

Genesis 6:9 – 22; 7:24; 8:14 - 19
Psalm 111
Romans 1:16 – 17; 3:22b - 28
Matthew 7:21 – 28

Living in the covenant of grace

Last Saturday it was the day for commemorating John Wesley's experience of a powerful transformation in his understanding of the Gospel. Wesley was at a gathering where Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans was being read. There is more than a symbolic link between Luther's preface to Romans and the renewal of Wesley's faith. Both found transformation and life through Paul's understanding of God's gift to us in Christ. Today we have heard the very passage from Romans, which transformed Luther and brought forth a gift of wisdom that has affected many, including Wesley.

The breakthrough for Luther came when he understood what Paul meant by the *righteousness of God*, mentioned in the first part of the reading (Ch 1:17). At first Luther associated being righteous with an angry and punitive attitude. "I hated the righteous God who punished sinners," he said. But later Luther came to see that the righteousness of God is not punitive but gracious. The *righteousness of God* means that God offers to all, without distinction, an undeserved gift of acceptance. This comes without conditions, regardless of our faults, our waywardness or our fumbling ideas of faith and belief. This insight involved Luther in a dramatic shift in imagination. He began to see in scripture a meaning that had previously been hidden to him, and this discovery became central for his life and work.

What Luther discovered is summed up in the term "justification" - a legal term meaning: "to put right". What it means is that the relationship between God and us has been put right from God's side on God's initiative, through Jesus Christ. This is a gift to us that comes freely from the heart of God who has chosen to love the whole world. As Paul says: *...For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ... (Rom. 3:22b-24a)*

This gift of God does not in any way depend on any quality or merit in us. This means faith is not an achievement of ours, a means by which we gain acceptance in God's eyes. Rather, faith is our acceptance of God's unconditional acceptance of us. This does involve a response on our part. It involves the willingness to enter into a relationship of trust in God, the giver of such a great gift.

The consequence is that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are drawn into a process of responding to Jesus Christ and being transformed into his likeness. In this way his life of justice and love offered to God is extended in the world through all who respond in faith. In other words, the relationship God sought with us in Jesus Christ becomes operative through us. Through God's gift and our acceptance the love

of God begins to reclaim the world, humanizing it according to the pattern of Christ.

On Late Night Live, Philip Adams was talking with Harold Bloom, the famous American professor of Literature from Yale. Knowing Bloom is Jewish, Adams asked if he still practiced the faith. Bloom prefaced his answer by saying that Judaism was not about doctrines: it was about keeping the Covenant. Bloom said: “I no longer keep the Covenant. But I am still interested in YHWH”.

It was a sad moment, but one many would understand because of the way belief has been eroded in our time. What does it mean to live according to a covenant? It means trustfully living within the boundaries of a relationship. Marriage is our closest example, except for one thing: marriage is a relationship that is based on the mutual response of two people to each other. In the covenant of faith the relationship is initiated by God and responded to by us. Not keeping the Covenant does not change God or God’s offer to us, but it does change the way we live in the world.

In the Gospel for today Jesus is concluding the Sermon on the Mount. He sees two groups of people, the first of whom look as though they are living in relationship with God: they call upon the Lord, they prophesy and cast out demons. We would say, they affirm the Creed, they preach powerful sermons and are known for healing and restorative works in the world. However when the final showdown comes they are revealed as having the appearance of faith, not its reality. They used the right words but in the end did not live in a relationship of trust with the one to whom these pointed. This group is compared with those who build on solid foundations because they hear Jesus’ words and do them. The harsh verdict against the first group was pronounced by Jesus, himself regarded as an outsider for his friendship with tax collectors and sinners, whose teaching and deeds were recognized as being without peer or precedent.

In turning to the words from Matthew it seems that we have passed on from grace and now are confronted once more with judgment: but the two are part of one whole. The Jesus who ate with sinners and called tax collectors to discipleship embodied the offer of new life to us. God’s movement towards us in him is both grace and judgment. There are those who follow him for appearance sake, and there are those who follow him with mind and heart.

What Jesus is seeking in Matthew can be seen in Noah, a blameless man who, when no one else was interested to do so, made the call of God the rock on which he built his life. Noah’s faithfulness made the covenant operative. Like the person who built his house on the rock – Noah endured the deluge. And thanks to Noah the new start God sought to create for the world became a reality for him and his family, and the many who followed after him.

These texts make us an offer: they call us to live with a gift. The question is: do those who hear this opt to live in a relationship of trust with the giver of this gift? What separates the wise and foolish builders in Matthew is the wholehearted *doing* of the words of Jesus. A life that embodies the acceptance offered in him.

We can see that Luther and Wesley were affected by these understandings, but does this have any relevance to our time?

One writer says that a modern example of how justification has been applied is the struggle of blacks for justice in America and South Africa. It was the preaching of Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu, which addressed the negative evaluation of blacks on the basis of the gospel affirmation that God has chosen to see all as worthy. This theological insight was translated into a program for social change that aimed to restore human dignity to one section of the population. It is salutary to see this, as the Aboriginal flag flies on the Town Hall to honor National Reconciliation week in Australia.

As good Uniting Church people who continue to be interested in justice, it is worth remembering that we have a reason for being interested relief for the downtrodden. It has nothing to do with our preferences or our prejudices. It comes from who we believe God is for us. God who has gifted the world with acceptance in Jesus Christ, this enables us to see that all are worthy and offered a new beginning in life. And nothing less than all will do. In response to what God offers us, those who aim to keep the covenant can do no less than work to see that others are enabled to have the benefit of this gift.