

Righteousness by Faith: Abraham, Paul and the Cross

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Genesis 15:1-6, Psalm 51, Romans 3-4

Nothing; being. Barrenness; fertility. Sin; righteousness. Death; life.

The God of Abraham, David and Paul is the God who brings being out of nothing, fertility out of barrenness, righteousness out of sin, life out of death.

When Paul, whose feast we celebrate today, wants to talk about atonement, this is the rhythm in which he thinks. It is a rhythm which orders that theological narrative of Creation, Fall, Israel, Justification and New Creation which turns the hearts of people to God, from Rome then to Oxford now.

The word of the LORD to Abram: 'count the stars; so shall your offspring be'. By that same word the LORD also made the stars: he brought into being that which before was nothing. That God made the stars is a guarantee that he can make Abram's descendants like the stars, bringing fertility out of the sad barrenness of Abram's marriage to Sara. Faith in this God of Creation and His work which enables miraculous procreation – this faith is what God credits as righteousness for Abram. Faith in this God makes Abram fruitful – Abraham, the father of many.

But what is it for God to credit someone with righteousness? Here we must turn to Paul who the workings of God's mighty grace – his unmerited gifts, the mystery uncovered in Jesus. Two elements of Paul's theology from Romans 3 and 4 will help us.

First, Paul tells his readers about the awfulness of the human condition for Jew and Gentile alike. Paul's doctrine of sin is sober and without discrimination: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. As Romans 3:2-3, echoing Psalm 14, says 'They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.' Moreover, there is no work by which a person may work their way out of sin. 'No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law.' This existential claim encompasses Jew and Gentile. Neither any work in accord with the Torah nor any work in accord with the natural law will make anyone righteous in the sight of God. Rather, the wages of sin are death. Abraham is vital to Paul's theology here. Just as Abram and Sara could not work their way out of barrenness, just so no one can work their way out of sin or out of death. And Abram epitomises the unity of Jew and Gentile in sin: for Abram was not a Jew when he believed; he received the promise *before* he was circumcised; he is the father of us all because he represents universal humanity in need of the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus.

So second, gloriously and wonderfully, Christ's death achieves the work which saves humanity by an act of sheer grace without merit on our part. Christ's death penetrates the heart of the human condition exposing its awfulness for what it is; but then opens up a way out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. For God presented Christ, in his death on the cross, as a sacrifice of atonement. What is this atonement?

In atonement, Jesus represents us by substituting for us to make us one with God. His act of substitution achieves for us forgiveness of sins and an alien righteousness whereby the wrath of God is propitiated. The forgiveness of sins: what a wonderful reality for Christians, fresh and sweet every day. But at great cost: for it required the propitiatory death of Jesus the innocent man, the Son of God. God is just but had patiently held over his just punishment for sin until, at the right time, it might fall, not on sinners but on himself in the Person of Jesus. Great injustice some might say – an innocent man dying for the wicked; but great justice proclaims Paul: for by this means, God, who is just and gracious, has decided to justify the wicked! The wages of sin are death but Christ received our wages in his death: he received the punishment of God which humanity injustice deserved. In that sacrifice, forgiveness becomes conceivable: for those who believe that Christ has absorbed into himself the hostility between sinners and a holy God, their sins are forgiven: they are reconciled.

But the grace of God does not end there; it goes deeper still. For with Christ's representative substitution comes also the gift of alien righteousness: a righteousness not my own but one which is reckoned to me so that I am treated as though I am righteous; treated *as though* I am righteous, even though I am yet a sinner. This is what God characteristically does, God who, as Paul says in chapter 4:17, calls the things that are not *as though* they were (ως οντα).

We are called to accept Christ's atoning sacrifice, his sin-bearing death by faith; and, in the same moment, receive his righteousness by faith: the happy exchange, the glorious marriage: sin for righteousness, all by faith.

This is the theme of chapter Romans Romans 4:25-6 where this representative substitution is called 'being clothed with Christ, being in Christ'. Paul tells us 'He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification'. How is resurrection to do with justification? One is not justified by being in a dead Christ – for there *is* no dead Christ; but by being in, being clothed by the once crucified now living Christ, whose righteousness, vindicated before all nations by God raising him from the dead, opens the way for sinners to be embraced by the Holy God.

Before this cross and this resurrection, in light of this gracious atonement, where is boasting? It is excluded. No boasting: no boasting in the self, the self's works, the self's markers of religious identity, the self's publications, the self's efficiency, the self's piety: because no work justifies; but Christians boast in Christ because his righteousness alone, in which we share, freely justifies. We should make no mistake: God's righteousness is not some abstract phenomenon but overturns all sorrow and all sin. Its grace penetrates humanity's existential depths; from it spring lives transformed, full of good works. Consider Abram in the sorrowful hopelessness of childlessness; or David in his sexual objectification and treacherous murder; or Paul's angry religious violence *en route* to Damascus. Does this sound sadly familiar?

But God works to justify them freely. God works to bring Isaac out of Sara, Solomon out of Bathsheba and the Gentile church out of Paul. Through sinners, and despite their sins, he brings amazing fruitfulness.

And what is their part in this? Confession of sin and joyful mission. David's confession in Psalm 51, picked up at the start of Romans 3 (3:4), proclaims God as the one who is justified when he judges. Once justified, David's contrition turns to songs of joy and a commitment to 'teach sinners God's ways' so that they 'will turn back to God' – that Zion may prosper, that the walls of Jerusalem may be built up. Justification generates joyful mission.

What David foretasted, Paul knew through his identification with the God on the cross concerning which he wrote to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

It is not the case that Jesus dies so that Paul does not have to die – a common but mistaken formulation of the atonement. NO. Jesus dies so that Paul may confidently die with him: for that death becomes not punishment but the gateway to new life. For having died, Jesus lives, and Paul lives with him. Wherever Jesus is, the believer is; in life, in death, in new life nothing can separate the church from Jesus, from the love of God. In God's love, God's creating and saving activity calls things into being which were not: stars out of nothing, Isaac out of barrenness, our righteousness out of our sin, new life out of Jesus' death.

The summons to us this evening on St Paul's feast day is to celebrate if we too have received the faith which God credits in love with righteousness through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For, as Paul says, in chapter 4 v23:

The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone,²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness— for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

'for us who believe in him'. Do we believe in God? Christian faith identifies with David and Paul in their confession and their joyful, forgiveness and reconciliation: as those who are "justified", reckoned righteous – known by God as righteous even though they are sinners.

With David and Paul, we who do trust in Jesus, we go together in mission and in praise (51:13, 18): we in the Chapel and Christian Union, we in the JCR, MCR and SCR, we in this week and 4th week and every week. Like Saul who became Paul, we too may be fruitful, joining with David building up the walls of Zion, the city of our God. Only in this way may we, together with them, be the *children* of Father Abraham, the children of God to whom we cry, by the Spirit, Abba, Abba, Abba. Amen.