

Believing and Belonging

Readings: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 & John 3:1-17

Intro

Good morning everyone. Well, today is the second Sunday in Lent, a time when we prepare ourselves for the great celebration of our faith at Easter. At the recent diocesan camp Bishop Justin called us a wilderness people, on the journey but not yet at our destination, and whether we think in the short term of our journey towards Easter or long term in the context of our life journey we all need what Justin called a Sabbath rest, a time when we can reconnect with God in a deeper way – an oasis, if you like, when we spend time listening to what God has to say to us. One of the ways we do this is hearing God speak to us through his word, the Bible, and that is what we are going to do now.

Let's pray before we begin.

Prayer

Lord, may our minds be open to hear and understand what you are saying to us this morning; may our hearts embrace it; and may our wills be ready to obey your word. Through Christ our Lord, Amen

Today we are going to look at our two Lectionary readings: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 and John 3:1-17. We are going to focus particularly on how we get to belong to God's family and how we live as members of his wilderness people.

Romans 4

We are going to start with the letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. As Susan said last week, Roman's isn't always easy to understand but Paul wasn't writing to a group of theologians or biblical scholars he was writing to a group of ordinary Christians. Some may have come from a Jewish background and have known the OT Scriptures really well, but that may not have been the case for Christians with a Gentile background. Some may have been wealthy and well-educated but others would have been slaves or part of the urban poor who lived in over-crowded tenement buildings. But they were ordinary Christians, so with the help of God's Holy Spirit let's see what Paul has to say to ordinary Christians like us today.

I'm a great fan of Phil and Kirstie and their programme: 'Location, location, location,' and for me location is also an important key in understanding a Bible passage. We call it context, but it means the same thing. So, where is Romans 4 located in terms of Paul's letter, and how does it fit in with the big-picture presented by the Bible as a whole.

Last week, Susan talked about the 'very good' at the end of Genesis 1 where God sees the whole of his creation, including humankind, existing in complete harmony with itself and with God, its creator. As we know that's not how things are today; humans chose to go their own way, and that close relationship with God was broken. Adam and all humanity after him, have disobeyed God and sinned, and this is the point Paul gets to in Romans 3 – "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (3:22-23).

So, instead of walking with God in the cool of the day Adam and Eve hid themselves. They had broken their relationship with God. But our God is a relational God and the big-picture story of the Bible is about what God has done to put things right. The Bible does indeed look forward to a time when that harmony will be fully restored in the renewed creation of heaven

and earth. In the passages we are looking at this is sometimes referred to as the Kingdom of God or as eternal life since it begins now but continues on into the age to come. But the process has already begun. In his second letter to Corinth Paul says that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation - God is making us new people to be part of his new creation.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves and we need to go back to Romans 4 and God's choice of Abraham to start a new family line as part of his plan of reconciliation.

Most of us have some idea of the story of Abraham – how God spoke to a pagan city-dweller from Ur in Chaldea, modern Iraq, and called him to go to a land he would show him. There God promised Abraham that he will be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4), a point that Paul picks up in Romans 4:16-17 when he says to the Christians in Rome: “He [Abraham] is the father of us all.” You Christians in Rome, Paul is saying, you are now part of Abraham's family, part of the covenant people of God. That could have been a surprise to the Gentiles among them, although the Jews would have prided themselves on being descended from Abraham because that's what made them God's chosen people. They were born into it. Nowadays we don't usually think of ourselves as being Christians because we are born in a so-called Christian country, although I did hear the other day about an American who was asked about whether some friends of his were Christians and he replied – of course they are, they're Americans!

So do Christians have to become Jews? Paul deals with this problem right at the beginning of the chapter. In v 1 he asks: “What shall we say then? Have we found Abraham to be our father in the fleshly sense?” In other words – are we part of God's family because we can claim to be descended from Abraham, - and if not then in what sense is Abraham our father? Good question and Paul answers it by taking us back to the beginning and encouraging us to look at Abraham as an example.

How did Abraham himself become part of this covenant people of God? Was it by works, by obeying the Law as some Jews, especially the Pharisees thought? Can we by our good behaviour get into God's good books? We may know that the answer is no we can't – but that doesn't stop some of us from trying or at least having that attitude as far as others are concerned. For example, I was at a meeting the other day when someone said: “God cannot bless a church when there is an adulterer sitting in the pews.” I don't know the background to her statement but what do you think about that? [pause] Now, we know that God regards adultery as a sin, and I am in no way condoning that behaviour, but would God want that person to be asked to leave the church, or to be allowed to stay? Hopefully if he stayed then he might hear the gospel and have the opportunity to respond to it? What do you think?¹ Remember Jesus' response to the women caught in adultery (John 8): Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone. We cannot behave ourselves into the family of God so let's not condemn ourselves or others when we fail. Instead, repentance, confession, forgiveness, acceptance is the pattern we follow.

So, if Abraham did not become the founding father because he was justified by works, on what basis did he receive the promises? V4 “What does Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Paul is quoting Genesis 15:6 here but we

¹ As I have said, I do not know the circumstances that gave rise to that statement. The question of church discipline also needs to be considered (1Cor 5:11-13) so discernment is needed in specific cases.

may need to unpack that a bit. In particular I want to look at three words Paul uses: credited, righteousness and believe.

‘Credited’ is fairly straight forward. It’s an accounting term and most of us are familiar with the idea of a sum of money being credited to our bank account. The point Paul is making here is that this is not the equivalent of our weekly wage or salary – it’s not something we have earned, it is not ours by right, it is a gift from God. A gift that is also called grace – a gift that originates with God. We belong in God’s family not as a result of our own efforts but because of something that God has done as we will see when we look at John’s Gospel.

Next we need to look at the word that is usually translated as righteousness or justification. What does it mean to be reckoned as righteous? Much has been written about this since Luther famously recognized that he had been justified by faith and I do not intend to go into all the ins and outs of this today. One of the problems is that we do not have in English a word that encompasses all that is meant by the Hebrew *sedeq*, or the Greek equivalent *dikaiosynē*. The really important thing to remember is that the word does not so much mean moral perfection as being found ‘in the right’ as a result of a court decision and also, following on from that, having a right standing in the community. The two go together. God declares that we are blameless or acquitted and so the relationship between us is restored. Or as Paul says in Romans 5:1: “The result is this: since we have been declared ‘in the right’ on the basis of faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus, the Messiah.” However, it is important to remember that for the Jewish people, and for us as Christians, being declared ‘in the right’ was never an end in itself, it was only a necessary part of restoring our relationship with God, the relationship that got broken back in the garden of Eden. One way I like to think about it is when we have had some sort of stuff up in a relationship but we have recognized it and tried to put it right, then we might say to our friend: “Are we good?” and hopefully our friend will reply: “Yes, we’re good.” That’s what I think God wants us to hear him saying to us – “because of what Jesus has done, we’re good.”

We also see the relationship side of things in the way James writes about Abraham. He says: “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness – and he was called a friend of God, a friend of God.” James 2:23. Does that remind you of something that Jesus said about his disciples? “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead I have called you friends.” John 15:15.

But before we get carried away with lots of warm fuzzy feelings let’s remember that Jesus also said: “You are my friends if you do what I command (15:14) and “This is my command: love each other (15:17). Or as Susan has on the bottom of her emails: You know that “Love your neighbour as yourself” stuff? I meant it. God.

That brings me to the last word I want to look at in this passage: ‘believe.’ “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” What does this mean?

Well, when I was a young Christian people would often ask if a particular preacher or minister was ‘sound.’ What they meant was did he (and it was almost exclusively he in those days) believe the right things – usually what they as a good evangelical believed. What they meant by believing was agreeing to a series of statements about the faith. Now, there is nothing wrong in that – most Sundays we recite the Creed as a statement of our beliefs, and in these days of ‘alternative truth’ it is more important than ever to know what we believe and why. But I don’t think that was what Paul had in mind here. It wasn’t about Abraham being

some sort of mastermind whose chosen topic was God. I think that for Abraham believing was more a deep down trust in God. Abraham went out not knowing where he was going – he had to trust God. This is pretty amazing when we remember that when God first called him Abraham may not have known much about who this God might be. Nor did he know what it might mean to follow him and live in conformity with God's ways. In fact the story of Abraham is the story of a man who very often learns by his mistakes as God leads him, tests him and transforms him. It is very much how God deals with each one of us when he calls us and asks us to live a life of faith trusting in him. In this way, says Paul in v 17, Abraham becomes our father because he is the father of all who have faith in God.

So far we have looked at Romans 4 and seen that God wants us to be part of his new family made up of both Jews and Christians who have Abraham as our father because, like him, we have decided to trust God and see where that leads us.

John 3

How does that compare with what we find in the story of Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus, we are told is a Jewish leader and a Pharisee so if anyone was relying on being born into the right family or on keeping the Law it would be Nicodemus. But I think that, like the rich young ruler in Luke 18 he wasn't sure if that was enough. The young man in Luke 18 asks Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Nicodemus doesn't even get that far. – Jesus gives him an answer before he has even asked the question! "Let me tell you the solemn truth," says Jesus, "Unless someone has been born from above, they won't be able to see God's kingdom." And then when Nicodemus doesn't get it Jesus more or less repeats it: "I'm telling you the solemn truth. Unless someone has been born from water and spirit, they can't enter God's kingdom."

What is going on here? Well we are still talking about belonging but the focus has shifted from being part of a new family to being part of a new kingdom. A kingdom that has already begun and which will continue on into eternity. How do we become part of that kingdom – by being born from above – that is by an action that originates in heaven - that is with God, – and which involves both cleansing with water and an inner transformation by the Spirit. This is something that Jesus expects Nicodemus as a teacher to know about because it's all there in Ezekiel as a part of God's promise to renew his people (Ezekiel 36:25-27). As I said before, God is making us new people to be part of his new creation.

But Nicodemus is still stuck on the how – so Jesus gives him another OT illustration, this time from Exodus. When the Israelite camp was invaded by snakes Moses was told to make a bronze serpent and hold it up so that everyone that looked at it would be healed and not die. Now, Jesus says, everyone that looks to me will have eternal life. In the well-known words of John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Or as Tom Wright translates it: This, you see, is how much God loved the world: enough to give his only, special Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age." It wasn't the bronze serpent itself that saved the Israelites but the saving power of God that lay behind it. In the same way God gave his Son so that all who believe will be saved. It is God who saves the world through the death and resurrection of his Son Our response is to believe. In these verses in John 3 we see clearly the link between believing and belonging.

But there is one more thing that I want to leave with you. Abraham trusted God and went out not knowing where he was going or what the future held for him. Jesus says that the wind

blows where it wants to and we don't know where it's coming from or where it's going to. That's what it's like with someone who is born of the Spirit. Some of us were able to hear Bishop Justin describe some of the ways in which God has led him along paths that were not always easy to follow. But as Spirit-born people of God are **we** listening to the Spirit? Are **we** prepared to be led into unexpected and maybe uncomfortable situations, or to embark on a journey not knowing quite where it will take us? That's the challenge I am going to put to myself as well as to you as we journey through this season of Lent, or indeed our life's journey, as God's wilderness people.