

May only the truth be spoken, and only the truth be heard. I speak in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation for the privilege of preaching here at Bethel. Unpacking the scriptures is a privilege (not to be taken lightly), and my only desire today is to honour Christ; and I hope, strengthen you in your faith in him...

Sooner or later it happens: We're watching 2 young children playing together, but there is only *one* favourite toy. One child will want the toy for him- or herself, and so will hog the toy, or grab it back. The child *without* the toy understandably feels cheated somehow. Perhaps there will be an attempt to grab the toy back (leading to a tussle), or there will be wailing and tears from the child without the toy... If the children are old enough to speak, the child without the toy will likely turn to us, and say, "That's not fair! So-and-so took my toy! That's not sharing..."

Even at that age, a child is appealing to a sense of universal justice: There is some sense of right and wrong. One child having *all* the available resources, and other child having none, is unfair, and needs re-dress. When there is injustice, justice needs to be restored. That is the way the universe is supposed to work...

Small children can be cute, but even at that age, we can see that there is something wrong with human nature, that one child will try to hog the favourite toy... At the same time, there is an appeal for justice to be restored: "That's not fair!!..."

When we are Christians, we believe in the Living God who cares passionately about right and wrong, and whose deep desire is for us to be restored into a renewed relationship, united with him. We can't fix ourselves, and flawed human beings can't be perfectly united with our perfect God... God is righteous and perfect; Paul's reading in Romans 3 (which we just heard) states God's righteousness with perfect clarity. In contrast, we ourselves have a serious problem, which left unchecked, leads to a kind of death...

So God acted decisively: When the time had fully come, God became one of us in Jesus Christ, so that we might be fully restored to him. Christ's crucifixion – previously only a horrible symbol of torture – is the perfect way in which we are restored to God... If we're disturbed by this fact, then we are getting it right, because God's ways are not our ways. It was the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that is the lynch-pin for the salvation of the world...

Christians do not believe that we are as horrible as we could be. Far from it! For we are made in the image of God. God does not love what is worthless...

However, if we're being honest with ourselves, then we have to admit our foibles and our failures – our grievous sin... One child taking another child's toy is *trivial*, compared with what we adults can do to one another, and against God...

How does the cross fit into this – that there is pervasive sin in the human race, and that justice needs to be restored?

Justice is restored when a price is paid, in one form or another... For a child who has snatched a toy, the price they might pay is not being able to keep the toy, or a “time-out,” or whatever the caring adult judges is a suitable way to make things right again... For adult sins, which are far more grave, and far more numerous when we consider the population of the world, a far greater price has to be paid... We can't pay it. We can't earn it. We can't restore the broken relationship on our own... To restore our broken relationship with God, some great offering must be made – a perfect offering, to our perfect God. Offerings of countless animals (as was done in the ancient world) will never be enough...

God can't say “it doesn't matter,” because right and wrong matter profoundly – most of all, to God himself... Jesus Christ is not some innocent third party in the restoration of the universe: We can't fix ourselves, so God made the perfect offering *through Jesus Christ himself*... All the pain, all the sin, all the death, all the natural consequences of our stupid misbehaviours or laziness, is paid for – but not by us. Instead, as our Substitute, Jesus Christ paid the full price...

We are being drawn into admitting our need for God and our need for universal justice, which was paid by Christ himself, on that terrible Friday in the springtime, in the Place of the Skull, outside Jerusalem... These astonishing facts of the intervention of God for the restoration of the world should not *leave us* in shame (although the realization that what we thought was hidden, God brings into the light, can be momentarily shameful)... Instead, our proper response is profound gratitude. A response is needed. For some of us, it's more like a lightning bolt of realization of our profound need for God. For others, it's more of a process of increasing clarity and surrender. Some of us – particularly those raised in Christian homes – might respond in childhood. For others, like the vineyard workers hired near the end of the day, the penny drops only a short time before our own deaths. As the late author John Stott once remarked, “It is not *when*, but *whether*, which is the most crucial thing...” In our reading today, Paul simply calls it “faith.” “Faith.” “Christ himself is righteous, and Christ justifies [that is, we are ‘pronounced innocent’] the one who has faith in Jesus...”

I invite you to join me, in a prayer of gratitude and humility:

Lord Jesus Christ, help me not to be casual about the stunning news of the cross.
Help me to admit my profound need for help, and to receive the help you provide.
Forgive me, please, and enter every corner of my life.
Equip me to serve you, now and for ever. Amen.