

## THE LORD IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

### Jeremiah 33:14–16

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.” (Jeremiah 33:15–16).

Last week we were listening to the last words of David (2 Sam 23:1–7). David, 1,000 years before Christ, was the greatest king Israel ever had, and God gave him some wise words about ruling. Remember? A true ruler is one who serves the people he rules over, like God does with His whole creation: like the sun coming up in the morning, and like the rain on the grass.

God also promised David that an even greater ruler would come from his family—like a branch coming out of the stump of a tree. That is what this prophecy given to Jeremiah 400 years later is all about:

I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land (Jeremiah 33:15).

An interesting name this ‘Branch’ is going to be called, which tells us something about what he would come to do. His name is: “The LORD is our righteousness.” How do we make sense of that? Surely our righteousness is our own righteousness—or unrighteousness as the case may be—and God’s righteousness is God’s righteousness, which would be of quite a different order. How can we say that *God is our* righteousness?

Maybe we don’t think about our own righteousness much. Not perhaps in quite that way. ‘Righteousness’ is not a word we use much these days. But the question of our righteousness, or rightness, or right standing or, to use another similar word, our justification—how we justify ourselves or put ourselves in the right—is with us all the time. If I were ask now: ‘How do you justify your existence?’ or ‘What is it that gives you right standing in your own eyes?’ what would we say?

There are a lot of things we use to justify our existence, or make ourselves feel important in some way. It might be how long we've lived in Port Lincoln. Or what school we went to. Or who we know. Someone new turns up at church, and they get quizzed: 'Are you from around here? Have you been part of this church? How long have you been in Port Lincoln? I don't remember you—did you go to such-and-such a school?' We call ourselves a welcoming church, but we don't realise how off-putting such questions can be. Why do we ask them? We've all got insecurities in our lives, and each of us have a measure of self-doubt from time to time, and maybe we over-rely on those things—where we come from, what we belong to, who we are connected with—to reassure us about ourselves as to who we are. But it can result in putting a barrier up between us and people who are not like us, so we end up excluding people who don't come from where we come from.

I wrote about this in the last issue of the *Here and Now* parish magazine—dig it out and re-read it, or look it up on the parish website. I said, "Every church has its 'gatekeepers'". Gatekeepers are people who are supposed to keep the gates open so lots of people can come in. But I said, "Often they have a reputation for keeping people out, or turning them away. Any community of sinners has a natural tendency to screen out people who are not quite 'like us', or 'one of us', and to relegate them to the margins". Often we are doing this without even realising it, even when we don't mean to, which is tragic. And the reason we do it is maybe because we ourselves sometimes feel a little bit inferior and in danger of being excluded, and we shore ourselves up in that way. So I said, "The tragedy is that everyone then feels marginalised in one way or another." So there's not a lot of future in that.

We have all sorts of ways of doing this—often it has to do with who we know: 'Oh, you're from such-and-such a place—do you know so-and-so?' It may be just trying to make a friendly connection, but sometimes it can be more than that: 'Oh—you don't know so-and-so—?' As if to say, 'I know someone you don't know, and that makes me a bit more special than you'. Silly, isn't it?

Often it can be us relying on something we've done: 'I've run this kind of business, or that kind of business. You haven't had that experience? Oh—so I guess you wouldn't know about that'. Sometimes it can be where we've travelled to: 'Have you been to this country, or that country? Oh—you haven't—? Well, when we were there . . .'—as if that gives us some kind of status?

All of these are ways of trying to establish our own righteousness, some position of honour in our own or others' eyes—as if we somehow feel the need to do that—some right standing of our own.

Another way we do it is having family going way back. Even in the church. I can play that game—people say, 'Bleby—that's a good old Anglican name in Adelaide, isn't it? Well, it's true—I had two grandfathers that were priests, and one of them was a Canon, and my father was an Archdeacon—and that's supposed to make me someone special—? When I came here it was noted by someone that my brother David was a Supreme Court judge—and good on him! But does that give me some kind of righteousness or right standing? I don't think so.

Paul the apostle said he could play that game too—as a proper Jew. He said he'd been through and done all the right things: 'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews . . .' [I could say, 'I'm and Anglican born of Anglicans'! There might have been a bit of Congregational also somewhere in the background, but we won't mention that!]. So Paul was ' . . . a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee [the most dedicated and conscientious of all the Jewish people]; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless'—he'd kept it all. But even though he could have got a lot of kudos from that, Paul refused to play that game—because he knew something so much better than that. Here's what Paul went on to say: 'Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a

righteousness of my own that comes from the law [by doing all the right things], but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith' (Philippians 3:5–9).

Now is that name given to the Branch in the passage from Jeremiah starting to make sense? What was that name? "The LORD is our righteousness." What did Paul say—'not having a righteousness of my own . . . but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God'.

In the Anglican Church we are privileged to have a prayer, called the Prayer of Humble Access. A lot of people don't use it any more—it wasn't in the special forms of service that we used over the last four Sundays, prepared for us by the Diocese. But we'll use it again this morning. I think it gives expression to the quintessence of true Anglican spirituality. It begins by saying, 'We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness'. There we are: no righteousness of our own that we are putting our trust in. We've discarded all of that as rubbish. Then what are we putting our trust in? 'We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies'—we're trusting in God's 'manifold and great mercies'—something that God has done towards us. We go on to illustrate this with a picture taken from the gospels: 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table'. That's how much righteousness we've actually got. Pictures are very powerful. Whether it's used a lot or a little today, this prayer has been much beloved by previous generations. I remember in my first year of ministry, 1971, as an assistant curate in Mount Gambier, I used to take Communion to an old fellow in the Boandik Lodge nursing home. He was deaf as a post—he had one of those big old hearing aids—like a transistor radio—strapped to his chest: kind of 'Are you receiving me? Over!' We used a shortened form of the Communion Service, but there was one bit he never wanted left out. Every time he would say to me, 'Don't forget the crumbs under the table!' He wouldn't have missed that prayer for all the world.

'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table'. Modern people might say, 'Isn't that putting ourselves down?' I don't think

so. I think it's just being realistic. When have we sinners ever been worthy enough to join the pure and strong, high and holy creator God at his table? Do we think we might have been able to scratch together a few shreds of our own righteousness to be able to pick up maybe the odd crumb? No way!

Especially as God does not want us to have crumbs. God wants us to have the whole meal—all of Himself—in His Son. How does the prayer end? 'Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us'. What did Paul say—'that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . . I want to know Christ'. No righteousness of our own, but the righteousness from God that comes through faith in Christ. 'And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness"' (Jeremiah 33:16). Paul says, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death'—even if it means letting go of everything else, and even suffering on account of him, I will be glad to be close with him in that way—'if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead' (Philippians 3:8–11).

So, when we start off with no righteousness of our own, how does the Lord get to be our righteousness? By Jesus Christ, the Son of God, coming to be totally identified with us—in our best and at our worst—and us being totally identified with him, and with what he has done for us, that we can say that we dwell in him, and he in us, and his righteousness is ours, and that righteousness of his works its way out through our lives, and into the life to come. As we used to pray: 'our sinful bodies . . . made clean by his body'—pristine—'and our souls washed through his most precious blood'—as thorough as that. We don't pray those words any more either, more's the pity.

Dear friends, I plead with you, whatever we may have been using to justify ourselves, whether it be to prop up our sagging self-esteem, or to claim some shred of self-righteousness and right standing for ourselves—whether it be where we were born, or where we've lived, or which school we went to, or who we know, or what we've done, or where we've been, or who our

family is, or what we belong to—I know how much it means to us, when we have been relying on that all along to give us some sense of self-importance—but if that's what we've been relying on, please let it go. Discard it for the load of rubbish that it is, and come on board with Christ—so much more, so much better, the full deal: all of God.

Does that mean that those things we have been trusting in are of no value? Not at all. Birthplace, homeland, schooling, friends and connections, achievements, travel, family, things we belong to—these are all good gifts of God. But they are never to take the place of God as that which gives us some righteousness or right standing of our own.

When I was at university I got a leading role in a play in the Union Hall. I put my heart and soul into it—it became my whole life. When it was over, they were taking down the sets on the stage, there was a ripping noise, and it was as if my very soul was being torn apart. That was when I realised: 'Hang on—a play, that lasts just a few weeks, is no thing to base your whole life on', and reluctantly I let it go. We let these things go, to God, and then often, as he sees fit, God can give them back to us. After that, I still enjoyed many years of amateur theatre, but in the right perspective.

There may be some listening here this morning to whom none of this applies. They may say, 'I've never claimed anything I've been and done as my righteousness. I've never had any righteousness, and I don't ever expect to.' Someone once asked me for special prayer for her need, and when we had prayed she said, 'I always feel uncomfortable praying for myself'. And I said, 'I'm sure you've prayed for lots of other people, and God loves you as much as he loves them. So you can pray for yourself. Besides, lots of us are praying for you as well'. That's how it is in the body of Christ. Isn't that good? So to those of us who say 'I have no righteousness, and I don't ever expect to', I say, 'Let us never put ourselves down, or underestimate God's great love and mercy and favour and goodness towards us. If we are in Christ, and he has come to be in us, we are in all the righteousness of God. Never settle for anything less.'

“The LORD is our righteousness.”

I have no righteousness  
But the righteousness  
In which I stand with God in Christ,  
And all that I confess  
Is God's righteousness,  
By which the Lamb was sacrificed.

There once was righteousness  
In Eden's happiness,  
When we with God-given glory shone,  
But then in wrong despite  
We turned against the light—  
The image marred, the glory gone.

All our self-righteousness  
And goodness we profess  
Is filthy rags and naked shame:  
Helpless in our distress,  
In spite and bitterness,  
Until the Man of Glory came.

Sent from the Holy One,  
He is the Father's Son,  
(No one is good but God alone);  
That He might take His grace  
Into the darkest place,  
And there for all our sins atone.

He is our righteousness,  
Our saving Holiness,  
Our Wisdom, Life and Light and Peace.  
Set free in righteousness,  
His praises we express,  
And look to joys that never cease.

I have no righteousness  
But the righteousness  
In which I stand with God in Christ,  
And all that I confess  
Is God's righteousness  
By which the Lamb was sacrificed.

Advent 1 C  
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And O what joy is mine  
To know this love divine—  
The length and breadth and depth and height!  
Now I am undefiled  
That I might be Your child,  
And be most precious in Your sight.

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