

Self-justification's barriers

St Philip's Anglican Church

Third Sunday in Lent Year A — 12 March 2013

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Exodus 17.1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42.

'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.' So began our reading from the New Testament this morning. This is another of Paul's purple passages which require of us careful reading. At the Thursday Eucharist this week I mentioned my first foray into academic theology. I took myself off to Trinity College in Melbourne to study a Certificate in Theology. The first session was a course on the Reformation. I vividly recall a number of us sitting with a tutor, he spoke about Justification by Faith as foundational in understanding the theology of the Reformation. Now, though I am a cradle Anglican, I was not raised in the 'Reformed' school. This was a new idea to me; so I plucked up the courage to ask the tutor what was meant by 'Justification by Faith.'

Basically, with apologies to those of you well versed in the reformed school, what Paul was saying is that your salvation is not secured by keeping to the Law of Moses. Salvation is open to all, including the Gentiles, and therefore your salvation is secured by faith. You are made right with God by faith. The reformer Martin Luther looked around him at the late Medieval church and saw folk endeavouring to buy their way into heaven, filling the church's coffers, and he turned to Paul's letter to the Romans. 'No', he said, 'it is faith that will save you.' Since then of course much has been written, even in the scriptures, and we end up with the 'faith versus works' debate! You will remember James's famous letter: 'faith without works is dead', and 'show me your faith and I'll show you my works.'

How might we understand this today, we who are neither trying to keep to the Law of Moses, nor trying to buy our way into Paradise? One of the problems with the insistence on 'good works' at one extreme and 'good faith' at the other is that they both lead to a form of 'self-justification.' It is a very small step from doing lots of good things or demonstrating your faith, to seeing yourself as somehow superior . . . 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

Among the many tragedies of our day is the persistent wall building. Many of us watched with amazement at the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the Iron Curtain that had fallen over eastern Europe. It seemed a new age had dawned. But I wonder if there are more walls than ever today—and even more are planned it seems. Ultimately, behind each of them, lies an individual who is hell bent turning back the clock to some imaginary utopia. It seems that many of these wall-building leaders are involved in some form of self-justification. This is big picture stuff, but self-justification occurs at all sorts of levels, it occurs within the Church.

But if we really claim to know Jesus, if we make the even bolder claim to be 'The Body of Christ', then there can be no place for the kind of we/they that is created by self-justification. Self-justification occurs when we justify ourselves over and against someone or something else, when we build a barrier of some kind.

In today's account of Jesus with the woman at the well we can see this question of barriers and Jesus gently removing them one-by-one as they present themselves. Of course, in Jesus we discover someone who is never intimidated by the barriers of race or gender or creed. There is never ever a sense of we/they—Jesus lives out what it is to be 'Justified by Faith',

because he is justified by God.

When we look at the text, we can find just about every barrier being dealt with: Jesus, the Jewish man, speaks to the Samaritan woman. Not only does he speak with her he asks to share with her. We can only begin to imagine what was going through this woman's head! It is then revealed that not only is this person a woman and a Samaritan, but quite clearly she is a woman of some notoriety! We are told at the beginning of the story that it is about noon, and of course we know that only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. This is a person around whom a significant barrier has been erected by her community—she has to go to the well when everyone else is enjoying a siesta. So the conversation moves on to religion; Jesus very quickly demolishes yet another barrier concerning worship and then discloses himself to her, the Messiah . . . ? 'I am,' and the conversation comes to a close.

This 'I am' is important. The gospel texts we are hearing over these weeks are those which would have been foundational in the Christian formation of those about to be baptised at Easter in the early church. They remain foundational for us today in our lives of faith. They help us understand the nature and mission of the person of Jesus. Today's text speaks to us about the boundaries that we continue to erect around matters of gender, marital status, religion and more. On a far larger scale, these barriers are being created by leaders who want to create communities in their own image. Jesus the 'I am' is the antithesis of all that divides. Today's reading from Exodus concluded with the Israelites asking 'is God with us or not?' This question is definitively answered by Jesus today in his presence, actions, and words.

Paul tells us: Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God. The boundaries we erect are so often all about self-justification, in which there is no peace. We are told that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are yet did not sin. I am sure that we can easily paraphrase that to say that Jesus was tempted to self-justification (think back to the wilderness experience) but never yielded because his mission was to bring peace, to do the will of the one who sent him, the one who justifies him.

I'm not sure that we will ever be free of the sin of self-justification in this world, I for one will forever be tempted to compare myself with others. But what a wonderful community we can create if we can just lay aside the rivalry and competition that create the barriers and the labels that divide. Defining ourselves against no one at all . . . that is a sure sign of a real knowledge of Jesus, the 'I Am.' Amen.