

## Sermon Trinity 17: October 4th 2020

In St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 3 verse 7, we read: 'But whatever was my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ' and later in verse 9 'not having a righteousness of my own ... but that which is through faith in Christ'

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I once remember being on the interview panel for a university post-graduate studentship. The candidate's application was very impressive, so was his *curriculum vitae* or statement about what he had achieved in previous posts. One referee wrote 'Mr X is as diligent as he is able'. It was only later we realised how subtle this reference was, because the student was neither diligent nor able. The verses which begin our Epistle this morning give us some of the best biographical details we have of the Apostle Paul. Indeed it reads almost like the *curriculum vitae* of a good Jew and, unlike the story of the research student, shows no exaggeration.

The verses tell us that:-

- a. Paul was circumcised on the 8th day.
- b. That he was born and bred an Israelite, a member of the chosen people of God.
- c. Paul could name his tribe, Benjamin, the tribe of Israel's first king and the one that remained faithful to God, when the others fell away.
- d. Paul was not only a Jew, but a Hebrew, able to speak not only Aramaic, but also Hebrew, Greek and Latin as well.
- e. We learn that Paul was a man of zeal, well respected in Jewish circles because he so respected the law, that he was prepared actively to persecute the early church.

Elsewhere in the New Testament we learn about Paul's great learning, trained as a Pharisee by Rabbi Gamaliel, possibly the greatest Jewish intellectual of the day. His letters show Paul to be a man of learning and a fine writer and held the privileged status of Roman citizenship. He could debate with kings, Jewish leaders, but at the same time earn his living as a humble artisan: a tentmaker. Despite all this and more, Paul can dismiss his achievements and gifts as being of no value compared with the knowledge of Christ and the righteousness of God. Perhaps the full import of our text is best captured by an alternative translation. 'All these assets I have written off because of Christ.'

What this personal encounter with Christ means to Paul is that he had to radically change all his values. And our passage this morning is about Paul renouncing his old ways and adopting the new. Paul is not saying that his old ways, his learning, knowledge of Judaism and the Old Testament, skills as a linguist and ability to relate to a wide range of people are wasted and will not be used again. Indeed as the Epistles and Acts of the Apostles make clear, he constantly uses all these, what is wrong is his frame of reference. This frame of reference, or world view, was informed by the related issues of keeping the law and self-advancement within Judaism. Knowledge of Christ shows that neither of these goals has any value at all. Under the Jewish law being counted righteous before God was a question of following the rules, but Paul now realised that this was merely legalistic cant. He was, after all, outwardly following the law when he persecuted the early church, but inwardly he had missed the point. Likewise his motives were selfish, self-advancement.

And now we come to the difficult bit of our text because like many other passages of

Paul it hinges on what the word righteousness means. Many commentators, including Martin Luther and many of the key figures in the 16th century Protestant Reformation, believed the notion of righteousness to be Paul's lasting positive contribution to the church. According to Luther, Paul's crucial insight was that we are saved by faith in God and the work of Christ - by faith alone (*sole fide*) not by any good works we do, or laws and rules we try to keep because like the Pharisees we will always fall short. Indeed since the sixteenth century there has been a tendency to make Paul not speak for himself, but to use either a Catholic or a Protestant voice. A traditional Catholic view contrasts with the Protestant position and holds that people are made righteous by love. God's love reaches out and it is through God's unconditional love that we are able to love our neighbours. Emphasis is placed on doing good works as a reflection of God's love. We can earn our justification through the work we do for others.

Neither of these positions, however, captures the whole truth. Paul wrote in Greek, but he was a Jew, an ex-Pharisee steeped in Hebrew language, thought and culture. When he wrote the Greek word we translate as righteousness, Paul had in mind the Hebrew Old Testament word: *sedeq*. This actually means right government, justice and care for the poor. The *saddiqim* were people who were faithful to God and his word, who both submitted to God and to his command to serve others. Hence it is now widely recognised by Catholic and Protestant scholars alike that both traditional interpretations of our text have been both right and wrong. Faith in God is all important, but this means nothing at all if it does not reflect God's values of justice, love, concern and action not only for one's personal salvation in the future, but also for the salvation of world today. This is all captured by Paul's notion of righteousness.

What justification and righteousness mean, therefore, are:-

First, accepting God's love freely given and believing that no matter what we do we will never be absent from it. As St. Paul holds when writing to the Romans 'we are never absent from the love of God in Christ Jesus.' Secondly, that having felt this love it is our duty to also love our neighbour. Paul is saying nothing more than Christ says over and over again: *'the First Commandment is this The Lord your God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is like namely this: love your neighbour as yourself.'*

Also remember the words of Jesus as recorded by St Matthew: *'then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?" 'The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." '*

What is central to the thought of Jesus and Paul is relationship. We grow in our relationship with God through being open to the Holy Spirit in faith, love, prayer, the sacraments, action in the world and how we react to and serve others. This is why strict outward observance of the law, the top show of spirituality, is no better than useless as St Paul realised. This is an equally valuable lesson for us as it was to the first people who read and heard Paul's Epistle to the Philippians.

Amen

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