

‘Father, forgive them...’



Call to Worship



God made *him* who had **no sin** to be **sin for us**, so that in *him* we might become the **righteousness** of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21

We will come back to that later. In the meantime, let's sing about Jesus, our righteousness...the tune can be downloaded but the words are below

Hymn 'Jesus, thou art my righteousness' [to the tune Belmont CH4 632 'Our children, Lord, in faith and prayer']

<https://youtu.be/9b1XLdT7fks>

Jesus, Thou art my Righteousness,
For all my sins were Thine:
Thy death hath bought of God my peace,
Thy life hath made Him mine.

Forever here my rest shall be,
Close to Thy bleeding side;
This all my hope, and all my plea:
For me the Saviour died.

My dying Saviour and my God,
fountain for guilt and sin.
Sprinkle me ever with Thy Blood,
And cleanse and keep me clean.

Jesus, my Strength, my Life, my Rest,
On Thee will I depend,
Till summoned to the marriage-feast,
Where faith in sight shall end.

Prayer

Lord God,

We praise you for your magnificence. You are the epitome of all that is good, pure and lovely... a character that was made manifest in your original creation. We are so sorry for what humanity has done to wreck what you put in place and for the fact that we, as a race, have, to a large extent, ignored and abandoned you.

But we are so grateful that, in your great mercy, although we have on occasions rejected you, and gone our own way to 'do our own thing', you always had a plan to bring us back to you. To become once again, your righteousness.

At this time of Lent, Lord, as we approach the celebration of the fulfilment of your plan, in Jesus... we praise you for all that you have done for us. For opening the life-gate that all who believe in him may have a chance to enter in to your kingdom.

We thank you that, in Jesus' atoning work on the cross, we are wiped clean of all our sins. Lord, remove from us any lingering guilt that may be lurking within us, and make us vessels that, freed from the entanglement of sin and disobedience, are better prepared to do your will.

We confess, Lord, that we are not always prepared. Too often we hide our time, talents and money under a proverbial bushel. We do not want to reveal them for fear of getting involved, loss of personal freedom or what others might say. Lord help us to be people who, knowing that they have been forgiven much, may ourselves freely, freely give. Help us to go in your name, and because we believe, people will know that you live.

In Jesus' name we ask these things, and in his name we now pray the prayer that he taught us,

Our Father
Which art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom
The power and the glory
Forever.
Amen

Setting the Scene ‘They haven’t got a clue...’.



Our Call to Worship this morning ...

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

One of the great things about being a Reader who dips into a church on an occasional basis, is that one can choose the subject matter of one’s service on a one-off basis rather than having to stick to a particular theme. And so, as this is the only time that I am going to be leading worship here during the approach to Easter, I want to go right to the crux of the matter. The crux, of course, is the cross! And on that cross Jesus said,

‘Father, forgive them, for they haven’t a clue about what they are doing’¹

They haven’t a clue! That is my translation, not one that you will find in any of the bibles that you might read, but I think that it gives a good modern-day slant on what Jesus might have said.

Of course, it is inaccurate, because the people of Jesus’ day, particularly the religious leaders, did have a clue. In fact, they had numerous clues...

I am a great fan of detective stories. I have read all the Sherlock Holmes books more than once! Holmes, however, was meticulous in his following of all the clues available to him. Armed with his trusty magnifying glass he would examine everything in detail – unlike another well-known detective – Inspector Clouseau [point at the screen] who relied mainly on luck, frequently ignoring even the most obvious of clues.

If the religious leaders of Jesus’ day had just used their own magnifying glasses to examine the words of their prophets with ‘eyes to see’ and ‘ears to hear’



... to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness ... they would have been able to recognise that at that first Easter, they were crucifying the very God that they

¹ Luke 23:34

claimed to worship! Other selfish agendas, however, prevented them from doing so. To use another biblical metaphor, their 'hearts were hardened'.

And it is no different today. In fact, today there is even less reason for us to be clueless. Today, we have even more clues to the purpose of God than they did in Jesus' time. We have the New Testament – the testimony of Jesus himself and his followers. There is therefore even less reason than previously for us not to be able to solve the puzzle of God's purpose.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

By Jesus' blood, shed for us on the cross, we are washed clean, in God's eyes, from every spot and stain. That is what Easter is all about. Forgiveness and cleansing. Hallelujah! Let's praise God for that by singing...

Hymn CH4 110 'Glory be to God the Father'

<https://youtu.be/ikH8DfDADxc>

Readings Psalm 32:1-11; Luke 15:1-3;11b-32

Psalm 32[GNT] - Confession and Forgiveness

- 32** Happy are those whose sins are forgiven,
whose wrongs are pardoned.
- ² Happy is the one whom the LORD does not accuse of doing wrong
and who is free from all deceit.
- ³ When I did not confess my sins,
I was worn out from crying all day long.
- ⁴ Day and night you punished me, LORD;
my strength was completely drained,
as moisture is dried up by the summer heat.
- ⁵ Then I confessed my sins to you;
I did not conceal my wrongdoings.
I decided to confess them to you,
and you forgave all my sins.
- ⁶ So all your loyal people should pray to you in times of need;
when a great flood of trouble comes rushing in,
it will not reach them.
- ⁷ You are my hiding place;
you will save me from trouble.
I sing aloud of your salvation,
because you protect me.
- ⁸ The LORD says, "I will teach you the way you should go;
I will instruct you and advise you.
- ⁹ Don't be stupid like a horse or a mule,
which must be controlled with a bit and bridle
to make it submit."
- ¹⁰ The wicked will have to suffer,
but those who trust in the LORD

are protected by his constant love.

¹¹ You that are righteous, be glad and rejoice
You that obey him, shout for joy!

Luke 15: 1-3; 11b-32 - The Loving Father

One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts came to listen to Jesus, ² the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law started grumbling, “This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!” ³ So Jesus told them this parable:

“There was once a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to him, ‘Father, give me my share of the property now.’ So, the man divided his property between his two sons. ¹³ After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. ¹⁴ He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. ¹⁵ So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. ¹⁶ He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. ¹⁷ At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.”’ ²⁰ So he got up and started back to his father.

“He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. ²¹ ‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ ²² But the father called to his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. ²³ Then go and get the prize calf and kill it and let us celebrate with a feast! ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so, the feasting began.

²⁵ “In the meantime the older son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him, ‘What’s going on?’ ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come back home,’ the servant answered, ‘and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ The older brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. ²⁹ But he spoke back to his father, ‘Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! ³⁰ But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!’ ³¹ ‘My son,’ the father answered, ‘you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’”

It could be said that, despite everything that the prodigal son had done wrong, he was nevertheless, like us, welcomed back by his father. He was accepted. He was forgiven. Let’s sing about that now.

Hymn ‘I am accepted, I am forgiven’.

https://youtu.be/iyW9s_BIIVI

Sermon 'Not guilty... you are free to go!'



Picture the scene... You have never been so tense in your life. You have been held in custody for months, without bail, accused of murder. You committed the deed, but you have lodged a special defence! In Scots Law, a special defence is one which gets you off completely – but you have to prove it, not the prosecution. The courtroom battle itself has dragged on for weeks, draining your vitality and weighing upon you with increasing anxiety. Are you going to suffer a lifetime's agony in prison?

Finally, the big moment has arrived. Handcuffed, you are led up from the cells in the basement, into the courtroom itself. The jury files in. They have been out deliberating for many hours. The courtroom falls silent as the judge calls the court to order. He asks, "Members of the jury, do you have a verdict?" Your heart is pounding, and your mouth is dry as you watch the foreman rise. The rest of your life depends upon his words. "We have m'Lord... we find the accused NOT guilty."

Not guilty! A flood of relief sweeps over you and tears of joy well up in your eyes. Not guilty! It's as if a heavy weight has lifted from your shoulders! The judge declares, "You are free to go." You no longer stand under condemnation. You are free! Life suddenly takes on new meaning. Can you imagine how that would feel?

Every believer in Jesus Christ should be aware of this feeling!

We know that we have disobeyed God's law, but we also know that when we appear before the judgement seat of God, we have a special defence which will result in a verdict of 'not guilty'! Our special defence is not one of alibi, self-defence or insanity. It is simply that we believe in our advocate. The chap standing beside us pleading our case, on our behalf! None other than God, the Son.

King David knew the feeling! Whether Psalm 32, which was read for us, stemmed from David's sin with Bathsheba, or from some other incident, he certainly knew how it felt to have God condemn him. But he also knew the joy and relief of experiencing His forgiveness. David felt a heavy weight of guilt for what he had done, but he knew that he had been forgiven because he was loved by the true and living God - in whom there is no guilt or fear.

Whatever happened to guilt? It seems almost to have become a forgotten emotion in our day. Especially in political circles. It used to be that a politician would feel guilty about doing something wrong - and feel impelled to act on that guilt, but nowadays, rather than feeling guilty when we sin, we seem to psychoanalyse the reasons for our actions to find a way of avoiding responsibility. Do you think that President Putin feels any guilt for his actions in Ukraine or is he good at self psychoanalysis? I read recently about a well-known pastor in the United States who resigned, explaining to his congregation, "... I have stepped over the line of acceptable behaviour with some

members of the congregation.” Fair enough but, according to the Los Angeles Times, he then went on to say that he had *“tried on his own to face unspecified childhood issues and had been involved in years of denial and faulty coping techniques”*² The implication was that his self psycho analysis had persuaded him that his behaviour was not altogether his fault!

David does not adopt such an approach. He does not say “How blessed is he whose unspecified childhood issues are forgiven and whose denial and faulty coping techniques are covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute stepping over the line of acceptable behaviour!” David knew that he had sinned, and he felt deep guilt for his wrong actions. Apparently that guilt was even making him physically ill. We learn more about this in Psalm 38 where David says,

*LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath...*

*³ Because of your wrath there is no health in my body;
there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.*

*⁴ My guilt has overwhelmed me
like a burden too heavy to bear.*

To my mind, guilt is a healthy thing to experience when we have done wrong. If we do not feel guilt, it may well be that we are ignoring the seriousness of the matter. We should not be burdened by it, as that in itself is a sin, but we should nevertheless feel it! Appreciation of God’s gift of forgiveness is best experienced by those who feel most guilty about what they have done wrong... and until we feel the burden of guilt, we can’t truly exclaim with David,

“How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!”

The burden of our guilt should drive us to seek the blessings of forgiveness.

And we should never think that we have done nothing which needs God’s forgiveness. That we are ‘holier than thou’. Paul says

... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

But he goes on to say

and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.³

We are back to our Call to Worship. Falling short of the glory of God means that we have sinned and not achieved the standard of righteousness that God requires but we are justified, made righteous, forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, and the salvation achieved by him for us on the cross.

² Los Angeles Times [2/22/93], p. B1.

³ Romans 3:23-24

In his psalm, David uses four different Hebrew words for our single word sin, and it is only when we fully recognise these, that we can better understand what it means to become 'the righteousness of God'

The first word is transgression. This involves rebellion, a deliberate refusal to submit to rightful authority. Literally, crossing a line. God has ordained certain limits for human behaviour for our good and the good of society. When we go against those limits, we transgress; we are really saying that we refuse to be subject to God's rightful authority in our lives.

Next, David uses the word sin itself. Sin is missing the mark... it is coming up short of the target which God wants us to hit. An archer does not feel satisfied unless his arrows hit the bull's eye. Missing the mark is unacceptable.

The third word that David uses is iniquity. I am told that the root of this word is 'bent or twisted'. Perverting what is right. Straying from the way. Whenever we have compromised our faith, we have committed iniquity.

And the final word used by David for sin is deceit. This involves a deliberate cover-up, falsehood, hypocrisy. Trying to present a false front so that you look good - even when you know you're not. Like the Pharisees who Jesus described as whited sepulchres - shiny white on the outside but full of rotten corpses!

But the same man who in verse 4 complained that he was oppressed by God's hand because of his wrongdoing goes on in verses 6 and 7 to declare that God is his hiding place. Previously, he feared God as his judge, now he takes refuge in Him as a protector who he says surrounds him with songs of deliverance whenever he feels afraid.

Remember the TV programme from the late 50s, early 60s, 'Wagon Train'? It provided a wonderful insight into the trials and tribulations of families crossing the American prairies in search of new lives. Well, as I was preparing this talk, I came across a story about just such a wagon train which came over a hill and was terrified to see a prairie fire racing in its direction. It seemed as if the folk on the train would be engulfed by the flames. But the leader quickly rode to the rear of the caravan and set the dry grass behind them on fire. The same wind that was blowing the flames toward them fanned the new fire away from them. Within minutes they all moved to the burned-out area. As the heat and smoke became more intense, a little girl cried out, "Are you sure we're safe?" "Oh, yes," said the wagon master, "we're safe because we're standing on ground where the fire has already been."

What's the moral of this story for us? Christ, by his death on the cross has taken the fire of God's judgment which was coming in our direction and placed it behind us. We are safe from the oncoming fire if we take refuge in Him. But we must want to take that refuge with all of our heart. No half measures.

The parable of the prodigal son illustrates this perfectly. It is the ideal foil to Psalm 32, as it talks about a son who had totally disobeyed his father. The fourth commandment is to honour one's father and mother but, by doing what he did, the

son showed no honour whatsoever to his father. However, rather than focusing on the poor behaviour of the son, we should really be concentrating upon the father. The story is really about the loving and forgiving nature of a father towards a dishonourable and profligate son. It is the third of three illustrations given by Jesus, when the Pharisees criticised him for associating with people that they thought could not possibly be loved by God.

Jesus firstly tells them about a shepherd who, upon losing one sheep from a fold of 100, leaves the flock and goes out searching for the lost sheep. Then he talks about a woman who loses a valuable coin... although having nine others, she goes searching everywhere until she finds the one that is lost. And it is against this backdrop that Jesus tells the story of the loving father - desperate to find his lost son and willing to do whatever it might take to bring him back into relationship. This resonates completely with those of us who are parents - especially if we have experienced the devastation of a loved one who has gone off the rails.

In the time of Jesus, it was unheard of for a son to claim his inheritance before the death of his father. It was the most enormous slight against the father for a son to even suggest this. Most fathers would have refused categorically to agree to what was proposed, and by doing so might have stoked up resentment on the part of the son, for years. But the point of the story was that the father wanted to allow his son to do his own thing in the hope that having done so he would see the error of his ways and return home.

That is what happened to David. David tells us in Psalm 32 that, to begin with, he did not acknowledge that he had done anything wrong, but he goes on to say, in verse 5...

*Then I confessed my sins to you;
I did not conceal my wrongdoings.
I decided to confess them to you,
and you forgave all my sins.*

This has so many echoes of the prodigal son...

I will get up and go to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers." So, he got up and started back to his father.⁴

And, having decided, like David, to confess his wrongdoings to his father, we read that the father forgave him all of his sins.

It happened to David, it happened to the prodigal, and it has happened to us. None of us deserve God's forgiveness. We have all dishonoured him by the way that we have lived our lives... but he is desperate to forgive us! Jesus says, when telling the story of the lost sheep,

⁴ Luke 15:18-20

*In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.*⁵

We are back to righteousness again... and there is a degree of irony here! Jesus was talking to the Pharisees who thought that they were a cut above everyone else. They thought that if anyone was right with God it was them - but we know from Paul that no one is without sin. Indeed, Jesus said to the sanctimonious folk who accused the woman caught in adultery,

“He that is without sin among you, let him be the first to cast a stone at her.”

And no one did! We have all sinned against God. We all need to confess our sins and repent. Why? So that we may be forgiven and ‘become the righteousness of God’.

And when we do, there is great joy in heaven! David talks about the joy that experiencing God’s forgiveness brings. He says...

*those who trust in the LORD
are protected by his constant love.
11 You that are righteous, be glad and rejoice
You that obey him, shout for joy!*

It is the same joy that our man charged with murder might experience when proclaimed “Not guilty!” The verdict frees him from the weight of the punishment that he was expecting, frees him from condemnation. Because Christ has paid the penalty due by us for our disobedience, God declares us ‘Not Guilty’! There is no greater joy than that of knowing that our sins are totally forgiven.

The loving father showed his joy at the prodigal’s return. It was fulsome

‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. 23 Then go and get the prize calf and kill it and let us celebrate with a feast! 24 For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so, the feasting began.

What joy the son must have felt by the reaction of his father that he had wronged!

That is why Jesus, in agony on the cross on Good Friday, was able to ask his Father to forgive his persecutors,

‘Father forgive them for they haven’t a clue about what they are doing’

Even in his agony, Jesus’ concern was for the forgiveness of those who counted themselves amongst his enemies. He asked the Father to forgive the thieves on the cross who jeered at him. He asked the Father to forgive the Roman soldiers who had

⁵ Luke 15:7

mocked him, spat on him, beat him, yanked out his beard, whipped him, put a crown of thorns on his head and nailed him to the cross. He asked forgiveness for the angry mob that had mocked him and called for his crucifixion... but it is important to realise that Jesus' prayer 'Father, forgive them' does not mean that everyone was forgiven, unilaterally, without repentance and faith. What it does mean, however, is that Jesus was willing to forgive them – that was the reason that he was on the cross. The words 'Father, forgive them' show the merciful heart of God for the prodigal that is willing to turn towards his father.

Hymn MP 181 'God forgave my sin in Jesus' name'.

<https://youtu.be/QJ3eklr3fc0>

Prayer

Lord God, we know that you are always with us in times of trouble. We pray for our world: for the leaders of the nations and their governments... and, in particular at this time, for the government of Ukraine and for its people. Save them from this terrible time of trial. Enable President Putin to see the error of his ways... blessed are the peacemakers. But in all of this, Lord, may your will be done. May the nations hear **your** voice: and know that you are God, supreme over all the world.

Lord, we pray for our communities as we seem to be emerging from two years of covid restriction... for the elderly, often confined to their homes and separated from family and support; for those who have lost their source of income; for those who continue to fear for their home; for those who have **no** home; for those offering extraordinary, everyday kindnesses to their afflicted neighbours.

And we pray for the young, and those in education: for those anxious about the state of the world and the potential for war, worried about the effects of covid, their exams, a place at university, their own health. Lord, you are our shelter and our strength, always ready to help us in time of trouble. Our future and our hope. Let them not be afraid, even though the world is changing.

We pray for key workers: for all medical staff and hospital workers, who go to work knowing the risks they face, from covid and other diseases; we pray for medical researchers, seeking ways to prevent and to cure; for social workers, protecting the vulnerable; for care workers, providing contact and support to those who have no other help; for teachers, worrying about their charges; for farmers, delivery and shop workers, keeping the nation provisioned; for cleaners, fighting the spread of infection; Lord, be with us all in our time of need: help us to do what has been asked of us, and give us grace to help others do what has been asked of them.

Lord, we pray for those known to us who are sick: for those afflicted with coronavirus or its long-term effects; for those with other illnesses and conditions which leave them vulnerable; for those with poor mental health - for all who suffer... Lord, we trust in you because your love is constant: bring them **all** comfort and healing,

And finally, Lord, at this difficult time of change, within the national and worldwide Church we pray for our fellow members in the body of Christ throughout the world,

for the Church of Scotland and, particularly, for ourselves and the church here at Carnock and Oakley. You are before us Lord, you are behind, and you are also in our midst ... keep us fearless in proclaiming your Word and works and make us to be lights in the darkness of an evil world, for we know that you are the God of our salvation.

And all these things we bring before you through our Saviour, your Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Hymn CH4 540 'I heard the voice of Jesus say'

<https://youtu.be/74kyfROS4q8>

Benediction

May the God of peace
who brought our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep,
back from the dead by the blood of the eternal covenant,
equip you with every good thing
that you may do his will,
working in us that which is pleasing in his sight,
through Jesus Christ, t
o whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen.

Hebrews 13:20-21