

## **Sola Fide – Rom 4.1-8**

Some of us here might recognise this picture  
...*the scream* by an artist named Edvard Munch.

In August 2006, two thieves tried to steal three Edvard Munch paintings  
from a hotel in Norway.

They burst into the hotel and threatened the staff  
before they took three paintings from the wall.

What they didn't realise was that earlier the hotel staff  
had swapped the original paintings with some copies.  
There had been a spate of art robberies in Norway,  
so just to be on the safe side they did a swap, the originals for the fakes.  
And so when the two thieves struck, they took off with the wrong thing.  
"These guys are amateurs, they have made absolute fools of themselves"  
said the police chief in charge of the investigation.

Now, I guess you could say that the thieves got what they deserved,  
but if I was attempting to steal an artwork  
I'd have no idea as to whether the item was a copy or an original.  
It seems to me that making the distinction requires a well-trained eye;  
One that can spot the most-subtle of differences.

I once watched a documentary about a painting that was donated to a museum,  
And they were trying to work out if it was a genuine Leonardo Da Vinci.  
It looked like it could have been one of his but they weren't sure.  
So they got an expert in and he was paying attention to the tiniest detail  
The direction of the strokes, the type of brush that made the stroke;  
did the artist paint like da Vinci painted?  
The conclusion was that yes, this was indeed a genuine item.  
And so that expert eye exposed the difference between  
a picture that was worth maybe a hundred bucks,  
and a picture that was priceless.

Now 500 years ago, deep in the heart of Germany,  
A Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther was paying close attention.  
Not to the artworks that surrounded him,  
but to the text of the Bible that it was his job to teach.  
And when he compared what he read in the Bible  
to what was being taught by others in the Catholic church,  
he realised that things weren't matching up.  
The doctrine of the Catholic Church  
wasn't matching what was printed in his Bible.

And so Luther and his friends started what became known as the *Reformation*,  
a movement which wanted to recapture Biblical Christianity,  
and which sort to expose the false understanding  
that had embedded itself in the Catholic Church.

The result of Luther's work (and of others like him)  
was the emergence of the Protestant churches,  
and that's what we are here at Waitara Anglican;  
we're protestant, not catholic.

And as the years progressed, the conclusions drawn by people like Luther  
have been summarized in a series of slogans:  
Salvation is by Grace alone,  
through faith alone,  
by the work of Christ alone  
as revealed in the Scriptures alone

And I thought what we might do to mark the Reformation's 500 anniversary,  
is to spend four weeks looking at these four slogans.  
I think its very important for us to spend this time because many of us,  
in a whole variety of ways, are engaged with people of the Catholic faith.  
Some of us have Catholic friends and families,  
some of us rely on the Catholic church to educate our children.

In many respects, what we believe looks the same.  
But there remain some very important but subtle differences.  
My goal is to have us become familiar  
with some of the finer points of difference,  
so like an expert in art can tell the difference between paintings,  
we can tell the difference between churches and doctrines.

We begin with the idea that we gain access to salvation by *faith alone*.  
To help us understand this concept of *faith alone*,  
we'll be looking at Romans 4.1-8.  
And Paul begins this chapter with these words:  
What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup> If, in  
fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before  
God. <sup>3</sup> What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him  
as righteousness."

Have a closer look at v2, because within it is a very important Biblical concept.  
Paul speaks about Abraham being *justified*.  
Now when we use the word *justification* or speak about being *justified*,  
We mean it in the sense of being proved to be right about something.  
So a parent might say  
"I was justified in not buying you that expensive jumper,  
because you've gone and lost the cheap one I did buy you!"

And this is close to the way the word is used in the Bible,  
to be justified is to be in the right with God.  
In fact it's perhaps most accurate to say  
that justification is *God's declaration that we are righteous*,  
its God's announcement that we are ok with him.

When Paul speaks about justification

he's actually using a one-word illustration;  
Paul wants us to think of a law court,  
that's where the word comes from.

So imagine that you have been summoned to stand trial.  
The charge against you is read out,  
the evidence against you is laid before the judge,  
your defence attorney has done their best to provide a counter argument,  
and then the judge asks you to stand as the verdict is read out.  
The gavel is raised, and the judge says 'not guilty'!  
That's the moment of *justification*,  
the judge's declaration that you are innocent!  
If the judge said guilty then that would be *condemnation*.

And this is the point that both Catholics and Protestants want to arrive at;  
we both want to arrive at the point of *justification*.  
And because of this shared goal it means that we have much in common:  
We both believe in a powerful God who will exercise his right to judge us,  
We both believe that humanity is in trouble  
because our sin naturally leads to *condemnation*, not *justification*.  
We both believe that the judge is merciful and wants to pardon us.  
The question is how we *access* that mercy, how we *access* justification.

Back in Paul's day, before there were Protestants or Catholics,  
(at least in any modern sense),  
people were asking the same question:  
how can we be sure God will *justify* us rather than *condemn* us?

Some were saying that humanity can access this salvation  
by ensuring that we are *doing* the right things.  
This is the justification by works that Paul speaks of in verse 2.  
People who were familiar with the Jewish religion were saying  
"Well, if you get yourself circumcised or if you obey the food laws  
then that's what going to provoke God to declare you as righteous"  
These days people might be tempted to think,  
"Well, if I'm regular at church or if I go to confession  
or receive the last rights, then these actions are going to do the trick."

Or maybe you have your own Protestant version of this thinking.  
I know the rector at Chatswood tells the story  
of how he used to think that if he became a missionary  
then that's how he would secure his justification!

And you can understand why people might think this way,  
because in the world we live in if you work hard you get a reward.  
What does Paul say in verse 4?  
Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.

Here in v4 Paul makes a pretty standard observation about life:

If you bend your back a little, then you'll manage to get somewhere good.  
We're taught this right from our earliest days in school, aren't we?  
So is it any wonder we import the same logic when seeking justification?  
You want to be justified by God? Then you better start earning it.  
Maybe you should get involved in meals on wheels,  
Maybe you should volunteer at a nursing home,  
Maybe you should support a kid through a sponsorship programme,  
Then you can cash in after you die.

It's an understandable way to think,  
but Paul wants to make it absolutely clear – "this is not how it works!"  
Take a look at verse 5  
However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked,  
his faith is credited as righteousness.

On the last day when God delivers his judgment.  
The people who will be justified  
won't be the people who have tried to earn their way in.  
The people who'll be justified will be those who've trusted God.  
Those who've put their faith in him.

So we can either work like our culture tells us.  
Or we can simply trust God to bring us salvation as a gift.  
And that's what Biblical faith is.  
Faith according to the Bible is trusting in God.  
Not trusting in our works,  
not trusting in our Christian culture, or environment, or background,  
not even trusting in our own trust.  
Faith is trusting in God as the one who brings salvation as free gift.

Works have nothing to do with it.  
I remember once speaking to a youth group member who was deciding  
whether or not to become a Christian and he said "well I need to get my  
act together first" No. That's not how it works. If you want to be justified,  
then trust God. You're own capacity to be holy is beside the point.

To emphasise this, Paul describes God as the one who justifies the wicked.  
In others words God declares innocent, the ones who are actually guilty.  
I mean that doesn't make sense: Evil people are declared innocent.  
But this is what the Bible says.

How can God do this? How can he declare us innocent,  
even though we've sinned  
and even though we may have done nothing to try and make amends?  
Well look back to Chapter 3:24. Paul says we are justified freely by his grace  
through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

God can justify the wicked  
because our wickedness has been overcome by Jesus' death on the cross.  
When Jesus died, our sins died with him

When Jesus died, God's anger against wickedness was exhausted  
When Jesus died, the punishment for wickedness was completed.

It's because of the death of Christ that guilty people can be justified,  
and so we're called  
to simply put our trust in the process that God has organized.  
We say to God "your son has done everything,  
so I trust you to save me, to declare me as innocent on that last day."  
And that's it; justification comes through faith.

If you went to a Catholic church, is this the message you would hear?  
My understanding is that you might hear something similar,  
but which differs in one very important aspect.

In preparation for this series

I wrote to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and asked them to  
send me some literature. I figured if there was one body that would be  
able to represent modern Catholic teaching then it would be the  
Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference! Here's one thing they sent me - a  
booklet entitled *Salvation: Yesterday Today and Forever*.

Some of what you read in this booklet is very good.  
I started marking things I agree with by a tick, and there are lots of ticks!  
For example, page 4 [...] That could have been written by Luther himself!  
Also page 7.

But there are some crosses, quite significant ones.

Page 4, page 6  
Now it's subtle, but in essence what they're saying  
is that God will act to grant you a start in salvation,  
but it's your job to keep your salvation by adding works to your faith.  
Each day I drive past St Patrick's Catholic school in Asquith,  
and at the top of their school crest they have the word FAITH!  
Catholics believe in faith, but they don't believe it does enough.  
It's a start, but it needs to soon be matched by your good behaviour.

Is this belief Biblical? Well, the model Paul gives us in Romans 4 is of Abraham.  
When you read Abraham's story, he certainly trusts in God's promise,  
But his behaviour isn't always stellar. Certainly he is capable of wonderful  
acts of obedience, but sometimes he caves in and acts very selfishly.  
But despite his varied record, he is still justified.  
Why? Because of his faith, and his faith alone!

You see how the difference is subtle?

It's very much like looking at a painting's smallest detail  
to see if it's the genuine article.

But just like those small details mean a difference of perhaps millions of dollars,  
the idea of justification by faith *alone* faith makes a world of difference.

What you end up with in the Catholic system  
is a view of salvation which is like a game of Snakes and Ladders  
We all start at the bottom,  
and we can't get off the bottom without God's help.  
But he finds us and *whoosh!* Up the ladder we go.  
But then we drink too much at the office Christmas party, and *uh oh!*  
Down the snake we go,  
but then we go to mass and *whoosh* up the ladder again,  
but then we get home and we say something nasty to our spouse: *Crash!*  
And so it goes on until you have the last rights before you die,  
which is that last *whoosh* up the ladder before you die.

It sounds tiring, and that's because *it is* tiring,  
 Salvation according to this scheme is hard work.  
 What the Reformation did was to say "hang on,  
 the Bible's picture of salvation is that Jesus takes us up the ladder  
 and we stay up there, even if our works are imperfect,  
 because we're trusting in Christ's perfect work on our behalf."

Here's what Luther said towards the end of his life,  
as he recalled his discovery of the Bible's emphasis on faith.  
Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an  
extremely disturbed conscience ... I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.  
At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the  
words "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is  
righteous shall live.'" (Rom 1:17) There I began to understand that the righteousness of  
God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith ... Here I felt that  
I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

And Luther's experience of the freedom that faith brings was just like the experience of the great characters in the Bible. We'll finish with the final few verses of our passage Romans 4:6-8. Paul quotes the words of David in Ps 32 David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. <sup>8</sup> Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

Why are we blessed? Because we don't have to worry.  
Because we're declared righteous through trusting in Christ's work,  
we are freed from the slavery  
of never knowing whether we're good enough.  
Your justification does not depend on your goodness,  
God will even justify the wicked, provided they have trusted him.  
And it's that spiritual confidence that Luther rediscovered  
which is what makes the reformation worth celebrating 500 years later.

Pray.