

Morning Worship - Sunday 14th June 2020
Sermon by Roy Maynard

Put Right with God Reading: Romans 5.1-11

In theory, everyone in our country stands equal before the law, innocent until proved guilty. There are those who suspect that it is not necessarily so - that some people have a bias against different members of our community.

Against those who have no permanent home and live on the streets, are youthful or poor. Then there are others who have a bias in their favour, because of their status in the community, or because they are wealthy, or have friends in high places... and so the list goes on. Jean-Jacques Rousseau began his *Social Contract* in 1762 with the words, "Man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains." Rousseau died in 1778, eleven years before the storming of the Bastille. But his work became part of the movement that led to the French revolution with its cry for "liberty, equality, fraternity."

Equality before God

In Romans 3, Paul wrote about a different kind of equality. He concluded that everyone is equal before God - equally guilty. Some may be degraded sinners, others may be earnestly good-living sinners. Yet all are sinners - whether Jew or Gentile.

The whole world is therefore under God's judgment. But the free gift of God's grace puts people right with him through Christ Jesus. Jesus has paid our punishment, has died our death, so that we can be put right with God through faith.

However if we view ourselves from the human perspective, we all have an equal bias against us because of sin. And we all have an equal bias in our favour because of the great love of God poured out for us in the coming, the life, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Faith

In Romans chapter 4, Paul develops the theme of the importance of faith. We still have the option of whether we want to be dealt with on our own merits, or on the basis of the gift of God's grace. On our own merits, not one of us can be made right with God. By faith, by our dependence on what God has done for sinners in his Son, Jesus Christ, we can all be put right with God.

Paul refers to the example of Abraham who God accepted as righteous because of his faith, not because of the things he did. And, Paul notes, he was accepted as righteous before he was circumcised - which makes him the father of all people of faith, whether Jew or Gentile. Abraham showed his faith through his actions. Abraham's faith wasn't dead or passive, it was alive and active. If I board a train and take a trip to London, when I arrive, I can't boast, "Look at what I've done!" If faith in trains is just an intellectual exercise, just a theoretical action of the mind, and I take no action to buy a ticket or board the train, I will never get further than my front door.

In the same way, faith in God must actively accept and depend on the redemptive work of Jesus - leading to a life which is constantly one of action. Works can never save us from our sins, but a faith that is real will lead to a whole lifetime of works. A true faith demands action. In Romans chapter 4. v24 -25, Paul says, "God will credit righteousness, to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

It is important for us to grasp this final verse of chapter 4 "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification". It is the key to understanding chapter 5.

All of us have some appreciation that Christ died for our sins. The cross is a central Christian symbol and forgiveness is a central Christian theme. Paul is here emphasising the resurrection - Jesus was "raised to life for our justification." Forgiveness is the important entry-point, but

God's purpose is new life, a new relationship with him. The term for this is "justification" - "justification by faith."

Sometimes we have talked about it as if it merely means being forgiven, whereas it really speaks of having a restored relationship with God. Keep your focus, not just on the cross - and forgiveness - but on the resurrection - and the new relationship with God.

The young man was in the far country. He had sinned against heaven and against his father. He was no longer worthy to be called his son. Yet he received his father's gift of grace. He received what he didn't deserve. He was forgiven, this is the story of the prodigal son.

But he was also restored, brought back into a right relationship with his father and the household. The robe and sandals and ring weren't just to replace his beggar's rags. They tell us that his father received him back with honour as a son. Much learning and growing would no doubt have to follow.

What about his attitude to the farm-work? What about the fractured relationship with his elder brother? What would he now do to heal the hurts he had caused? Yet he was received back on the basis of the father's grace. And he didn't turn back to the far country - he accepted that grace by faith.

Justification by Faith

Paul begins chapter 5, "Therefore since we have been justified through faith," there are certain consequences. One of them is "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The rebel sinner has stopped his fighting against God and is accepted.

Paul must have often recalled his Damascus road experience - persecuting Jesus, kicking against the pricks of conscience as the Holy Spirit strove to bring him to faith. Even as that faithful disciple Ananias laid hands on him so that he might receive his sight back, there must have been the overwhelming awareness of peace with God.

In a short space of time Paul the antagonist became Paul the evangelist. The good-living sinner who knows that his life just doesn't reach the mark, who is conscience-stricken because of honest failure and sin...but he comes to know the beautiful peace of forgiveness, as the love of God pours over his.

By faith, Paul says, we now live in this experience of God's grace. God hasn't fully worked out his plan in us yet, but "we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." We all fell short of the glory of God, but now we're going to reach it. The sufferings that happen to us along the way will produce perseverance, developing our character and feeding this hope - this confident expectation. And it's not an idle hope - a pie in the sky event when you die. Already "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who he has given to us."

This is not just a nice feeling. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" The symbol of the cross and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are both reminders of this central truth of what God has done. "We have now been justified [put right with God] by Jesus blood..." That means that we are "saved from God's wrath through Jesus." In other words we are no longer God's enemies, since "we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son."

Matthew tells us that "when Judas, who has betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse..." and then went and hanged himself (Matt. 27.1-10).

The judge isn't looking for the person who feels guilty, but for the person who actually committed the crime. The accused may be guilty without feelings of guilt at all.

Justification isn't saying that Jesus has fixed our feelings - so we can stop worrying about it. Justification says that Christ has died for our sins. When we believed in Jesus and fully trusted him, God made us right with himself. God looks at us "just as if we'd" never sinned.

Forgiven - put right with God - peace with God - the confident hope of becoming what God has always meant us to be - no longer enemies but God's friends. "I – We are a new creation no more in condemnation, here in the grace of God I - we stand"
Thanks be to God!

If we once again look at the story of Paul's meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was no longer the defiant antagonist against the Christians, Jesus followers, no Paul was broken. Paul during a time of isolation, had time to think and reassess his life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul became a new man, working and serving Jesus preaching the gospel serving his new Lord, Jesus.

In our bible reading from Mathew Jesus talked about a harvest to be gathered in. Paul became a harvester for Jesus working here in Gods Kingdom on earth bringing people to know and love God, through his son Jesus. This is Faith in Action, something we are all encouraged to do.

At this time of lock down, our farmers are not getting the worker to pick the crops in their fields. Will we get our strawberries this year and what about the lovely Kentish black cherries will we see them in our super market.

We are just beginning to see signs of the COVID19 easing a little. It's not over yet, by any means, and we still have to take care to protect ourselves and others. But where do we stand as Jesus disciples, we as his disciples of today are his harvesters of souls, how do we continue to work as harvesters for God.

It's not easy, but we are not alone, our God walks beside us. Some time ago I read about a group of Christians, I think they were called the navigators, who before they left home every day, would pray that God would allow them to meet someone to talk to about the Gospel. I

wonder if we are brave enough ask God to do that for us or are afraid he might actually do it?

I was talking to Linda Fiddymment about the large number of people queuing for food or vouchers at the Magpie Centre. Linda said that that were meeting the need, and in some cases individuals and families were happy to receive prayer.

I believe that whatever we seek to do for God our first approach must be through prayer. So if we are seeking to be harvesters in the Kingdom, let us seek God's wisdom, his guidance as to how to achieve this in this time of isolation. Let us have the Faith to believe that God will do it.

I have no doubt that this is still his plan and through his son Jesus, God will show us how to achieve it in his name.

Let us Pray

Heavenly Father, we pray that you will strengthen our Faith and Commitment to you, to be the harvesters in your Kingdom here on earth. Lord Jesus as your disciples of today give us courage to proclaim your gospel, the story of your life on earth, your death and resurrection and your offer of salvation to all mankind, and lord provide us, we pray, with contacts with willing hearts to hear the gospel.

AMEN