

## The Adventure of Prayer

### 5. BEING JUSTIFIED

Romans 4: 17, 22 – 25

Have you ever had the experience of being accused of something, of getting into trouble for something you feel either you didn't do, or wasn't your fault, or where you thought there were good reasons for what you'd done, or hadn't done?

Does that ring any bells?

Let me tell you about something I still remember from when I was about 10 years old at prep school.

I was sitting an exam at my school. The desks were all in rows. The boy opposite was obviously struggling and getting upset: I leaned over and gave him the answer because I felt sorry for him and wanted him to pass. But I was spotted, and had to go to see the Headmaster – who accused me of cheating and gave me the cane. I remember trying to justify myself because I felt that my action arose from kindness and compassion.

If you have got into trouble – you probably also wanted to justify yourself – to put yourself right with the higher power and restore yourself to their good books, restore yourself to a good relationship which you felt had been broken.

Justification – it's what our reading from Romans talks about. Abraham was justified, counted as being just, being made right with God, because of his faith in God. Justification is partly a legal term: Paul is saying that none of us deserve God's love, deserve acceptance by God on our own merits. All of us, if put in the dock at the end of life, would be found unworthy to live for ever with God. All of us are sinners, and most of us know it (the people to worry about are the ones who pretend/think they aren't sinners). But if we put our trust in God, that same God will justify us – acquit us in the court of life, restore us to relationship with Him, and count us worthy to live with Him for ever.

Justification – it's what we all yearn for. But there's something more. Abraham didn't just believe God's promises – he lived as though he believed them, and the first thing he did was to pray: and to pray earnestly for the wicked people of Sodom, that God would spare at least some of them.

This is the last in this sermon series on prayer, and I want to end where I began – by saying that prayer is always a response, a response to the discovery that we are unconditionally loved by God – a response to the acceptance that God has justified us, accepted us, even though we feel instinctively unworthy of that love. And the response to that is to pray, to give thanks, to praise, to pray for those in need, to pray for those we don't much like or approve of. Especially those we don't much like/approve of.

Prayer is our loving response to the God who loves and accepts us. It's not something to fit round all our other preoccupations: it's not something to be left until we're really desperate. It's a daily dialogue that should become as natural as breathing. As I said at the start of this

series, the absolute heart of the Christian Gospel is the conviction that each human being is infinitely and unconditionally loved, not because we deserve it, but because that is the kind of God God is. “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” The Cross is, for the Christian, the focus, not of pain and death, but of love. This conviction is beautifully expressed in Isaac Watt’s famous hymn, “When I survey the wondrous Cross.” And I thought we would use this as our prayer to conclude this sermon series:

There’s a story about this hymn. During a University Mission at Oxford in the 1960s the then Archbishop Michael Ramsey who had been leading the Mission was speaking at the final talk in the Sheldonian – 2000 young people listening to him. At the end they all sang this hymn – singing away lustily and as we sometimes do – unthinkingly. When they got to the final verse Ramsey stopped the singing and he said: “You’ve heard this week about God’s love for you and His world, about Jesus who has died for each one of you on the Cross, about the new start the Christian life offers – If you love Jesus with all your heart – sing the last verse loudly and strongly.

If you aren’t quite sure, but want to love Jesus as your saviour, or if you feel you’re really not ready to take that step but want to want to love Jesus – then sing this last verse very quietly as a prayer – and God will answer. And 2000 young people sang quietly and prayerfully:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine...”

When I survey the wondrous Cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

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

If we are tempted to think of prayer as a dull obligation, or a tedious routine, try to reimagine it as our daily response to the recognition of all God has done for us, of his unconditional love for us, that like Abraham we are justified, restored to God’s presence and grace through our faith. And let’s remember also that as for Abraham prayer wasn’t a duty, but an adventure, a willingness to dream the impossible and wrestle with the invisible, not for himself but for others, especially those who had no-one else to pray for them, so may prayer be for us – not a chore, but an adventure, an encounter with the mysterious in the heart of the everyday. The Adventure of Prayer: I commend it to you.

As Isaac Watts so memorably puts it:

“Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Amen.