

God's promises! I mentioned them last time I preached and affirmed that they could be trusted absolutely. Our passage from Romans reflects on this so I'd like to start there and see where we end up.

In a lot of ways, Paul here is doing the perfect job of a preacher. He is taking what was known and written in the scriptures (our Old Testament) and using that to teach something to his "modern day" listeners. Let's see if I can do the same.

Paul is starting with something that, to the Jews among the recipients, was an absolutely basic part of their history, the calling of Abraham and the start of the Israelite nation. We've come in part way through Paul's "sermon" but the starting point of Paul's argument is taken from Genesis 15

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

'Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,  
your very great reward.'

But Abram said, 'Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.'

Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.' He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Abraham was given a promise here that, despite being childless at the age of 100, he would have so many descendants that no one would be able to count them. To the Jews, a whole nation that were counted among those descendants, this was a pivotal moment in their history. Paul's point though is that it was not Abraham's actions that saw him recognised as righteous, but his faith in God and belief that God would fulfil the promise he had just been given.

What was true for Abraham all those years ago was also true for Paul's listeners 2000 years later. God will recognise them as righteous not because of what they have done but because of what they have believed. Paul wrote to them "The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." (23-24). That was true in Paul's time and it's just as true for us now, 2000 years later. Words written 4000 years ago have been used to encourage Christians through all the years since Jesus was here on Earth.

When we put our faith in God, the God that raised Jesus back to life on that first Easter morning, we were accepted as righteous in his sight. That righteousness came at a price, Jesus had to suffer and die, but it was a price he willingly paid and has allowed us to be justified by God.

This passage has not just been used as an encouragement, but also to help with mission. When I was much younger I lived in Slough which, like Keighley, has a large Muslim population. Someone at my church there was producing some literature to help with mission among the Muslims and I offered to help typing up some of the text. This chapter from Romans featured heavily in the arguments that were being made (since Muslims also consider Abraham their ancestor) that what was true for the Jews, and the Christians that came out of Judaism, could be equally true for them.

Paul goes to some lengths to point out that it was not what Abraham did, his actions, that caused him to be counted as righteous but his faith. However, Abraham's faith led him to do what God told him to do, circumcision and offering Isaac being the 2 biggest challenges he faced, but it was not

through doing these things that he was justified. Again, what was true 4000 years ago is still true today. We can not earn our righteousness. We can not earn our way into heaven. However, our gratitude to God for what he has already done for us should lead us to doing what he wants.

So we have been justified. We were justified through Jesus' death when we believed that he came and died to save us. But, not only *were* we justified but we *are* justified, it's ongoing. It is not something that can easily, if at all, be lost while we maintain our faith.

Our Gospel reading I think helps to illustrate that. Peter, what a wonderful, larger than life, foot in mouth character. You do have to wonder sometimes, particularly when reading Mark's gospel, where so many of his character flaws are shown, just what Jesus saw in him. However, to me he is one of the most encouraging of the disciples that we meet. He could get things so right, his faith that led him to get out of the boat on a stormy night to walk to Jesus or his declaration to Jesus just before our reading today that "You are the Messiah". But he could also get things so wrong. Today's reading being one of those times with his denial of Jesus being another.

Telling Jesus not to be silly and that he wasn't going to Jerusalem to be killed makes sense, from a human point of view. Not only was Jesus his friend, but he was a great teacher, healer and, as the Messiah, the hope for the Jewish nation. His rebuke to Peter "Get away from me Satan" on the surface seems a bit harsh. However, Jesus recognised this as another temptation being put in his way to avoid the agony that was awaiting him.

Despite all this though, Peter went on to become the spokesperson and leader of the early church in Jerusalem. Despite failing in some of the worst ways we can imagine, Jesus didn't give up on him. Peter maintained his faith in God, his belief in the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death.

Peter gives us hope that even if we mess up we do not automatically lose our redemption. We must remember we are justified by faith, not by actions. This does not give us a license to do what we want, but it does encourage us when we feel we have let God down that He is bigger than our failures and can and does forgive us.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you that we are saved by faith in you and not by what we do. Help us to use our freedom to do those things that will bring others to know you better. Amen.