

From time to time, and I'm sure I'm not the only one, I have this fear about getting older. I know I can't do anything about it, but I don't like the idea that time is running out. I see many people as they get older stepping back from things, not taking on the same commitments, and I think that's quite sad. Because along the way I have met people who almost come alive when they are older. They don't have the burdens of the job over them, they are free to make their own choices each day. And so, I suppose if I really thought about it, I would conclude that there should be no fear in getting older, but there should be a fear of growing stale as one gets older. If you sense that time is marching on, then you should be afraid of losing a vibrant, active, youthful faith in God. My good friend, and previous rector, Bishop Fanta (Ken) Clarke retired a number of years ago, and when he retired, he got stickers printed so that when he would meet people and they would talk about retiring, he would plant a sticker on them which said "I'm not retired, I'm re-fired". Today are you retired, are you may be looking forward to retirement. But what will you do with it? Will you be re-fired, re-energised for the work which God would have you to do?

One of the great promises in scripture comes in Psalm 92 where the Psalmist said, "*those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age. They will be fresh and flourishing.*"

Now whilst my introduction appears to be for the older members of our church family, the message today is for all of you, no matter what age you are. You see I believe that what makes a person attractive at any age is a confidence in God, but I find it so exciting when I meet people who at an elderly age, with all that life has thrown at them, continue to be confident in the faithfulness of God. And that brings us to Abraham. He's the main focus of our reading today. He's known throughout history as the Father to the Jewish nation, and yet we will see today that he is the Father to all generations. He's an old man, and in Genesis 25:8 we read this about him now at 175 years of age. It says, '*Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years*'.

Abraham is greatly thought of in the Jewish tradition, and so Paul in his letter to the Romans now calls on him as a witness in chapter 4 to prove his case that it's salvation by grace alone through faith alone that is more important than all the years of what a person does. Abraham is this immense figure. He was the ambassador for people throughout generations, and yet Paul describes him here as someone whose legacy was not about being a Jew, but about being righteous before God due to his faith alone. You see being right with God is not about our performance by good works, but it is by faith. I honestly believe that many people get really caught up thinking that they will be measured by the good and honest life that they have led in order that God will love them and accept them. And yet Paul is going to emphasise something different. And he's going to use Abraham as an example to follow.

You see the Jews had misunderstood the covenant altogether. They knew that Abraham was the Father of their nation. They knew that God had given a covenant or promise to Abraham and had set him aside through the act of circumcision, and that he was righteous (or right) with God. They knew that they too had received that sign of circumcision (now it wouldn't have been my first choice, but there you go), and therefore because of that sign they too thought that they were right with God. This is the kind of stuff that Jesus came up against, from Jews who believed their righteousness before God was as a result of their circumcision and their history.

And so Paul is going to argue here that Abraham was declared righteous **before** he was circumcised. In other words, God called Abraham a righteous man according to his faith, and then 14 years later gave him the covenant sign of circumcision.

So in that context, let's look further into these verses now.

Verse 1&2 – *what then shall we say that Abraham discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.* Remember that the word *justified* can be thought of as someone who has not sinned – or *just as if I* have not sinned. So if Abraham was justified by what he had done in his life then he would have something to definitely talk about. But that’s not what he did. Let’s look at verse 3. And so, Paul quotes from Genesis where it says ‘*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness*’. It doesn’t say that Abraham did all kinds of good things, and because of that God counted that towards his righteousness. It doesn’t say that. It says that Abraham believed, or put his trust in God, and that’s what mattered. You see God had promised him that his offspring would be as many as the stars in the sky – and Abraham believed and trusted what God had said to him.

But how much did Abraham really believe in what he had heard. Because all of us can say we believe in things, but do we really? For example, lots of people, in fact I’d say a larger number of people in Irish society will say they believe in God. So is that the same belief that Abraham was talking about? Well, if you look at the Hebrew word for belief that’s used here, it meant to literally lean on someone. I’m going to give a quick example here, and it’s all to do with trust.

[Example of leaning without doubting]

That’s what this word ‘belief’ means here. It’s a complete unwavering trust in the Lord. Abraham had no doubts in his mind that God’s plan to make him a great nation would be fulfilled.

So what do you lean on today? Can you truly lean on God for everything, or do you still lean on your own securities? Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight*”. You see faith is about trusting in that which at times you cannot see, but you still place everything on it. So is that you today?

And so, Paul goes on again in verse 4 & 5 to emphasise that those who don’t try to work for their salvation, but trust in God will be credited as righteous. But there’s something in these verses that is particularly interesting. It says that the one who trusts in the God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited. God doesn’t justify the good. He acquits the ungodly. So, let’s think about an issue we have today - Why is it that people don’t want to come to church? Well, some will say, I need to get my life sorted, and when I get it sorted then that will be the time to come along to church. Folks, those people have completely missed the point of why we come here. We’re here because we are all ungodly, and that includes me. We’re here because he justifies and forgives the ungodly. Remember that Jesus didn’t spend time with the religious do-gooders. He spent time eating and socialising with sinners. And of course, the pharisees criticise him. So hear Jesus’ response to them, Matthew 9:12. “*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*”¹³ *But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’*^[a] *For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”.*

God forgives the ungodly when they put their faith in him. Unfortunately, many have this weird idea that I have got to fix my life, and only then will God be able to accept me. That is so opposite to how God operates folks. The truth is, you and I cannot fix our lives, we can’t fix our marriages, we can’t fix our homes, and you can’t fix everything with God by doing good. Folks, today we have nearly 700 people on our books. And whilst I don’t know every one of them, I’m sure in that number, there may be some who think that they’ve done all kinds of things that God can’t deal with. God forgive us if we have made our churches a place where people must behave in a particular way before they can belong. The reason we must turn these around, is because that’s what God does with us. We belong to him as we are through what Jesus has done on the cross, and in trusting him with all our mess, turning

to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, our lives are transformed, and we behave differently. So, let's never think we are something that we are not. We are all sinners, but we all need a saviour. And even the great Paul knew that when he was deep down honest with Timothy as he wrote this *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life"* (1 Timothy 1:15-16). That was a man who looked square into the revelation of Jesus, and he saw himself as he was, and he knew that he needed a saviour.

So the next time that the enemy would remind you of how much a sinner you are, and remind you of your background and history, when he accuses you of your unworthiness, it's at that point you can stand on the promises of God from this morning's reading that he justifies even the ungodly who put their trust in him. I know this morning that some of you feel that pain of accusation. Well brother and sister, know this that *"there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 8:1). Write that down in the face of all accusation that comes your way. And take the promise to your heart which Paul declares in verse 8 that *"blessed is the one whose sin in the Lord will never count against them"*. Did you hear that, know that you have been forgiven when you lean completely on the Lord for everything, and know that even though you and I are sinners, those sins will never be counted against us.

So let's move on with another reminder of what we've been saying today. Verse 16, *"¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all"*.

This is now the cornerstone to everything we've been talking about today. Paul is saying that the way to the Father is by faith in Christ Alone. It doesn't say faith and something else. It is not faith **and** good works. It is not faith **and** ceremonial rites. It is not faith **and** law-keeping. It is by faith *"so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all."* It says that the promise of Salvation comes only by that trust, that faith in what Christ has done. That grace, that undeserved acceptance from the Father, comes by faith. Faith and grace can never work in partnership with good works in order to give us a right standing before God. Faith and grace are discriminatory. They will only work with each other. They work within the same economy of salvation – "so that" – in the middle of verse 16 – *"the promise"* – referring to the promise of salvation in Christ – *"will be guaranteed to all the descendants."*

People may not like it, but it's this exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ alone. There's not one way for a Jew to be saved and a different way for a Gentile to be saved. There is only one way of salvation. And unfortunately that message has been diluted over the last couple of decades in our age of tolerance, that we're told there are many roads that lead to heaven. No, no, no. There's only one road that leads to heaven, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Verse 16 makes that abundantly clear. And if we believe that this book is the inspired word of God, then that means all other religions, all other ways of seeking spirituality, if it's not through Christ then it's not leading to heaven. That is sad, and it requires a response of evangelism from all of us who trust in the Lord.

So some questions as I end.

Firstly, do you believe in Jesus Christ? And by that I don't mean a head knowledge. Have you put all your trust in Christ, because if you're trusting in anything for your future except Christ alone for salvation, your faith is void. If something else in life dominates more than Christ, then your faith is void. Today may be your last day, and if it is, what are you leaning on the most?

The second is – and this should be a great encouragement to us – it doesn't matter how old you are. You can be an old man or woman. Scholars think Abraham was in his 80s when he received that promise from God, and he believed. Therefore, Abraham should scream encouragement to us that someone who is advanced in age can still come to faith in Jesus Christ. And for any of your family today who you know haven't this faith that I've talked about, then you need to keep witnessing to them. You need to keep on praying for their salvation. Until the day they are dead and, in the grave, there is still the hope that they can come to faith in Christ.

And then the last thing that I would say is it doesn't matter how far removed someone is from Christ. Do you ever wonder why Paul chose Abraham in this reading? Well listen to his life - Abraham was an idolater. Abraham was a moon worshipper. Abraham couldn't have been in any more darkness. Joshua 24:2 says that he served other gods. And God called him out of that darkness to a place, an appointed place, at an appointed time that God had planned, to bring him into the Promised Land, and it would be there that God would meet with Abraham. It would be there that God would give him saving faith and call into existence that which did not exist in his life. Folks, no one, irrespective of their past, is so far removed from Christ but that the grace of God cannot conquer their heart and bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

So folks, as we enter Advent, a time of recalling the reason why God sent his son to save the world, but also considering Jesus' return, consider the old man Abraham who believed, who trusted, and was credited as righteous, not by works or good deeds, but by faith alone. I pray that is truly where your trust is in today.