesus and the sheer power of that love which was in him.

We think with amazement on a love which will never give up on us, never find anything too hard to cope with, never be destroyed.

Because of this love we have hope,

Because of this love we keep faith,

Because of this love we reject the pleas of those who want us to celebrate "The Festive Season" and we persist, boldly and gladly to celebrate Christmas.

Amen.