

Abraham

Today's readings pile up a load of good, Evangelical Christian words into a few paragraphs that provide reassurance that we are going to heaven. Words like, faith, righteousness and justification. But when those words are used by well-meaning, bible-thumping, Shakespearean-linguaged, evangelistic super-Christians – rarely are they accompanied by the word, Covenant. And yet it is within the context of Covenant that these most treasured of Christian words find their proper meaning.

And of course, we all know what faith is, what righteousness is, what justification is: Faith, we know, is the ability to perform the mental gymnastics necessary to con yourself into believing stuff you know isn't really true. Righteousness means that you don't drink, smoke, swear or behave inappropriately. And justification – to be justified means that, before God, it is 'just-if-I'd' never sinned.

But today's readings reveal that these words, these roots of our Christian identity, are to be found in the context of a covenant that God makes with Abraham. And that covenant is the name of a story that unfolds throughout the pages of Scripture.

The story of Scripture so far, is that God has created a good world – and that world has been defiled by human beings. In Adam and Eve, human beings chose to live as if there were no God, chose to ignore God – and the result has been growing violence in the earth. (That goes against received wisdom of our age, when most wars tend to be blamed on religion – but I suspect that if you talk to a real historian, you might well hear a different story). Then a flood comes and wipes everyone out. But the problem of evil is not solved. The world remains a violent, unpleasant place. A long way from the good creation God intended. And so, God chooses to call an individual – at a particular time and place, God intervenes and chooses one man. And through this one man, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

And the one man's name was Abram. And so we have to picture a very elderly man, living in ancient Palestine, in the late Bronze Age – I guess around fifteen centuries before Christ. We heard that Amram was ninety nine years old, probably not hungry for adventure. But God calls him from his reclining armchair, to walk before him all his days. And he says to this elderly, childless couple, that their offspring would eventually number many nations. It was a ridiculous call, with a ridiculous promise but Abram obeys, and becomes Abraham.

I'm not quite sure how modern, righteous people cope with the idea that Abraham already had a son, Ishmael, through another woman – who wasn't his wife. The great hero of the faith was not a good, monogamous, righteous man. But – we can forgive him that, because it was the olden days. And God doesn't seem to mind, because he also promises to bless Abraham's son, Ishmael. But it was Abraham's readiness to take God at his word that seems to have made him the ultimate hero of the faith – or the hero of faith.

But the context is this covenant that God has made with Abraham – so it is worth revisiting these Christian words in light of the basic covenant that God makes with Abraham.

Faith:

So what does faith mean in this context. Of course, everyone has faith – in one way or another. Anyone who climbs on a bus has faith that it will carry you to the destination written

on the front of the bus. You believe and you hope that sooner or later, the bus will get you there. So you take action based upon your beliefs. That is the real meaning of faith. Not necessarily anything religious. Although in Scripture, the words used for faith also refer to faithfulness. That is – that you remain faithful to the promises that have been made. That you stay on the bus even if it does not go the way you were expecting.

That's what we see with Abraham. Faith was not, as Mark Twain had said, the ability to con yourself into believing stuff you know ain't true. Nor is it some vague belief in the supernatural. Eighty percent of people in Britain believe in God ... But faith is not some mental capacity to accept there may exist a world beyond this one. Faith, in the context of the covenant, is the readiness to put your life on the line for the sake of promises made to you. In other words, faith presupposes action.

Righteousness:

Abraham believed, and God credited that belief to him as righteousness. We tend to think of righteousness as meaning the same as holiness, or purity or good character or something. But if you read enough about the Abraham story, you see that he doesn't score too highly on any of those things. Throughout Scripture, the word for righteousness and the word for justice is the same word.

It's interesting that in our modern translations, righteousness always seems to be the favoured word. We live in an individualistic age, and righteousness is regarded as a personal, individual quality to do with our own personal conduct. And so the translations we have often reflect that individualism. But how would some of our favourite passages sound if we substitute the word justice for righteousness? Our entire theology might sound rather different. Because righteousness just sounds like a static quality, whereas justice – like faith – presupposes action! Listen to some of our favourite verses should sound:

1: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? Who want to be much better individual Christians? No - Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, they shall be filled.

2: Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness? Persecuted because they are good moral Christians in an immoral world? No. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

3: The prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective? Powerful and effective because he is a good man so God is more likely to listen to him? No prayers of a man of justice are powerful and effective, why? Because he will be praying about the right things with the right motives.

Righteousness, within the context of covenant – the old and the new covenant – presupposes action.

Justification:

Faith presupposes action. Righteousness presupposes action. And Justification presupposes action: we tend to think of justification as being made right with God – so that, at the end of time when we are stood before his seat of judgement, we will be made right in God's eyes. And that does seem to be a by-product of what Paul means by the word. But the context is the covenant. That the world is in a mess. That injustice is everywhere – and it is through a

particular people, the descendents of Abraham, that God is putting the world to rights. And justification simply means, putting things to rights.

So, for those who claim to be justified – it doesn't mean that our eternal status as hell-worthy sinners is replaced, by means of some spiritual transaction, with an eternal status of being right with God. To be justified means that we become part of the people through whom God has covenanted to put the world to rights. Once again, justification presupposes action. And it talks of the kind of action.

The covenant says that God is not abandoning this world to its injustice, but through these descendents of Abraham, the world is being put to rights by God. And to be justified is to be part of this people and part of this process. And that is why it is faith that makes us descendents of Abraham. That is the major point of the Gospels and this letter of Paul. That it is not our blood line that makes descendents of Abraham: think of John the Baptist – what did he say to those who came to be baptised? Do not say to yourselves we have Abraham for our father – you can make descendants of Abraham out of these stones! Think of Paul, in this reading, it is not being part of the Jewish people, this people who stand on the law of Moses, that makes you a descendant of Abraham. It'd all people and all nations who are part of this covenant with Abraham. Having the right blood line or moral code has nothing to do with being justified, with being part of God's way of putting the world to rights.

Conclusions:

Faith, and righteousness and justification – when placed within the context of the covenant, all speak of being part of God's purpose to put the world to rights. And he does that ultimately by means of his Son, who is the climax of the covenant. It this Jesus to whom we are called to be faithful, continuing his mission of putting the world to rights, and this Jesus who calls us to be a part of that. In Christ then, we have faith, we are made righteous and we are justified.

This is one of the themes that we will take up in Disciples on the Way this afternoon, as we explore the meaning of Evangelism. Evangelism is the invitation to remake the world, it is a call to action, to put the world to rights in a particular way. In the way that Jesus shows and enables.

Being part of this covenant people commits us to a way of being, a hunger and thirst for justice, it may sometimes mean being persecuted for the sake of Justice. It will mean that our prayers are covenant prayers, as we are drawn into God's own vision for a just world, and our prayers are then powerful and effective.

“What marks a man is the way that he responds to the difficulties and hardships that beset him.”

Having faith, desiring righteousness and being justified do not free us from difficulty. They enable us to engage the difficulties that inevitably we will face, in a way that is consistent with the covenant promises that are made to Abraham, that are transformed in the New Testament, and that by God's grace can shape the lives that we lead today as we follow the God who loved the world so much he sent his only Son.