

**St Botolph's Church Worthing**  
**Trinity Sunday 22 May 2016**  
**Romans 5: 1-5, John 16: 12-15**  
**Father Roger Walker**

In the early 16th Century a German lawyer named Martin Luther was deeply concerned over the state of his soul – he could not be convinced that God had forgiven his sins and was very afraid he would die and go to hell. One day he was walking on open heathland when a violent thunderstorm erupted. Terrified that he would be struck by lightning, he prayed 'St Ann, save me and I will become a monk'. We would probably pray to the Lord, but this was the medieval Catholic Church.

He was not struck by lightning and he did become a monk, but this did not solve his problems. Indeed, his brothers in the monastery became so fed up with him forever going on about his sins that his Abbott sent him to teach at the university of Wittenberg. When he got there he learned that he was to give a series of lectures on the Letter to the Romans. He decided he had better read it: a sad commentary on the place of the Bible in the medieval Church. When he got to Chapter 5 – the words we heard this morning – his life and the life of the Church were changed. For as he read these words he realised that forgiveness of sins and salvation comes not through doing all the right religious things: pilgrimages, buying indulgences, confessions, masses and praying to the Saints.

Instead it comes through faith in Jesus Christ. We are, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, justified by faith. This English translation does not make a lot of sense for we use the word justified in a quite different way. But Martin Luther was probably reading the original Greek of the New Testament – where the word justify is 'dikaio' – meaning 'to set straight or set right'. So we are set right with god by our faith. Even more confusion is caused in English translations when the noun from this verb – dikaiosune – is translated as righteousness. To us, this has no connection with 'justify'.

But back to our text. Once set right with God by our faith in Jesus, faith that he died to take our sins upon himself and so they no longer stand between us and God, we are justified: set right. This gives us peace with God, meaning a sense of unity because there is no unforgiven sin between Him and us. That is the same concept as when we share the Peace in this service. St Paul goes on to emphasise that it is faith that is all-important, because he writes 'we have gained access by this faith in Jesus to the grace in which we now stand'.

Grace is one of those words that can trip off our tongues without us really understanding its meaning. For grace is the free unmerited gift of God is the free unmerited gift of God: in this case forgiveness. It is God's gift, not something we earn by what we do. And if that was not enough theology in two verses of the Bible, verse two concludes 'and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God'. Three great theological words in one sentence: rejoice, joy: the emotion of heaven which we seek to shine on earth, hope: the Biblical word

that signifies eternal life and glory which always has a sense of unity with God.

So our faith is not just leading us to forgiveness of the sins that separated us from God but it also opens to us the eternal life for which God created us. No wonder Martin Luther was so overjoyed to read these words, for they reassured him of everything that he feared he was cut off from – forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven. His watchword became sola fide – by faith alone.

Of course, the eventual result of Martin Luther's new insight and teaching was the Reformation, when those who continued to hold the medieval Catholic view of the good works needed for salvation were separated from those who held the Protestant view of salvation by faith alone. Theologians like St Paul and Martin Luther revel in sentences like these two verses, which contain six important theological words: but we ordinary mortals like things to be a bit simpler. So is there a message we can take away from today's Reading that can help us live a Christian life day by day?

We could say that our faith in Jesus Christ should be central to our lives: this is fine, but something we know already. Or we could say that, as believing Christians we can have complete confidence in God's forgiveness that leads to eternal life. Again, this is true but does not fill our every waking thought.

So perhaps we should take a completely different direction and say that we should read the Bible regularly because, just as God used it to show Martin Luther the message for him. If we are reading the Bible regularly, he will also use it to speak to us and show us what He wants of our lives. Many of us will already have experienced this and will know how God does use His Holy Scriptures to speak to us and keep us close to him.

So our message for today, based on Martin Luther's experience, is - quite simply – Read the Bible regularly.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

22.5.16