

Sunday 14 June 2026 – Trinity Season (1) – Janet Marley – Heart-warming faith

Janet Morley sees Paul's 'justification by faith' as a radical outpouring of God's love into our hearts.

Readings:

Luke 18:9-14. Romans 5:1-8

Sermon: Heart-warming Faith – Janet Morley

‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’

Justification by faith. The rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation, which changed the churches profoundly. Peace with God, not through adherence to the Law; not through pious religious behaviour; not through generous donations to the church or even to the poor; and not through our own efforts to do good works in the world. *Justification by faith*, and faith alone, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Number 11 of the 39 Articles of Religion in the Church of England, which every clergy person has to formally, if a little elliptically, swear by before their ordination and whenever they are inducted and licensed to a church. The epistle to the Romans, especially this chapter which we heard a section of today, carries a weighty history of reception and interpretation within the Christian churches over time. It's a passage that is deeply important to and loved by our evangelical sisters and brothers. The turbulent priest Martin Luther, whose challenge to the selling of indulgences in the Roman Catholic church of his time kicked off the Reformation, immersed himself in Romans. He thought it was so important that we should ideally learn by heart all 16 chapters of it, so as to meditate on it daily. You'll be relieved to know that I don't expect to convince St Marks' congregation today of the merits of this recommendation. But neither do I think we should always swerve getting to grips with one of the major emphases of St Paul, so here goes.

Well, what is justification? We immediately hit a problem of translation. In Greek, and in the Hebrew word that underlies it, just one basic root word emerges in many different forms to convey something that English requires at least two different roots for: all the words connected with 'right', 'righteous', 'upright' – and also the words associated with 'just', 'justice', 'justified'. In English we have to keep swapping the roots, since we cannot begin our translation of chapter five, as the Greek does, in a single word, thus: 'we having been righteoused'. But alternatives introduce problems of association in English. Our word 'justified' can mean 'I was right all along'. Our word 'justification' can mean 'a very good excuse or defence'. Neither of these thoughts are remotely helpful here.

One of the commonest explanations of justification is that we are put into right relationship with God through a kind of judicial process. It conveys a sense of being officially acquitted in a court of law, even though our sins have clearly made us guilty. Through the death of Christ 'we are now justified through his blood'; that it is, it is argued, he took on himself the punishment of suffering and death that we really deserved. Somehow this satisfies God's justice and his wrath against sin, and we are delivered as if we were innocent. You can make this case from Romans 5, but I can't go with this explanation. Obviously, the work of the Trinitarian God in our redemption is profoundly mysterious and a metaphor can only go so far. But, at a human level, a father requiring the death of his innocent son is a monstrous metaphor. And if

we just stick with the forensic courtroom image, the substitution of one person to undergo the punishment really due to another is not something to celebrate but a miscarriage of justice.

I think we have to start in a different place. Looking at the wide range of meanings that can be conveyed by the Hebrew word for righteousness, I was fascinated to note that they start with a very basic meaning in the everyday world. It can be used to describe a 'just' weight; it is about how we deal with each other in trade or barter, to show integrity in our weights and measures. So a measure can be not just 'accurate' but actually 'righteous', because it has integrity; it is based on what is real. This is typical of Hebrew thought, that every part of common life and how we treat others, has a profound moral dimension that God cares about; and it is about *reality*.

I think the gospel reading helps us somewhat with this, the little parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. It's so familiar, and because we are aware of many heated arguments in the gospels between Jesus and the Pharisees, we automatically know the Pharisee will end up looking bad. But I think that Jesus' first hearers would have been completely astonished, if not scandalized, by this parable. Quite a lot of our reaction to the Pharisees is based on an unthinking antisemitism which I'm sorry to say the Christian churches over the centuries have done very little to discourage. Pharisees in Jesus' time were popular. They were teachers of the law and cared about it deeply, yes. But so did Jesus. He is also called rabbi, and some think he might even have been a Pharisee. Certainly he was close, and I think the passionate nature of some of his battles was due to the fact that these are insider arguments. (Look at today's Labour party for a similar flavour!) Pharisees cared about the poor and lived and taught among them. And it is simply not true, as many preachers allege, that there was a clear official agreement about how the Law should be fulfilled and that Jesus overturned this. There was hot debate, which Jesus took part in. The detailed codification of the Law in rabbinic Judaism didn't take place until after Jesus' lifetime, after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple made local synagogues gatherings the new locus of developing Judaism.

And what about tax collectors? Well, they were not lovable rogues or rather sad, misunderstood delinquents who were unjustly outcast from Jewish society. And certainly not blameless civil servants. They were active collaborators with the Roman occupation. They bid for tax franchises and then were in a position to enrich themselves by extorting from the poor whatever tax they liked. They were wealthy and exploitative, a bit like loan sharks. I don't think any of us would have been thrilled to be asked to associate with them or admire them or sit next to them in church. How on earth does this man go home '*justified* rather than the other'? Well, I grant you, the Pharisee's prayer wasn't impressive. It may have been accurate about his devotion to the Law, but it was all about him and his sense of secure righteousness. He was busy justifying himself. But the prayer of the tax collector was the real thing. It's not that he grovelled, it's that he told the truth. A rich man acknowledging the truth about the source of his wealth: that's radical reality. Like the conversion of Zacchaeus, it's a well-nigh incredible, unprecedented event. Truly a sign of God's kingdom breaking in. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant by 'justified'.

So let's return to St Paul, and what he might have meant by justification. Now we are completely clear that Paul himself was a Pharisee, and although his position about the Law was indeed radical, he was immersed within it, and its delight in righteousness. He didn't carefully define his terms because he wasn't writing an academic dissertation, but a genuine letter. It seems that the community in Rome had both Jewish and Gentile Christians within it, and so the burden of his argument before this chapter is all about how, in the purposes of God, the promise to the Jews and the promise to the wider Gentile world, can be reconciled. In doing so, he goes right back to Abraham, who was the recipient of God's promise even though he

preceded the giving of the Law with Moses. His righteousness therefore didn't depend on adherence to that later Law but was a matter of his faith. Paul therefore sees Jewish and Gentile Christians being on a level playing field. But for both communities equally, the entry into a new covenant with God is now the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So Paul is really not, I think, discussing a cool forensic courtroom situation about who has to take the punishment for human sin. He is talking covenant. Yes, he does go on to talk about delivery from the wrath of God, but before we clutch our liberal pearls, I want to say that God's wrath against what is evil is a good thing. The whole bible shows us a deity who genuinely abhors what is evil, and who is offended by piety that is accompanied by the exploitation of the poor and the perversion of justice – matters which certainly have never gone out of fashion in our world. This was an extraordinary religious teaching in the ancient world, which was full of deities who really wanted to be worshipped by human beings but were not that bothered about dreadful behaviour towards other humans. And the bible shows us a God who makes a covenant of love with his people, being wounded and indeed angry when his love and commitment are betrayed by our failure to do justice and love mercy. This passionate covenant God, who gives up his wrath not because someone has finally paid the price he demands, but because he cannot bear to sustain it against his beloved people, is the God who lies behind Paul's words.

Look at the *tone* of what he says. Not that we have been judged and found wanting, but that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts'. Yes, 'Christ died for the ungodly', but it isn't just about our sin, it is because of God's compassionate perception of our weakness. God's motivation is explored in very human terms, and it isn't that of a judge weighing up a sentence of punishment, and who must bear it. It's appealing to us to identify what could persuade us to such sacrificial love that we would risk our lives for a good person or cause. Then he points out that even without such goodness, God in Christ sacrificed himself for us – suffering and then defeating the real consequences of human evil. It is a mystery of which we can barely speak...

Now in case we might be worried that to embrace justification by faith might mean throwing out the importance of good works and activism for justice, let me reassure you. We can hardly accuse that tireless traveller, writer, preacher and community builder St Paul of failing to engage in activism; he wasn't exaggerating the sufferings, the endurance, the test of character and the indomitable hope in his ministry. And to return to Luther, and consider his Preface to the book of Romans, there is some of the most glorious language you will find about the sheer joy of inhabiting the fullness of the law and active good works, not through dogged obedience because we must, or from a crippling sense of guilt, or indeed by striving to justify ourselves through being ultra good, but because the outpouring of God's love in our hearts causes us to delight in it truly, and to fulfil it in a way that is impossible just by our own efforts.

I want to end with the story of another equally driven, activist preacher whose secondary conversion will have been celebrated at Pentecost by our Methodist friends. John Wesley was certainly devoted to righteousness. At university, he formed a society called the Holy Club (I wonder how well that went down with some of his fellow students?) He and his brother Charles were ordained and went as missionaries to America, but that didn't go well. They attracted the name of 'Methodists' originally as a kind of insult, because they were so meticulous about a routine of piety. Something was missing, and this is his account of what changed:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an

assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

May we all have such a warming of our hearts. Let us pray:

O God, before whose face
we are not made righteous
even by being right:
free us from the need
to justify ourselves
by our own anxious striving,
that we may be abandoned
to faith in you alone,
through Jesus Christ,

Amen.

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