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Justifying Grace (Romans 3.21-26)

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Well, here goes! As those of you who were here last week will recall, in this season of Lent, I've set us (and therefore myself) the daunting task of exploring the theme of atonement. Christianity proclaims that something happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to enable humanity (and indeed the whole creation) to become more fully itself, more fully alive. Through the events of Easter, we are said to be brought into renewed relationship with God and each other; we're made to be 'at one', having been formerly divided, fragmented and less than ourselves. Atonement – 'at-one-ment' – is the word that describes both the outcome and the process of this 'saving' work of Christ. Our tradition has made many attempts to articulate what this really means and how it works.

Always we must remember that any talk of atonement and, relatedly, of 'reconciliation', redemption, 'forgiveness of sin' was not for the earliest Christian communities a matter of abstract belief, a line in the Creed. Rather, this talk named something that had happened to them that they wanted to share with others. And share, not just in the sense of telling people about it, but in the sense of inviting others into the same experience. They knew themselves to be differently, related differently and more freely to God, to their neighbours, to those beyond their own community – and they connected the change in them to Jesus, crucified and risen. This transformation in being is what they wanted to enable for others. It's what we too are seeking to discover and inhabit.

As I've said, there are various ways of trying to make sense of this. St Paul – as we'll see in coming weeks – tried quite a few. The passage we just heard expresses one of his key formulations. We are justified by faith, or justified by grace through faith because Jesus died for our sake. Today, I want to have a go at unpacking this understanding.

First – justification. For many of us, the notion of ‘being justified’ evokes primarily a sense of being right – or better, being ‘in the right’. I am justified if I have good reason for what I did or said. If my anger is justified, my choice justified, then no one can tell me I’m wrong or that I shouldn’t have done what I did. When I am justified I don’t have to apologise or be sorry, I don’t owe anything, I am morally out of debt and so I need feel no guilt or shame or remorse. But many scholars agree this doesn’t quite capture what Paul is talking about. For him, justification isn’t primarily about being deemed morally in the right. It has more to do with being rightly aligned with the truth of things – aligned with God and your own being. A clue to this meaning might lie in the way we speak of a page of typescript being ‘justified’, aligned.

Twentieth century American theologian, Joseph Sittler, offers a further image. Think of a carpenter trying out a new hammer. The carpenter ‘knows by the way that the hammer moves under his impetus (does it deflect to the right or the left? Does it seem balanced, properly weighted?) which of the hammers he tries is “just”’. A hammer is just when it is capable of doing the thing that hammers are meant to do. Its justification means the appropriate casting and moulding and weighting of it, so that it will “hit the nail on the head”¹. ‘Similarly, *justification* [in Paul’s sense] is the righting of the whole human person so that he or she will behave humanly – will become, so to speak, himself or herself’.² So when Paul writes, “By grace you are justified, through faith”. he doesn’t mean ‘by grace you are deemed to be in the right’. Rather, by grace you are being humanized, aligned with your deepest nature and call, freed to be who you are created to be.

So what does this mean in human experience? Over a decade ago, I faced a profoundly difficult choice in my life. According to my previous sense of myself and many of my moral commitments, the choice I ended up making was ambiguous at best, and just plain wrong at worst. But it seemed, at the time, the choice I had to

¹ Cited in Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2003), pp.107-108.

² Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, p.108.

make, the only choice I could make. I desperately wanted to know myself justified – in the sense of being ‘in the right’. I wanted to be assured that I had nothing to reproach myself with, and that neither did anyone else. I felt by turns guilty, shamed and defensive, remorseful about the hurt I’d caused and suffering from a sense of self-inflicted ‘moral injury’. I wished I could go back to my previous state of relatively assured righteousness.

Here’s the bad news. Being justified by grace doesn’t help with most of that. It doesn’t justify you in the sense of assuring you that you’re in the right; it doesn’t save you from the ambiguity of moral discernment, from damage to your self-image or the suffering of remorse. It doesn’t put things back the way they were, when you thought you were innocent, when you felt yourself basically good, and everyone else did too.

How then does it help? In essence, it assures you that you’re loved despite everything and that your life can still be worked through by God. It connects you to something that helps you bear the pain of your failure, your loss of innocence. It allows you to be released from the futile cycle of guilt and shame, so as to waken again to the possibility of meaning, a future, having a part to play. This is what the disciples found in the aftermath of Jesus’ death. They had abandoned and betrayed him, yet he returned to them in forgiveness, breathing peace. His presence with them didn’t cancel what they had done, didn’t tell them they’d been right all along or save them from remorse. What it did do was reveal that, whatever they had or had not done, God remained for them and was still actively seeking to draw them into fuller alignment with the truth of their lives. And St Paul underwent exactly the same kind of experience on the road to Damascus. Justification isn’t so much acquittal as it is about being enabled to look truly at yourself and your actions in the light of God’s love, and then to enter an ever-deepening process of being transfigured by love.

Being justified like this means there are circumstances in which you may never really know if you did the ‘right’ thing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Protestant theologian involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler, writes movingly of learning to

live with this sense of moral unfinishedness, with the vulnerability of having to entrust your goodness to God, rather than being assured of it on the grounds of your own successful moral performance.³ This is why St Paul constantly contrasts the justification given by grace, with the self-possessed righteousness that goes along with keeping the law. It's not that we're now licensed deliberately to do wrong, or to ignore the law. But, in the end, our righteousness, our capacity for goodness is sourced in our connection to God, not in our moral will and success. And even for those who think they are morally successful, not in need of grace – Paul suggests they think again. You may have avoided a catalogue of obvious 'sin'; but have you never gossiped, been unkind or unheeding, been less than you might be? All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Paul says (Rom. 3.23); and all are therefore in need of 'justification' by grace.

And this brings us to the faith bit. How do we access this 'justification' freely offered? How do we let ourselves be drawn into this ever-deepening process of being made more true, more loving? Our only access is trusting that the gift is given, that it really is for us. We can't earn it or deserve it – it's given for no reason other than that it is 'the nature of God always to have mercy'. American theologian Paul Tillich preached a famous sermon on this theme. He called it: 'You Are Accepted', and the invitation is to 'accept that you are accepted'.⁴ That's what justification by grace through faith means.

None of this implies the casual waving away of the seriousness of some of our acts and omissions. Grace is not cheap grace. It costs us something to receive it, for we cannot truly receive it until we let ourselves know our need of it; until we let go our attachment and striving to possess a righteousness of our own. To receive what God would give, we have to give up, to sacrifice, our self-sufficiency. This is humility. It's necessary not because God requires us to grovel before letting us off the hook;

³ For his theological reflection on this theme see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'God's Love and the Disintegration of the World' in *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2009), 299-338.

⁴ Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, p.108.

it's because unless we can let go the defensiveness and pride, the drive to self-justify at the heart of our need to be right, unless we can bear to be just another fragile and flawed human being, then part of us is withheld, unavailable to be loved, forgiven, and so aligned and realigned with God.

Grace costs something to receive. And to make this grace known to us, available for us, costs God something too. Paul says that 'to show' or make known his righteousness, 'his divine forbearance' which passes over sins previously committed, required the sacrifice, the giving up, of Jesus to death. We're going to explore more of what this means in coming weeks. For now, perhaps it's enough to recall that the disciples came to know the forbearance, the mercy of God, and thus the real nature of God's righteousness only when Jesus' returned to them on the other side of his death. They came to know it because he underwent betrayal, entered the maelstrom of human violence, and loved them still. 'For our sake and for our salvation he was crucified'.

I said that reflection on atonement wasn't for the earliest Christian communities a matter of abstract theological concern. Rather, it was an attempt to give language to their lived experience of being reconciled to themselves and their histories, being newly freed to live. As we continue our own reflection on this mystery, I invite you this week to let yourself touch into the tender places in your own history, your own conscience; I invite you to let yourself feel your longing to be loved and unbound, humbly bringing the whole of yourself to God in trust, asking to know God's justifying grace.