

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 10th October 2010

Acts 13:38 - "Right with God"

Will I be forgiven? This is going to date me a little, but that is the question which the singer Alanis Morissette asks in the last line of the final verse of one of her songs. 'One last stupid question' she calls it, 'Will I be forgiven?' I'm getting blank looks from our teenagers in the youth group. OK I'm about fifteen years out of date talking about Alanis Morissette, but I did a little check with Google and actually the theme of forgiveness is right up there in more contemporary music. Leona Lewis, I noticed, has a song called Forgiveness. I certainly don't think it is a stupid question... Could anything, really, be more important? 'Will I be forgiven?' In Alanis Morissette's song there is no answer – and I wonder what she would have made of this statement of the Apostle Paul's that we are going to consider tonight: ***'Through Jesus,' he said, 'the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.'***

Whenever we're thinking about Christianity for ourselves or talking about it with others it makes a lot of sense to go right back to what the first century Christians believed. That way we are in touch with genuine historical Christianity. And this little statement is taken from one of the earliest recorded Christian sermons, written down for us in Acts 13 by a historian who was a contemporary of Paul's. We're looking at the whole sermon he preached next week – but this week it's just this one sentence: ***'Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you'.***

They're words which highlight first of all our **need of forgiveness**.

1. Our need of forgiveness.

Maybe that question 'Will I be forgiven?' isn't actually one you ask much. But for Paul to make that the central plank of his message suggests he thinks it is one which everyone ought to ask. When he said this it wasn't something he was aiming at his hearers specifically, as if they were a special case, particularly in need of forgiveness: it wasn't that he was speaking to a hardcore group of psychopathic killers or sex-offenders. This is something he would have said to anyone and everyone, on the assumption we all need forgiveness: ***Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you...***

So if Paul had been out on the crowded streets of Cambridge yesterday, yes – he'd have seen a whole variety of people, young and old, large and small, some highly academic, others much less educated; some comfortably off others, others begging for their very existence, some with lots of family and friends, others on their own or in a world of their own... All very different, but one thing he could be certain of every last one of them – that each would need forgiveness.

If we ask why, the answer lies within the phrase itself – 'the forgiveness ***of sins***'. It is our sin that needs to be forgiven – a condition which the Bible claims that every single one of us has. At one level, we probably don't take convincing that our lives aren't perfect. Just imagine for the sake of argument that on the screen up here instead of projecting the words of our hymns we had been watching a film of your life. Incidentally it isn't so implausible is it? I don't know where the statistic

came from but I remember hearing Lavinia Byrne the radio presenter saying that on average in city centre London in one day you might appear on a total of 400 hours of closed circuit television.

So just imagine that your life had been caught in its entirety on film – digitally enhanced to include all the deeds you'd ever done, all the words you'd spoken even all your thoughts, desires and inner drives – many things you've forgotten about, other things no-one else knows about. And we were all to see it.

There's lots in the film which you would want to be erased, isn't there: especially if all the other characters who appeared in the film of your life were invited to the showing as well. I'm glad it's not my life were watching.

But as far as the Bible is concerned that's not the half of it. The horror of our sin is not that we've offended other people – it's that behind each of those acts that mar our lives there is an unspoken attitude of rebellion against God. In spite of the fact that God made me and I belong to him – in spite of the fact that it is God's world and he's in charge – I ignore him, I assume centre-stage. I live as if he doesn't matter – so much so that I am hardly aware I am doing it.

When I used to live up in Manchester, I was a tenant in a council house and through some oversight, my rent stopped being paid by the church I worked for... Unknown to me this went on for quite a while – until some months later the letters began to come from the council. At first they were quite moderate in tone: 'You haven't paid; please settle up.' Then they began to get a little stronger: 'if you don't pay up soon, we'll have to press charges'. In the end it was pretty insistent... 'Pay up today, or you're on the street tomorrow'.

The message was pretty clear: 'it's not your house, so stop behaving as if you own the place'. And God could say the same to each of us about our lives – 'it's not yours, it's mine'. Or about our world: 'stop strutting around in my world as if you own the place.' What if GOD were to watch the film footage of our lives with us – if we really saw what our unspoken attitude to him was – ignoring him, dismissing him as an irrelevance?

We'd rightly be ashamed! Even if by comparison with other people, I convince myself I live quite a good life – still it's my attitude to God that is the really significant thing.

Perhaps an example will help: suppose there was an excellent sailor, on an old ship – he's sailed the seven seas, very experienced, safety-conscious, hard-working, and committed to the welfare of the crew, a real team player, trusted by the captain because he is so reliable. There's just one thing I haven't told you about him: the flag flying above the ship he sails is a skull and cross-bones. He's a pirate.

Suddenly that changes everything.

Good sailor he may be, but it's in a bad cause. And in fact because he's a good sailor that means that he advances the cause of piracy more: he might hold up that wicked cause if he wasn't such a good sailor!

The point is this: any really significant evaluation of a person's behaviour has to take into account not just our actions but our motivations as well. Not just what we do, but the whole direction in

which life is lived in relation to God. To be a good person in opposition to God... is to be in opposition to God: AND THEREFORE TO NEED FORGIVENESS. For the Bible is absolutely clear: my sin must either be forgiven before I die, or it will be punished after death. I won't be able to ignore God and defy him forever. To treat him the way we do is a terrible crime; and if we're not forgiven, the punishment for that crime will be terrible. Hence our need of forgiveness.

But Paul is equally clear about a second thing: **the provision of forgiveness.**

2. The provision of forgiveness

'Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you'. There was a lecturer in a teaching hospital who was trying to demonstrate the danger of too much alcohol and to prove his point he placed a live worm in a glass of water another live worm in a glass of whisky.

At the end of his lecture he turned to the two glasses The worm in the water was wriggling about strongly but the worm in the whisky was still, obviously stone dead. The lecturer turned to his audience of medical students and asked 'What's the lesson to be learned?' A quick reply came from the back: 'if you've got worms, drink lots of whisky.'

Which I dare say is not an appropriate remedy! But what is God's remedy for our sin? Let's notice to begin with that it is a person: 'Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you'. That means we're not talking about a vague mystical experience, but a figure of history, Jesus of Nazareth – a real person, who lived in Palestine 2000 years ago. If we'd been in the right place at the right time we could have seen him for ourselves.

I know there are any number of modern day theories about him – some claim to be serious attempts to give us a new and improved Jesus for today's world. Others are simply bizarre – like the philologist John Allegro, who suggested that Jesus was just a code word for an ancient sex-cult, inspired by magic mushrooms: a theory which did nothing for Allegro's academic reputation and which in the words of one critic 'gave mushrooms a bad name'.

At the end of the day you have to ask, surely, whether modern day reconstructions of Jesus Christ 2000 years on are more likely to get things right than the accounts of people from his own day or not. At the very least, surely, those accounts have a fair claim to be heard as evidence about him. So I wonder if you're prepared to read – or re-read one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus. If the answer is yes – I'd love to give you a copy of Mark's gospel afterwards – just ask me for one.

Interestingly, if you read his account, you find that over 1/3 of it is about the last week of Jesus life. That's not normally how we write biography – to focus on someone's death. But the point is this: that the hour for which Jesus came into the world was the hour in which he left it – because when he died was the moment he made provision for our forgiveness.

Jesus' words as he was crucified explain it all. Initially, if you remember, Jesus said nothing, while his enemies mocked and jeered – then there was an extraordinary darkness and all was quiet and still. When suddenly Jesus shattered the silence with a cry: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

What did he mean? Well think of our won sin as being our attempt to forsake God. I go my way, not God's. The consequence of that is that I will be God-forsaken. God gives me what I have chosen: If I choose to forsake God, then forsaken by God is what I will be. That is the full horror of what will happen in hell if I die unforgiven. But listen to that cry again: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Not of course because Jesus had forsaken God: he never did go his own way. And yet at the cross Jesus Christ suffered the spiritual torment of hell – God treated him as if he had lived the life on that film showing of Simon Scott's life – as if he'd thought and said and done all those things. He was literally God-forsaken. Which means that my sin has been punished – he has taken it from me. So that, if I accept his offer I need not face that punishment myself.

Do you remember that bombing which happened in a church in Cape Town, South Africa a few years back- we have some former members of that church here – there was a very moving illustration of what happened at the cross there. Halfway through a normal Sunday service, gunmen burst into the building throwing grenades and spraying the congregation with bullets. There was an English 17 year old there called Richard Okill, sitting between two girl-friends – and when one grenade rolled across the floor to them instinctively he threw himself on top of it to protect them. They were unharmed, but he was killed. That's heroic love! But you see Jesus' love is even more amazing because he gave his life not for his friends but for his enemies. 'If you want to understand the Christian faith', someone said, 'you must begin with the wounds of Christ.' The provision of forgiveness: 'Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you'.

All that remains is **the acceptance of forgiveness**.

3. The acceptance of forgiveness.

'Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you'. 'In other words', Paul was saying, 'you've heard about it – what are you going to do?'

There was an occasion once when Mohammed Ali, at the time, the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the world, was flying interstate across America for a title fight. Suddenly the flight's captain announced: 'Ladies and gentlemen please fasten your seat-belts; we're about to enter a storm and I'm expecting some sever turbulence.' It was a blunt announcement and everyone did as they were told – except Mohammed Ali – who sat happily in hi first class seat without fastening his belt.

When the stewardess came through the cabin checking everyone she had to repeat the captain's message to Mohammed Ali: 'Sir,' she said, 'We're entering a storm and the Captain has asked everyone to wear their seat belts'. Ali replied: 'Superman don't need no seat-belt.' And quick as a flash the stewardess answered him: 'Superman don't need no plane.'

It's pretty arrogant if you're five miles up in the sky entering a storm in a great big piece of aluminium to say you don't need a seat belt. But it is no less arrogant to say in effect: 'Superman don't need no forgiveness'. When you think about the way God provided forgiveness, that simply can't be right, can it? If Jesus Christ had to die, then obviously no other route is open to us for receiving forgiveness – or God would surely have taken it. If I could have made it into friendship with God by trying harder to please him in some way or other, then Jesus' death need not have happened: Do you really think God would have gone through with it if it wasn't absolutely

necessary? Of course not. Moreover, would Jesus have endured that spiritual torment, if these were not issues of massive importance for every one of us here?

Let's return to that question: 'Will I be forgiven?' Well I hope some here will at least commit themselves to finding out more; if there is even the merest possibility of the Christian message being true, then surely you can't just shrug it off and do nothing: it must be worth finding out more.

Maybe for others, finding out more is not what you need... It's actually time for you to accept his forgiveness; to ask him for it and to receive it. It'll be the best decision you ever make. There is a cost to it; but the fact that Jesus loved us enough to go to the cross ought to reassure us that whatever changes he makes in our lives will only be for the best. By all means come and talk to me afterwards, take a booklet – but don't delay unnecessarily. Forgiveness is not automatic: this is a message which demands a personal response, the acceptance of forgiveness: ***'Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you'***.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)