

29/03/2024 Romans 5:6-11 Good Friday

Today we are remembering the suffering and death
Of Jesus of Nazareth,
The son of a Jewish carpenter,
Who was put to death by the governing Roman authorities
Outside of the city of Jerusalem in the first century.
Today we pause from our daily lives
And remember that this innocent man
Was betrayed and abandoned by his friends,
That he was mocked and spat upon,
That he was flogged and crowned with thorns,
That that he was nailed to a cross of wood,
And that even after he died,
A spear was thrust into the side of his corpse.
We remember, in other words, an ugly act of mockery and violence.
Ans yet, as people of faith, we know that this death on a cross
Revealed to us, reveals to us, a beauty
That has an attractive power like no other,
Because the cross of Christ revealed to us, reveals to us,
The love of God.

Today from God's word I will proclaim the love of God for us,
Sons of Adam and daughters of Eve.
Then I will proclaim our justification through Jesus' blood:
That we approach God as people declared innocent by him.
Then I will proclaim the reconciliation that we have
As a gift from God: That we can live in renewed harmony with God
And with each other.

Let's hear first about God's love for us.

Here's how the reading begins: **For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.**

St Paul here is talking not about what human beings can do for God
But what God has done for human beings,
About what he in love has done for us
In our spiritually weak and helpless state –
In our naturally ungodly state – estranged from God
And hostile to his word and his will.
Christ, St Paul says, died for the ungodly –
He gave his life on behalf of those who had no claim on his friendship.

Listen to how St Paul goes on: **Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.**

God proves his *love* for us.

This is a message that we need to hear

Because as we look at creation it can seem as if God is hostile –

After all, although there is great beauty in nature

But nature is also red in tooth and claw.

More than this, if we consider God's commands

According to our inborn hostility to God –

According to our from-birth lack of trust in God,

Then it can seem as if God is worse than a tyrannical dictator.

After all, from a sinful human point of view

God forbids us to do what we so often would like to do,

And then threatens us with dreadful punishments

If we fail to live up to the fullness of his law -

A law that, according to our fallen nature,

We have no hope of fulfilling.

It can seem that God is no better than commandant

Of some divine concentration camp, with us as the inmates.

And yet, what tyrant would give the life of his own son

To save not even his own people

But to save his enemies?

God shows that he is not a tyrant

He shows his love in giving his own Son

To pay the debt of our sin, to wash us clean

And make us fit for life in his kingdom,

To declare us innocent of any charge against us.

The love that God shows, in other words,

Is a self-sacrificial love, that wills our good,

That does not give us what we deserve

But freely gives us what we could never earn.

God's word makes it clear that it is Jesus' blood –

His self-sacrificial death – that give us innocence before God.

And this is the second point of today's sermon.

Listen to what St Paul writes: **Much more surely then, now that we have been *justified by his blood*, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.**

The language of justification is courtroom language,

And to receive this word it is helpful to have in our mind's eye

The image of a courtroom,

With us in the dock, and with God in the judge's seat.

St Paul is saying that Christ's suffering and death

Gives us a declaration of innocence in this courtroom.

Christian people throughout the ages have mediated

On *how* this works – on *how* Christ's suffering and death

Atone for human sin,
About *how* Jesus' blood makes us innocent before God.
There are many answers to these questions
Some more Scriptural, some less Scriptural,
And they are worth thinking about as we mature in faith.
But what we can be sure of is what Scripture proclaims
That Jesus' blood does indeed justify us
That it does make us innocent before God,
That it puts us right with God.

Today meditate on this: here and now, consider it:
In Christ God approves of you, welcomes you,
Is here to help you in your need.

And as we trust this message we see the power of it:
That it leads to a different way of life,
Not being hostile to God, or servile,
Or wavering and unsure whether God will ever approve of us.
Rather, as we trust this message we are freed
To have the unselfconscious confidence that a child has
As he or she comes to a loving father,
And we find that we can pray to God as our Father with confidence,
Knowing that he will not turn us away,
But work all things, even our suffering, for good.

And this takes us to the third point of today's sermon:
In Christ Jesus, and through his suffering and death,
We are reconciled to the Father,
And so share in the new life of Christ.
This is what St Paul writes: **For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.**

Let's think for a moment about what reconciliation means.
Let's suppose someone wrongs us:
They take something that we own,
Or they treat us rudely,
Or they speak badly about us behind our back.
And let's suppose that we, reflecting on God's kindness to us,
Don't hold it against them but forgive them,
And treat them as if they are innocent of what they have done.
From our point of view, in biblical language, they are justified.
Does this mean that we are friends with them again?
Well, not if they don't want our friendship.
They could claim that they have in fact done nothing wrong,
Or that, although we don't like what they did

They have not intention of changing their behaviour,
Or they could think that we are not sincere in our forgiveness,
And that we are playing a game of revenge with them.
In these cases there would be forgiveness from our side,
But no restoration, no harmony, *no reconciliation*.

But St Paul is saying that through the death of Christ
We are reconciled to God: we are friends again with him.
That's because as we see the love that God has for us
We are free to admit that we have broken God's laws.
As we trust that God declares us innocent
We have power from the Spirit to change how we live.
And as we see how God brings us together as his people
And grows us in love for each other,
We learn that God does not want to take revenge on us,
But share in his own nature with us
As his sons and daughters.

And listen to how St Paul ends the reading: **But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.**
For St Paul, the opposite of boasting is being ashamed.
So he is not ashamed of the Gospel,
But boasts in it: makes it his hope: considers all earthly boasts
As empty in comparison to what we have in Christ.
And indeed today we will soon sing: ***Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God; All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.***
Anything that we would present to God
As reasons for him to accept us
We are now free to let go of.

Christ's suffering and death: his blood on the cross
This is the cost of human sin, and this alone
Shows us the love of God; brings us the gift of innocence,
And reconciles us to the Father.

So, on this day let us receive the message of the cross
And see in the cross the beauty of God revealed:
A beauty that draws us to God.
And as we are drawn to the cross we are drawn together
With people from every tribe and language and nation,
So that we may love each other,
And so that God's name may be glorified in heaven and earth.
In Jesus' name. Amen.