

Justification by Faith

Readings: Galatians chapter 3; verses 23-29; Luke chapter 15, verses 11-24

I was doing a Bible Study this week and got involved in an attempt to explain Paul's doctrine of Justification by Faith. It was an abject failure. What was perfectly clear in my mind was obviously as clear as mud to everyone else. So here goes on another attempt.

I begin with a word about the significance of clothing. In the Old Testament we read about Joseph's amazing technicolour dreamcoat. That was a symbol of his status as favourite son. In the parable of the Prodigal Son Jesus tells of a father's reaction when his wayward son returned home. "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; for this my son was dead..." The robe was a symbol of continuing son-ship.

In both stories clothing is indicative of status and relationship. And that is the heart of what **Justification by Faith** is all about. Jesus puts it in the context of a family relationship. Paul puts it in the context of a law court. But it boils down to the same thing at the end. At issue is the question of our relationship / status to God.

I want to begin with Paul this morning simply because his is the more difficult concept to grasp. But his view lies at the heart of our Protestant Faith so we need to understand it.

Paul imagines that we are the defendants in a Court of Law. God is the Judge and we are charged with having sinned against him. There is only really one plea that we can enter. "Guilty my Lord!" The fact is that we have all sinned whether we like to admit it or not. Only one verdict is possible. Then comes time for the sentence, now the most incredible conclusion. The Judge pronounces "Defendant is acquitted".

Our first reaction is to cry out "What a total miscarriage of justice" Imagine your reaction today if someone was had up on a murder charge; pleaded guilty and the Judge pronounced "I acquit you; you are free to go". There would be hell to pay!

So how come Paul is able to say that this miscarriage of justice is at the heart of our Christian Faith?

Paul's answer would have been that our faith in Christ unites us with Him in such a way that God pronounces on us the sentence He would have passed had Christ been in the dock. Our faith unites us to Christ and identifies us with Him in the closest possible way. So God sees us as we are in Christ and judges us accordingly. That is the critical difference. By faith we are united with Christ; become one with Him and what God sees is Christ in us.

Which is why that great communion hymn has the line; "Look Father, look on his anointed face; and only look on us as found in him". Its as though God sees us bi-focally. He sees us as we are. But He also sees us as we are in Christ and it is this second sight which enables Him to pronounce Acquittal.

So Paul urges us to "put on Christ" almost like clothing ourselves in a garment. Wesley picked it up and sang "Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine".

This idea fits in nicely with the story Jesus told about the Prodigal Son.

In that story the youngster goes wild in the far country, disowning his father in the process. Then he comes to his senses, realises what a mess he has made of things, and resolves to go home. The best he could hope for was to be treated as one of the hired servants. His father saw things differently. And when the prodigal came home his father didn't even give him a chance to blurt out his

apology. "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, for this my son was dead and is alive". The point being that in all the years of his wasted youth the boy had never ceased to be a son. His father had never disowned him. When he came home his father didn't read the Riot Act to him. Nor did he give the lad five years probation as a hired servant. He welcomed him as a long-lost son. He had always been a son and always would be. It was enough for the prodigal to realise he had made a mess of things; to repent and to return home. The best robe was sign and symbol of this relationship.

Paul is describing the same thing as Jesus. A free forgiveness and a restored status in relation to God. And what needs to be said is that the offer of a free forgiveness is not without cost. As far as Paul was concerned the cost of offering a free forgiveness was borne by God in Christ. The Cross of Christ is what it cost God to be able to offer us a free forgiveness. For God was in Christ and on the Cross we see Jesus enduring the penalty and the consequence of our sinfulness. He so identified Himself with us that he endured that sense of separation which is the penalty of sin. Jesus cried out "My God, why have you forsaken me?". That's what it cost God to offer us a free forgiveness.

And you will say "There is no Cross, no suffering in the story of the Prodigal Son.

It was an Indian preacher who saw differently. He told his congregation the story and said that when the Prodigal returned home he was appalled to see that his father's hair had turned white in the intervening years. White with worry and anxiety and inward suffering for his wayward son. White with the suffering of love offered and rejected by a headstrong son.

And all because God is Love. In terms of the Prodigal Son story "Love only waits to forgive and forget". In terms of Paul's legal explanation God Himself bears the penalty that sin incurs and therefore can offer a forgiveness which is free to us. Nowhere is this better said than in Isaac Watts' great hymn *When I survey the wondrous Cross*. It speaks of the suffering of God in Christ:

"See from his head, his hands, his feet
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?"

And our response? – There can only be one response:

"Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my life, my soul, my all"

Relevant Hymns in Hymns & Psalms

281	Come down O Love divine:	verse 3
593	And now O Father	verse 2
216	And can it be	verse 5