

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly.
Acts 21.17.

Today is Reformation Sunday. On 31 October 1517, a monk who taught scripture at the university of Wittenberg, nailed 95 Theses, 95 points of argument, on the door of the local church. The monk's name was Martin Luther, and his nailing his 95 Theses on the church door began a cataclysmic process which would bitterly divide Europe into Roman Catholic and Protestant. But what was it all about? What was it that had got under Luther's skin so much? What was it that caused so much anguish, so much war, and so much bloodshed?

Partly people were sick of the corruption of the church and its worldliness. Popes and bishops should be spiritual leaders not politicians. Clergy shouldn't be rich. But it was all triggered off when the Pope needed to raise a fortune to rebuild St Peter's in Rome. Fundraisers were sent round Europe selling what were called 'indulgences'. If you paid so much money, you would get so many days out of heaven. Luther was aghast. This issue which might seem nothing to you today, got to the very heart of everything Jesus was about, and it is this: you can't buy God's love. You can't buy salvation. You can't buy your ticket into heaven.

Luther went back to the Bible. In *Romans*, he read about something called 'justification by faith'. You are justified, saved, get into heaven, simply by having faith in God and what Jesus has done *for you*, not what *you* can do for *God*. Thinking that you get into heaven by what *you* can do for God Luther found was called 'justifying yourself by your *works*'.

You can't buy love. You can't buy *God's* love. You cannot make yourself better so that God will accept you. The glorious good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ is that God already accepts you as you are, because of what Jesus did for you on the Cross.

OK, end of the history lesson. So what? What's that got to do with me? Here's a headline from last week's newspaper:

PERFECT GRADES, PERFECT BODIES, PERFECT BOYFRIENDS. MIDDLE-CLASS GIRLS TODAY ARE UNDER UNPRECEDENTED PRESSURE TO SUCCEED - AND IT'S SENDING THEM INTO **SUPER-GIRL MELTDOWN**.

That's a bit over-the-top, I know, but it expresses a deep anxiety in our modern society: the huge pressure to succeed. We want it all. We want to be perfect - the perfect bodies, perfect houses, perfect jobs, perfect marriages, perfect children - and *then*, then people will accept us. They'll *like* us. Life seems to be a massive struggle to get other people to accept us, or so we *imagine*. No-one could possibly accept us as we are with our middle-age spreads, grey hair, our little homes, our disappointing children, and ordinary car. And that's the point, isn't it? Ordinary isn't good enough today.

One of the most successful men of our age was Sir Ludovic Kennedy. What a glittering career: Eton, Cambridge, author, famous TV personality, knighthood. But underneath this was deep anxiety and insecurity. His mother loathed him and he felt it. He spent his life trying to impress her, to be good enough to deserve her love.

And *that* is what Luther meant when he kept going on about 'justification by faith not by works'. You don't need to try to be good enough to win God's love. He already loves you. Just believe it. Have faith that God already loves you.

So many eating disorders stem from people trying to win love. They look at themselves in the mirror. They are skeletons, but they think they are fat. 'If only I can make myself thinner, people will admire me and love me'. In so many ways this desperate attempt to win other people's approval is the cause of deep, deep anxiety and insecurity. If I get into St Aidan's; if I get to Oxford; if I'm thin; if I'm rich; if I've got a smart car, people will like me.

That is certainly how the *world* operates. That is how it sees success and failure. But let me tell you, that is *not* how God operates. He already loves you. He accepts you *now*. Yes, you're a sinner, a moral failure. Who isn't? But Jesus has already paid the price for you on Calvary's Cross. All you have to do is hold out your hands and receive the gift of love and forgiveness and acceptance he wants so much to give to you. A great theologian once said that the hardest thing in the world to accept is acceptance. Just have faith that God already accepts you in Jesus his Son. If I had to sum up this wonderful message it would be in this sentence: 'there is nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less'. We need to hang on to that. And the Bible word for that freely offered love is Grace.

Let's go back to our passage from Acts 21.17ff on p1118. V17, when they arrived at Jerusalem the brothers received them *warmly*. It's cold world out there where we *aren't* always received warmly, and not everyone out there is our *brother*. But we are brothers and sisters to each other in church. Whether we're rich, beautiful, dumpy, ordinary, Oxbridge or left school

at 15, it doesn't matter here in Christ's church. There is one thing and one thing alone which we all have in common, and that is that we are all sinners, who desperately need Jesus Christ and his forgiving Calvary work. So 'in Christ' we're brothers.

We're all moral failures here, so it doesn't really matter whether you're rich or poor, educated or not, pretty or plain, we're still sinners who need redeeming.

Later in our passage the brethren get into a frightful mess about whether Christians need to keep the OT Law of Moses, vv20-22a... Just to prove that he wasn't *anti* the Jewish Law, Paul agreed to go through a Jewish ritual about shaving the head, vv22-24. The point was that Paul would never agree that you can earn God's love by *keeping* the Law. This is the main argument of his letter to the Galatians.

Islam is a religion of *works*. *If* you do this and this and this, Allah *might* accept you and let you into Paradise. Mormonism is a religion of works. *If* you prove yourself a good enough Mormon, you can get into heaven. This is *not* Christianity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is *not* about what you can do for God; it's about what Christ has already done for you on that Cross. You cannot buy God's love or favour. You cannot make him accept you. He *already* accepts you. Just accept it. You are his child, and he already loves you, because Jesus has paid for your sins. The hymn 'Rock of ages' sums it all up:

Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace.

Beautiful isn't it? Who says the world doesn't need this grace?