

St. Aidan's West Epping, 7th April 2019

“GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS, NOT OURS”

(Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:3-14; John 12:1-8)

If you were here last week when little Corey was baptized, you may remember a rather strange Old Testament reading, especially for that occasion. It was a fairly detailed account of the circumcision of the men of Israel just as they entered the Promised Land after those forty years in the wilderness. I took the opportunity to assure the family that I was only intending to conduct a baptism, not a circumcision!

When I was young, the circumcision of young boys was a fairly common procedure. Opinions of its value have changed over the years, and it is discouraged nowadays unless there is good reason. My circumcision has no great personal significance to me.

But for the Israelites, circumcision was very significant indeed. It was the sign that you were a member of the people of Israel, that you were a member of God’s covenant people, that you were an inheritor of God’s promises to Abraham and Jacob and Moses. It still is for Jewish men today!

The problem was that time and time again in Old Testament times, those people who saw themselves as God’s people didn’t live as God’s people. The prophets called them to turn back to God, and so often they ignored the call. They did not see that the sign of circumcision and membership of God’s family meant that they must live as God’s people: that they must seek to serve and obey the God who had made them his people.

The covenant signified by circumcision brought obligations and responsibilities. These were spelt out in the Law. People must not think: “I’m circumcised. I’m one of God’s people. That’s all that matters. I can now live how I choose. I can do whatever I want.” In fact the prophets on occasion told the people that they needed to have their hearts circumcised, and not just their bodies. Circumcision really mattered. The Law really mattered. As I said, for faithful Jews, it still matters today.

But when Jesus came, he started raising questions, including questions about the Law, which many Jews found uncomfortable.

He seemed to be more interested in what was behind the Law, rather than the letter of the Law itself. He seemed to sit lightly on some aspects of the law as it was widely understood, just as he mixed happily with the kinds of people who were known to be disobedient to the Law.

Following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Spirit called Christ’s followers to take the Gospel to all people, not just the people of Israel. It was a big challenge for those first Jewish Christians. Gentiles were outsiders to the covenant. They were ritually unclean. Yes, some Gentiles had converted to Judaism. Some had even been circumcised, and become Jewish proselytes.

But the Gospel challenged those early Jewish Christians in a new way. And the big question was: On what basis could Gentile Christians be accepted into the Christian community? In particular, did these converts need to be circumcised in order to be truly accepted as members of the Christian family? Two thousand years later, in a very different world, we might easily fail to see what a big issue this was in its day. But for those early Jewish Christians, the idea that circumcision might be unnecessary was an attack on their traditions, and even on their understanding of God’s covenant.

It was Paul who brought the issue to a head, as he insisted that circumcision was not necessary for Gentile Christians. There was wide resistance to his radical teaching. How could a person be acceptable to God if they do not submit to the Law God gave to Moses?

And this issue kept coming back time and time again as Paul travelled around preaching the Gospel.

As Paul was writing his letter to the Philippians, he heard again of preachers going around saying: “Paul’s got it wrong. Of course you have to be circumcised, if you are going to be a real Christian.” And in today’s reading from Philippians Paul makes clear that to insist on circumcision is to deny the Gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

He says that we Christians are the true circumcision: we are the true members of God’s covenant people. In a sense he was echoing the prophets in saying that true circumcision is something in the heart: what happens to the body is no longer the issue.

And to emphasize the point, he tells his own story: his circumcision, his membership of the family of Israel, his faithfulness to the law, his zeal to overcome what he saw as blasphemous teaching. Paul was a faithful and commendable Jew indeed! If anyone could earn a place in God's kingdom, surely it was Paul.

But what does Paul say? "Whatever gain I had from all these things, I count as loss because of Christ... I regard all these things as rubbish because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus."

Well, Paul's qualifications didn't sound like rubbish! And I'm sure that many of us could compile our own list a bit like Paul's. We may have grown up in a church-going family, and gone to Sunday School and then Youth Group regularly. We may have taught Sunday School. We may have married someone from the church. Perhaps we've been going to church all our life, and been involved in church activities and served in different ways. We've shown kindness to people in need. We've done nothing terrible that would cause a scandal if people knew about it. We've tried to live faithful Christian lives.

I imagine that quite a few of us are not too far from that. We mightn't put ourselves in Paul's class, but people might say that many of us are, humanly speaking, "good people". However, most of us also have those sides that we keep to ourselves. These shortcomings, these weaknesses and failings may not be dramatic: sometimes those closest to us are aware of them, sometimes only we know them. But God's kingdom is a perfect kingdom. We know we don't qualify: we are not truly righteous, we do fall short.

Do you remember those old advertisements for toothpaste or washing powder? A person would be seen with what were supposed to be white teeth or a clean load of washing. But then we see the second person who has been using Colgate or Fab or whatever it is, and you see how "inadequate" ordinary toothpaste or ordinary soap powder really is. In a similar way, we might think we're doing pretty well in living a good life, until we see it compared with the perfect righteousness of God.

Paul had done a lot of commendable things himself. But he saw that his righteousness could never qualify him for a place in God's kingdom. If he tried to use his background or his studies or his faithfulness or his work to qualify him for a place in God's kingdom, these things were rubbish.

Commendable though they were, they had no value for that purpose. The things that might have seemed to make him a righteous man were in fact a complete failure. And it's the same for us. There's an old question which is sometimes brought out to make the point. If you met God tonight and he asked you: "Why should I let you into my heaven?", what would you say?

To give a list of our good points or the good things we've done or our baptism and confirmation or our church involvement is to miss the point. **Our** righteousness is not true righteousness. What we need is the righteousness which comes from God: our own righteousness will never qualify us for the kingdom.

But through Christ, that is what God provides for us! Christ died to bring us forgiveness, and to do away with our sin. In a sense he replaces our unrighteousness with his righteousness, so that we are fitted for God's kingdom. It is his **gift**.

That is why Paul got so uptight about those who tried to impose circumcision on new Gentile Christians. We enter God's kingdom not through Judaism, but through Jesus. It is not about the rituals we have gone through or the good things we have done: it's all about what Christ has done for us. The righteousness which makes all the difference is not our righteousness, but the righteousness which is God's gift to us: the righteousness which brings us into a right, a loving relationship with God. Ultimately there is nothing that we need to contribute. It is all God's grace.

But as we read on, we are reminded that there is still the possibility of making the same mistake as the Israelites of old. They thought that because they were God's people, they could do their own thing. But being in relationship with God always means responsibilities on our part, as is the case in most relationships. We haven't yet arrived in the kingdom in all its fullness. We still have a life to live, a path to walk, a Saviour to follow. As Paul says, we need to press on towards the goal. We do that not in order to earn our place in the kingdom, but because God has graciously called us into the kingdom, and because he has brought us into a loving relationship with himself.

So let us keep seeking to live as God's beloved people. Let us keep living our lives as members of his kingdom. Let us keep following Christ, who has given himself for us, and enabled us to become truly God's people.

Amen.

Paul Weaver