

Sunday 23rd October 2022 – Apprenticed to Jesus #7 ‘Justified’ (Luke 18:9-14)

As many of you know, as a family we love to take our main summer break in Northumberland. In particular, we usually stay in a village on the coast called Beadnell, which has a lovely beach and a little house we rent which works perfectly for us as a family. Often when I’m sat on the beach in Beadnell, I look south along the bay and in the distance I can see the magnificent ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle. On a hazy day, they look almost mythical, like something out of Arthurian legend.

There’s something about ruined castles and abbeys which captures the imagination, isn’t there. Impressive as it is to visit an old castle which is still in tact, an atmospheric ruin somehow is even more satisfying. We love a magnificent ruin!

The idea of magnificent ruin is also a very biblical way to describe what it’s like to be human. The bible throughout affirms two great truths about our humanity. First we are magnificent: we are made in the image of God, with all the remarkable capacities that entails: a brilliant mind, a capacity for creativity and community, for complex relationships, a love of order and an ability to solve problems, a capacity to understand good and evil and to regulate our behaviour beyond our basic biological needs. We are also, each of us, unique – with unique personalities, gifts and talents. Even our fingerprints are special: no-one else on the planet has even the exact same finger as us. Whatever you might feel about yourself, you are amazing, and God has made you to be magnificent. However, the image of God is scarred in us, too. We are fallen, and all carry a basic selfishness which mars who we were made to be. You could say that, like Dunstanburgh Castle, we are all, each of us, magnificent ruins. The bible calls this innate selfishness sin, and there are three different words to describe it: the first is the idea of **falling short**. It’s the same word used to describe an arrow which misses its target. We long to be better, to do the right thing consistently: but we often fall short, we miss the target that we aim at. The second word refers to **crossing a line**. The best way to understand human nature is to set a boundary. Try telling a child that the one place they *can’t* go is... and you’ll know the first place they’ll go when no-one is watching! It’s the word we translate as trespass and we humans love to do it: to cross lines, especially moral ones that God sets for us.

The final word is deeper, it defines our state of mind rather than a particular thing. It is basically the word **‘rebellion’**. What we object to is the idea that anyone has the right to tell us what to do, to run our lives. Like Braveheart, we send much of our lives telling God: ‘You’ll never take our freedom!’

This is the biblical view of humanity: we all have, to some extent, a divided self. We are created to be like God, and yet we rebel or fall short or cross lines so often – in short we all sin, and as the bible says, when we do that, we fall short of the glory of God. It’s not who we’re meant to be.

For much of the life of the church, the idea of sin has been accepted unquestioningly. Even today, a brief look at the world makes it clear that the idea that we sin is self-evident. Take a look at the news and you won’t be short of examples! And yet, it’s become deeply unfashionable to talk about it. Even in the church, we prefer to emphasise our magnificence than our sinfulness. Some writers and leaders have coined the phrase ‘worm theology’ as a disparaging reference to churches that apparently dwell too much on sin. In Christ we are made new – we can all agree on that – so (the idea goes) let’s talk more about new life than all this depressing sin stuff...?

The problem is that we can’t jump straight to new life without addressing the reason we need new life in the first place. If there’s no sin, there’s no mercy. In fact there would be no need for a Saviour, or God coming in human form or the cross. If there’s no death, there’s no resurrection either.

There's also no forgiveness. One of the things the bible affirms repeatedly is that we need forgiveness: not just among each other, but before God. Without it, we carry a burden of guilt and shame, like a stain on our heart we can never rub out even with the best Vanish – and over my 30 years of Christian leadership I've met so many apparently successful people who are haunted by this. Try as they might to earn their salvation, to make themselves clean, they can't do it. There are things they can't put right, and failures they can't forgive themselves for, regardless of whether other people have forgiven them for it. They are magnificent ruins.

Which is why today's simple story is such good news. It turns out that God loves sinners! In fact, God is delighted whenever a human being is humble and honest enough to admit that they can't fix their own lives and make themselves holy; that they need him, they need mercy. There is a path to magnificence – but it lies through admitting our ruin. When we humble ourselves, *then* we are exalted: not by ourselves or by others but by God.

To make the point, Jesus tells a story of two people who go to worship. They represent two polar opposites in society: one respectable and important, the other a traitor who is hated by his own people. The self-important person doesn't feel any need to ask God for forgiveness, but rather trumpets his own success. And without saying it, Jesus is implicitly challenging all of us to remember that even our moral successes are pretty small compared with the glorious perfection of God's holiness. The Pharisee's boasting about his tithing is only what he was meant to be doing anyway! It wasn't more than the law required, or somehow 'the extra mile'. And that is so like us, isn't it? It's a classic human temptation to give ourselves way too much credit for stuff like that. The path to life, Jesus implies, starts with abandoning rose-tinted views of ourselves.

On the other hand, the tax collector carries no such fantasies about himself and his life. He knows he's a wreck, and all he can do is fall on his knees and cry out to God: 'have mercy on me, a sinner.' 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.' That's quite a punchline, isn't it? It turns out that, according to Jesus, **there are only two types of people in the world: sinners who know they're sinners and need forgiveness, and sinners who are too proud to admit it.**

The big misunderstanding about this passage, and more generally in our culture, is that Jesus is not asking us to wallow in our sin. In fact, the opposite is true: to admit our sinfulness, our need for mercy, is the path to life. It is those who humble themselves *who are exalted*. It is sinners who are saved, set free and led into the glorious freedom of the children of God. It is saved sinners who know the deep joy of having been forgiven, of knowing that before God, their debts are paid, their stains are cleansed, that God chooses to remember their sins no more. They are truly free!

As an aside, we talk a lot about self-esteem today, but our culture misses one massive thing which renders much of what we try to say about self-esteem ineffective. You can't cleanse your own guilt and shame, no matter how many affirming soundbites you tell yourself – someone else has to do that for you: and the only person who can really do that is God. **There is nothing so liberating, so joy-giving as being fully forgiven.** Some of you may have experienced that in human relationships and can testify to what that means; but all of us can experience it with God. God is the one who can cleanse us, forgive us and set us free: and all we have to do is cry out to him: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

That is not the end of the journey, but it's the start: the path to life, the path to wholeness, the path to resurrection. It is the path that Jesus offers each one of us: will you receive it today?