

Brackenhurst Methodist Church: 28 September 2008
Justification by Faith: Gideons 07h45; Baptism 09h30

Call to Worship: Isaiah 53:4-6

Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God
smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all

- Hymn 222 — Hail Thou once Despised Jesus

Opening Prayer

Lord, as we gather here this morning we are reminded once again of the reason for your coming:

Not only to set us free from sin
but to set us free to live, to love and to be all that you created us to be.

We pray that as we meet in your name today that you will once again grant us the grace of a vision of a world, and a life, that is different

A world that does indeed glorify your name

And a difference that begins with each one of us as we reflect on what you have done, through your son Jesus Christ, for every person

Amen

Welcome & Notices

Gideons (8 min)

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

We thank you, Lord God for your Word to us

A word that has spoken in every generation of your love for us

A word that reminds us today of your action in our lives

And a word that goes before us and teaches us of your presence wherever we may go

We pray that morning that as we worship you you would help us not to worship a book of words

But that we would worship the living Word

The Word through whom all things were created and the Word who came to dwell among us

The Word who died for us to set us free from our transgressions

That we would worship you our Creator in reverence not only for who you are, but also in fear and trembling for how you have created us in your image

And that as we worship you that you would grant us insight into who we have become, that we offer ourselves in fullness to you today, not holding anything back.

And so now, in this time of quiet we allow the light of Christ to search our hearts, that we may may keep nothing of who we are hidden from God

...

Amen

- Hymn 273 — Rock of Ages

Absolution:

So we thank Jesus that through your death on the cross you have justified us with God.

And that you have indeed cleansed us, saved us, washed us and forgiven our sins.

Help us to never forget this, but to always live our lives in response to all that you done.

Amen.

Offering

Prayer

Scripture:

Romans 3:21-24; 4:1-5

- Hymn 238 — I Cannot Tell

Message

INTRODUCTION

- Have you ever been in a situation where somebody said something, and you realised that they used a whole bunch of words that just made no sense?

- This happened to me not so long ago — and I was sitting in church at the time!
 - * And I thought, I should know what this means
- They're words that we use often in church, and read often in the Bible
- And then I thought if I'm not so sure what it means, what does the rest of the congregation think it means
 - So after chatting about this in staff meeting we thought that it might be helpful, before we get into the whole Christmas journey, to spend a few Sundays looking at some theological words and phrases
 - * And what they mean.
 - And seeing as we're Methodists who take our theological heritage from John Wesley we thought that it would be good to turn back to some of his sermons to unpack the meaning of these words
- Today we look at the word 'Justification'
 - A word that is used often by Paul, as in the passage we've just read from Romans.
- We misunderstand the word and the concept, and yet it is one of the most important concepts in our understanding of the salvation that God offers to us
 - As Wesley says, "it contains the foundation of all our hope."¹
- So what is the origin of the doctrine of Justification?
 - Well, the starting point is a recognition that while men and women were created good, in the image of God
 - * In fact, created perfectly
 - And to the perfect man and woman were given a perfect law
 - * A law which would have ensured fullness of life in community with God and each other
 - And more than that were given the ability to obey it perfectly and to live a life of holiness and happiness in paradise, somehow God's perfect creation failed to live up to God's promise and hope for them.
- From the moment of their disobedience, they tasted, not the juicy taste of a freshly picked fruit, but tasted the death brought about by a life of disobedience to God.
 - So the origin of the doctrine of Justification has its origin in the very first chapters of the Bible
 - * The Bible is a book described by Daniel Erlander as God's plan of salvation for the entire universe

¹ Sermon V:1

- As the earliest men and women try to explain why things are in such a mess and why a world that should be perfect is in fact so difficult and so painful
- The doctrine of Justification is first and foremost a recognition that we are not who we were created to be, but that God has made a way for us to become who he made us to be.
 - And this is where it becomes dangerous because we are very quick to want to justify ourselves
 - * We want to find a reason, an excuse as to why we are not what we ought to be, rather than a reason to become who God wants us to be
 - Remember the Pharisees when they came to argue with Jesus?
 - * “They wanted to justify themselves...”
- They were self-righteous and wanted to find an excuse as to why they were behaving as they were
 - As long as we try to justify ourselves we’re not going to allow God to justify us, and it is only God who can do that
 - * As long as we make excuses for our behaviour we aren’t going to change
- But God looks at us and sees the mess we have made and God desires to change things for us
 - He wants that so badly
 - * Friends, God is for us, he is not against us
 - Yet some of us live like that expecting God too want to punish us all the time, and if not us then certainly the other sinners in the world
 - * That’s not who God is
- God wants the mess that we’re in to be different so badly that in order to put right the relationship between God and between ourselves that we destroyed through disobedience
 - That God himself came in the person of Jesus Christ to sort our mess out
- As Paul writes, we have all fallen short of the glory of God, but we are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came through Christ Jesus.

(1) What is Justification?

- What does it mean to be justified, what is justification?
 - Firstly, what is justification not:
- Justification is not being made just and righteous — that’s sanctification, what God works in us by his spirit as opposed to what God does for us through his Son, the topic for another week
 - Justification is also not about us being cleared from accusation of wrong doing.

- * Whether those are accusation brought by the great accuser, Satan
 - * Or accusation brought by the words of scripture
- And Justification is certainly not about God looking at us and saying that we are not guilty
 - * Or God seeing us and righteous when clearly we are unrighteous.
- In other words, at no point is justification about us being declared innocent when we are clearly guilty
- God clearly sees who we are and what we have done and how we stand accused of our sin by the very words of scripture
 - The plain idea of justification as presented in the bible is that of pardon, of the forgiveness of sins
- God sees and knows and takes cognisance of what we have done wrong
 - Each and every thing
- And in spite of that pardons us and forgives us and sets us free to no longer be bound by our wrongdoing, but to be set free to live fully.
 - Justification is the act of God the Father whereby, through the blood of his son Jesus Christ, he shows to us his mercy by pardoning what we have done wrong
- It seems that there was a man in England who put his Rolls-Royce on a boat and went across to Europe to go on a holiday. While he was driving around Europe, something happened to the motor of his car.
 - He cabled the Rolls-Royce people back in England and asked, "I'm having trouble with my car; what do you suggest I do?"
 - Well, the Rolls-Royce people flew a mechanic over! The mechanic repaired the car and flew back to England and left the man to continue his holiday.
- As you can imagine, the fellow was wondering, "How much is this going to cost me?" So when he got back to England, he wrote the people a letter and asked how much he owed them.
 - He received a letter from the office that read: "Dear Sir: There is no record anywhere in our files that anything ever went wrong with a Rolls-Royce."
- God knows our sins, but through Jesus he has fixed the problem and refuses to use our sins to condemn us, as though we had never sinned.

(2) Who are Justified?

- Paul is very clear: the wicked
 - He says:

“when one works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. But to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

- Now this is a difficult thing to take a hold of
 - We live in a world where we are taught that if we want something we have to work for it
 - * We have to work to achieve, to earn, to prove ourselves
- And the radical message of the gospel is that our works are worthless because it is God who justifies — not those who work for it
 - but the wicked.
- In the King James version of this passage it says that God justifies the ungodly
 - The ungodly
- Not the good, not those who try to be good, not those who think that they are better than anybody else, not those who are in church on a Sunday morning
 - But the wretched
 - * Wesley describes them as “the ungodly of every kind and degree; and none but the ungodly.
- What does this mean?
 - It means simply that God is merciful as only as far as our unrighteousness is concerned
 - * It is our ungodliness that he chooses not to remember.
- Rolls Royce was only able to repair the car as far as it was broken, and as far as its owner admitted the brokenness
 - Imagine the engine cover clips broke, and he drove around Europe with a piece of rope tied around the front of his Rolls Royce
 - * Many of us do that!
 - Our lives are a mess and instead of trusting God to sort out our ungodliness, we try to do everything ourselves to fix it
- We have this idea that we need to first prove our worth to God before we can be good enough for his kingdom
 - We have to make some sort of an effort to obey his commands, to keep his law
 - * And then, and only then, as a response to what we are doing, God will reach out and forgive us
- You’ve heard the story of the professional who comes to make a repair and the owner asks how much it will be
 - He answers R50, but R100 if you watch, R150 if you help
- We think that as long as we are doing our bit to keep the major parts of the law

- Not murdering, stealing, raping, pillaging
 - * God will forgive us the minor parts of the law that we do not keep.
- This is not what Paul says!
 - What Paul is saying is that it is the ungodly, the rapist, the murderer, pillager, the thief
 - * It is the sinner who is forgiven
- God does not justify the godly, but the ungodly. God does not justify the holy, but the unholy
- He seeks and saves the lost
 - he pardons these who need pardon
 - * and he saves every sinner from the guilt and the power of sin
- Those who are condemned already, not only by God, but also by their own consciences of all their ungodliness in thought and word and deed
 - These are the ones who are justified.

(3) How are they justified?

- So if the ungodly person is unable to earn acceptance by God through works, then how are they justified?
 - Does God freely justify everybody?
- Scripture makes it quite clear:
 - the wicked is justified by faith: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus
 - Justification is by faith!
 - * Faith in the redemption that was obtained for us by the finished work of Christ
 - * Faith that is a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and that he gave himself for me
 - * Faith that is a response to God's initiative
 - * Faith that is a willingness to take a risk, faith that is a willingness to step out of the boat and trust God's promises.
- There can be no justification without faith not because God doesn't want to do the work of justification, but because he has already done the work we need to believe to take hold of it.
 - Faith is not an action but an attitude
 - Faith as action says, I'm a Christian, therefore I must do a, b and c in order to be acceptable to God
 - * I must be good, I must love my neighbour, I mustn't murder

- Faith as an attitude says that I live by believing in the fact of justification, the fact that God loves me beyond what I can conceive or imagine
 - * That he accepts me as I am in spite of seeing my sins and faults and flaws
 - * And then living that attitude out in the world
- Faith, we read earlier, is credited to the wicked as righteousness
 - God does not punish us for our sins, but treats us as though we are both guiltless and righteous.
- Faith is the only thing that is needed — and sometimes the most difficult thing — in order to be justified.
 - We can do all other things, read our bible, pray, go to church, give generously, be in every sense of the word a good Christian, but if we do not believe that we are justified it counts for nothing
 - * Justification depends on our faith that it is so, and living that out
- You see, when we think that our actions count for something as far as God is concerned we begin to think that we are better than others who are not doing as much as we are
 - We think that we must be closer to God
 - * Even, heaven forbid, that God loves me more because I am doing his will and somebody else is not
 - The danger is that we forget who God is and we lose sight of the amazing depths of God's grace, and begin the prideful focus on our own abilities and achievements
- But when we begin to recognise, when we truly know the depths of our own depravity, but also when we begin to truly know that in spite of our wickedness and distance from God we are justified by God
 - then we have no option to see ourselves in same position as those we would consider the sinners, the wicked, and the godless
 - * And we recognise that as much as God has pardoned my sin, as much as he has justified me, he has also justified the most godless neighbour
- it is only for that person
 - not to reform his ways, not to repent, not to ask God for forgiveness
 - * But for that person to accept what God has done for him
- To have faith is simply to acknowledge a relationship with God that is already in existence.
 - It is not our place to judge who God can and cannot justify, because, as I said earlier, we all fall short of God's glory

CONCLUSION

- Friends, and as I conclude this morning, I do so by reminding you of the words I spoke at the beginning of my sermon
 - Justification is the basis of the only hope we have as men and women.
- Not because of anything we can do
 - But because of what God has already done for us
- Justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins
- Justification is for the most wicked, ungodless people
 - And is simply the acknowledgement of a relationship that God has already made possible through Jesus Christ.
- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen

Prayer of Response and Intercession

- Hymn 691 — Come let us Sing of a Wonderful Love

Benediction

Doxology