

Seeing the Truth

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

*"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."*

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Romans 4:1-8,13-17 ESV)

What do you see when you look in the mirror?

It sounds like the beginning of a joke or quip – and considering the range of responses – it might well be! Whether spotted fleetingly or over a longer time as we prepare our looks, we know the face staring back at us: Hello you – My you're handsome – Ughh, you're not at your best. Our reflection can provide introspection of a different kind – not to do with our features but with our person or our deeds: You're hopeless – a failure – look out world, here I come!

This perspective of the face in the mirror is very much ours – for our eyes only almost – because everyone else sees us face-on while we the mirror image of us. We have a scar on our left cheek and we see it on the left side of our face but everyone else sees it on the right side of our face. The more asymmetrical your face is – perhaps particularly with your hair – the more unique your mirror image is of yourself. And that's the way it is in life – those who know us, do know us, recognise us, can predict what we might do with reasonable accuracy – but our view of ourselves is that little bit different for we see things others don't and we see things in our own way – and what people see of us and what we see in the mirror is never the full picture.

The person ashamed and remorseful has no doubt done something wrong but does that mean they have never done anything kind? Probably not. The person brimming with success and confidence can feel good but has every day of their life so far always been like that? Probably not. What we see in the mirror or when we are seen by others – the photograph moment – are true for that moment – but that doesn't tell the full story.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? You see yourself in a moment in time – having come from the previous moment – on a journey – and because you're not going to be Narcissus and remain looking at yourself for ever, at some point you're going to leave the image in the mirror and go and face the world. You recognise yourself and can label yourself according to what you're looking for – but it's still not the full picture – not forgetting that often we see what we want to see.

Now this might be the introduction to some sort of self help therapy or the beginning of a class in how to apply make up to good effect – they both rely on good and accurate vision – but that isn't the case. We're in church with not a mirror to be seen but instead hearing words that tell us about ourselves because in this place we see with our ears! God's Word describes life and reality and this world and us so that we, in turn, are seen and see ourselves in a certain way.

Today's second reading is part of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome and continues his point that everyone falls short of the glory of God, that we are justified by faith – that is God declares us innocent of our sins because of Jesus – and we trust this word in our ears. And now Paul is saying that this is always how God has worked – through faith – and he goes back to Abraham the one first called by God to come to a promised land – which he never receives except for a burial plot – to be the father of a great nation – with his barren wife – and through him all the world will be blessed. Paul points out that Abraham is a man of faith – justified by faith not works – because God does the unthinkable and justifies the ungodly.

This is all about words – God's words – and then in the incarnation, the Word made flesh, Jesus – who brings about the reality that God is saying – forgiveness of sins, life with God now and forever, someone else is punished and sacrificed, pays our debt. What Jesus does is cover our sins so that when the Father sees those in Christ he sees Christ – we're not invisible – of course he sees us – but our sins are covered by Jesus' blood and righteousness. From our side we still see ourselves, we know the sin is still there – we don't see Jesus covering us – we don't see God looking at us – we're still in this world but the Christian believes the words that are being said about Jesus and about him/her.

For Lutherans this is summarised in the phrase 'simul justus et peccator' – simultaneously saint and sinner at the same time. Just as Jesus mysteriously is divine and human – 100% divine – Son of God – 100% human – son of Mary and of course there is only one Jesus, so those in Christ – Christians – also live with the mystery that God declares them his children – saints – holy ones – remember that doesn't mean good – it means touched by God and blessed by him to live with him – while we know that sin still lives in us and there's only one of us – 100% saint by faith and 100% sinner in this body.

This vision of us can only be seen through God's Word – and it is the only picture that makes full sense of the horror of the cross. Any other picture of people as basically good or as saints with some bad and smelly bits still clinging to us devalues the cross and why it was necessary for the sinless Son of God to die on it. If sin is a deed that needs correcting then killing the Son of God seems excessive. Surely he could have just taught us the right way? But sin means death and so sin and death and the devil needed de-fanging, needed their power over us broken because we were dead and trapped. And this Jesus accomplished when he cried out 'It is finished'.

'No, it isn't', we mutter in the mirror when shame and guilt and the desperation that comes from wanting the earth to swallow us wash over us. Sin is still at the door and in the heart. That's why we need to hear words from outside of ourselves that point to mercy and forgiveness. These words don't change the sin or the deed but they give us a way forward to deal with them.

Jesus said and says: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30 ESV)

And ... “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:13-14 ESV)

“Take and eat this is my body given for you ... take and drink this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.”

We look into the mirror of the Law in God’s Word and the message is consistent – we are sinners. And then the Gospel is heard – But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4,5 ESV).

And so we live by faith – ears fighting at times what the eyes say or want – and in faith we say ‘I am a sinner; and I am saved and loved by God’ – that’s the full story for Christians. And then we go out into the world each day in repentance and joy – and live out the details.