

Sermon: Justification by Faith (21st June, 2020)

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans this morning begins with a big "Therefore". It is a quarter of the way into the letter, and in a sense is a statement of: "In the light of all that I have already said..." So what has Paul said so far?

Remember how last week we looked at the fact that there was tension between the Gentile, non-Jewish Christians and the returning Jewish Christians, who were returning having been in exile from Rome for the last five years. The nub of the issue: how essential was it to adhere to the Jewish laws - keeping the Sabbath restrictions, eating kosher-only food, circumcision - in order to be true followers of Christ.

We saw how Paul began to answer this question with the rather sobering analysis that everyone, Gentile and Jew alike, had fallen short of God's standards, had failed to live in the image of God in which we were created. That wherever you looked, humans were acting in wrong ways, doing evil things to one another. And not even trying to obey God's commandments was enough to rectify the situation. The world was badly out of kilter, and our failings and sinfulness put in an unsurmountable barrier between us and the life-giving, joy-filled relationship with God for which we had been created.

It is at this point that Paul begins to unpack the impact of Christ's death and resurrection in ways that had never been articulated so clearly before.

He states: it is not by our efforts that we can be put in a right relationship with God. (He uses the words righteousness and justification a lot in the letter but the simplest way of understanding this is simply "being put into a right relationship with God"). Whatever we try to do - obedience to the Jewish law; trying to be kind to others; living the golden rule - none of it will be enough, none of it takes the weight of sin seriously enough. But here is the radical good news: God in Christ has done everything that is needed for us to be in right relationship with Him. All we need to do is to reach out and accept it.

To get the point across, Paul uses a series of images that would have resonated with his Roman audience.

He uses the image of the law court. In first century Rome politicians made their name by either commanding legions in battles abroad or by wowing the crowds by their great oratory when defending or prosecuting law suits. Huge crowds would gather for court cases, usually held in the open air. They provided the entertainment that TV soap operas do today. Paul states that humanity has been found guilty and sentenced to death. There is no mitigation great enough to reverse the verdict. The crowd is baying for blood. But then Christ steps in and takes our place. The verdict and sentence that had been placed on us is now placed on Christ. We are free. We have done nothing to deserve it. We have done nothing to earn it. But because of Christ we walk free.

He uses a second image, one of animal sacrifices as part of religious worship. It was a familiar practice across all the religions of the time, but the imagery Paul uses has particular resonance for the Jewish people. For them, the sacrificing of an animal in the temple was a way of taking away their own sins, even if but temporarily. The animal they presented bore their sins, carried the punishment that was due them. Paul says that God himself presents the sacrifice on our behalf, the sacrifice of Christ. God the Father offers his Son, Christ himself willingly offer himself, and in this act of extraordinary love, the cost of sin is paid for once and for all. This is no temporary fix. This is a permanent solution.

And the third image he uses is again one totally common-place in Roman life - slavery. It is estimated that the slave population in Rome outnumbered free citizens by as much as two or three to one. And there were strict laws as to how slaves could be bought out of slavery, how they could be redeemed. Many slaves longed for that day. For the people of Israel, freedom from slavery meant even more - the escape from Egypt and the entering into the Promised Land. Here Paul is saying that God has paid for us to come out of slavery, the slavery of sin and death, and to enter into a new abundant life, and the price for our redemption is the life of Jesus Christ.

In the 21st century, some of those images may feel a little clunky. We may prefer images today that place stress more on relationship rather than contract. But Paul's imagery conveys three fundamental truths. First, that the consequences of human sin cannot be overestimated. Second, it is God's work, not our actions, that make the difference, that help us to come into a right relationship with God. And third, because of the seriousness of sin and the power of death, God's work comes at a cost, the cost of Christ

dying for us and rising from the dead.

In Paul's language we are "justified by faith in Christ". In other words, we are placed in a right relationship with God through simply trusting in what Christ has done for us in his death and resurrection. We are offered the most extraordinary and wonderful gift - all we need do is receive it.

Which brings us to our "therefore". "Therefore (Paul writes), since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." If you are anything like me, you may spend a lot of your time and mental and emotional energy striving to be liked, to be considered good enough, and I sometimes take that attitude into how I approach God. I feel that God won't love me or accept me because I have let him down, I have not done as much as I could have done, I have not tried hard enough. But I need to hear these wonderfully liberating words again. God's love, his acceptance of me, is not conditional on my actions. They are, in many respects, irrelevant. God's love is purely based on him, not on me. A parent may say to their child, "No matter what you do, I will always love you." Sometimes, sadly, those words may be tested to breaking point and beyond. But with God, those words will always remain true. We are to stop straining and striving to earn God's approval. He loves us, pure and simple. To know that is to know peace, no matter what we are going through.

Therefore, because of being made right with God through the actions of Jesus Christ, Paul writes, we can also know joy. We are welcomed into the loving, life-giving arms of God. The very thing that we were created for, the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to our lives, the very thing that makes us truly human, the very thing that also makes us distinctively and uniquely us, that thing, being in a life-giving relationship with God, has been given to us for free! As he writes in another of his letters: "Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say it, rejoice!" Whatever we may be going through, and I know many of you are going through some very tough times at the moment, we can return to the truth of God's unconditional love for us, and find joy.

And therefore, because of being made right with God through the actions of Jesus Christ, we can also know hope. We can have hope in God that ultimately the future is in his hands. Recent events - the coronavirus, the death of George Floyd, in particular - have shaken our confidence, have reminded us of the fragility of life and the often failing nature of our relationships. But our hope for the future does not rest in our own efforts. That would all too often be a false hope. Our hope for the future rests in God who already in the death and resurrection of His son has shown us the way. In the prayer of Desmond Tutu, that I was reminded of the other day:

Victory is ours
Goodness is stronger than evil
love is stronger than hate
light is stronger than darkness
life is stronger than death
Victory is ours through Him who loves us

We have a certain hope because in Christ we already see how the future will end.

Peace, joy, hope - all gifts to us through simply trusting in what God has done for us in Christ. Let us reach out to receive them this day.

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