

Where Justice and Mercy Meet

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Preacher: James MacBeth

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of May 2003. The preacher is James Macbeth.

His sermon is entitled Where Justice and If Mercy Meet and is based on Romans 4.25-5.8 It would be good if you could keep that passage open there in front of you.

I'll be focusing primarily on just verses 6 to 8 a bit later in the sermon. Let's pray. Father, we come to you tonight as the living God, the God who speaks and does us exactly as he says.

Lord, I suspect that we are here for many different reasons tonight. Some of us know you, some of us do not. Lord, I pray that in your mercy that you would give each one of us the ears to hear and the eyes to see the meaning of the cross.

I pray this in Christ's name. Amen. As I said, I was a history teacher for some time, ancient history primarily, towards the end of the six years.

[1 : 18] And I've spent a great deal of energy trying to get my students to imagine what it was like in New Kingdom Egypt or in classical Greece. And I want to do tonight a bit of a reverse. I want us to imagine what it would be like to take a first century Roman and place him in the middle of Melbourne in 2003.

There's no doubt a whole range of things that he would find very strange. Sunglasses. Tobacco. Coffee. Microwave thick shakes. Reality television.

Reality television. Daytime television. All television. These things are foreign, utterly foreign to that man. There are, however, many things that he would find familiar, that he would recognise or admire.

The fact that you have long, straight, hard roads. He would love that. Absolutely love it. We went to the shrine, the war memorial, on Thursday. And standing there, I thought, yes, he too would admire this.

The Romans were a people who loved to remember, to memorialise their warriors. And, of course, I think he would love most of all the MCG. The great Coliseum of Melbourne.

[2 : 35] The great arena. And he would understand the obsession with sports. Although he would be bemused by the fact that the gladiators appear in their underwear.

They're armed only with spiked boots. And they get to leave the arena alive. Although James Heard was limping, to which Paul found a great deal of satisfaction.

And there is one thing that he would find absolutely familiar from his own day, from 2,000 years ago, but would find utterly bizarre in its application, in its use.

Something that was of the dung heap of Roman society, yet given a place of absolute honour in our society.

Crosses. Crucifixes. Placed on the top of spires that reach to heaven. Carved out of stone.

[3 : 40] Carved out of wood. Fashioned out of metal. Bejeweled at times. Hung around the neck. Off the ear. Of all the things that he would encounter in a day in Melbourne in 2003, I suspect this, of all, would be most strange.

And of all the questions that he might have to ask, somewhere along the line, he would say, what are they doing there? What on earth is that supposed to be achieving?

Now my initial reaction would be, that reminds me of the death of Jesus and God's mercy. And he would go, death, yes.

Mercy? You've got to be kidding. The cross is judgment. The cross is death for the worst of the worst.

It is for the scum of society, the dirt of the empire. Mercy. A man on the cross is cursed by God. He is finished.

[4 : 53] Two very different views of the cross. Judgment or mercy? Punishment or forgiveness?

Are we just struggling here with differences of ages? Different emphases? The inevitable interpretations that must shift and change over 2,000 years? Are we so different that we must look at this in a different way?

What is Jesus doing there on the cross? And why has the cross endured as the defining symbol of Christianity?

What I want to do tonight is strip the cross, go back to its original wood, cut through any ornamentation or superstition that we might attach to that symbol and understand why there is a broken figure who was nailed to that cross.

And in doing so, I want to show tonight that in the death of Jesus, it is not a matter of judgment or mercy, but rather judgment and mercy.

[6 : 09] That it is here where God's justice and God's mercy meet. And in so doing, I want to show that this has a vital application to each one of us here tonight.

Let's consider justice first. Danny, is it possible to get that glass of water? It's just down there near the pillar. Thanks, man. Let's consider justice first.

I think it's a fair call to say that in the machinery of our society, justice is a major part.

It's a major part of that machine. A quick glance at our TV guide says that we love, as a society, to watch our legal and police dramas. And whilst on the face of it, it might be because all the lawyers are particularly sexy and it's a very dramatic and a half hour of our evening, I think the fact is we watch because we like to see right prevail and the wrong punished, even though it is idealised, even though we know that it has been formulated.

It is an art. When a royal commission uncovers great corruption in our legal or police services, we are understandably outraged.

[7 : 29] We cry out for justice because what is right has been trampled on and what is wrong has been rewarded. I'm told that in prison, even those who are currently being punished by the legal system have their own hierarchy of right and wrong, their own understanding of certain crimes that are worse than others, and that the men and women in there will mete out their own rough justice as the need arises.

Justice as a notion, justice as a desire, sits deep in our system, in our society. And Jesus shares that desire. He shares our concern for justice.

And yet when he speaks of justice and when he pursues justice, it is never idealised, it is never corrupted, and it is never rough.

The justice of God is very real, it is perfect, and it's absolutely precise. It's totally accurate. And this is one of the first points I want to make tonight.

I want us to be comforted by the fact that God as a judge is absolutely fair. He doesn't miss anything. There is no evidence that goes by the wayside.

[8 : 55] He never has an off day. He is totally, totally true and faithful. And he also sets terms and consequences that are simple and are clear.

My wife is currently working as a court transcriber. She puts onto paper every single word that occurs in the local or district court, whatever particular case is on.

And she says, it's amazing the language that is used and the nature of these cases, no matter how simple or, you know, small the misdemeanour is, there is only a select few who actually understand what's going on.

Whether people are on the right or the wrong side of today's law, they are absolutely reliant on the lawyers, the legal counsel and the magistrates to navigate through that labyrinth of our legal system.

And they have to trust that they will make the right decision. There is a select few who understand. God does not present us with such a labyrinth.

[10 : 05] God's law, the terms that he sets are at its root very clear, very simple. A man came up to Jesus at one point and asked him for those terms.

How am I to act before God? And Jesus distilled the law into two beautiful phrases. He said this. He said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and all your strength and love your neighbour as yourself.

That is, show total devotion and thanks to God in your home, in your work, when you're travelling, in your desires, with your words, with your thoughts, with your life.

And this should be reflected in an attitude of service and humility towards everyone else in our circle, whether they share our beliefs, our work, our class or our race.

They are all our neighbour. Now I hear that and I know that I am in deep trouble. I have enough trouble loving a few people in small ways some of the time let alone God and everyone in my broader circle in a way that honours God as the one who has made me, as the one who has given me life, health, a beautiful wife, education, food on my table and clothes on my back.

[11 : 49] You and I owe him everything. Everything. And yet I challenge any one of us to stand tonight and say that I love God with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind and all my strength.

We do not and we have a problem. The Bible simply calls it sin. A word that just hisses through the teeth.

It catches in the teeth. Sin is not just loving inadequately and nor is it simply just wrong actions. Stealing or lying, cheating, adultery. Sin is at its roots a broken relationship. It is a rupture between the individual and God.

Between the creator and the very height of his creation. Sin is rebellion. It is a resentment for having to love him in the first place.

[13 : 01] It's that pride that says to God, don't tell me what to do. I will decide what is right and what is wrong for me.

I am the God of my life. And they might not be the words that you use, but we are all stained by this rebellion.

We all bear the marks of that fall, if you like. The perfectly fair judge has set clear terms and we have not met them.

And the consequences are equally clear. Later on in Romans from where we read tonight, it says, the wages of sin is death. I remember I wrote that down on the page and I thought, there's nothing I can do to soften that statement.

There's no other way that I can put it that actually alleviates it somewhat. It is a stark formula. It is a stark formula. Sin equals death. There is no way around it.

[14 : 08] There's no compromise possible. It is a precise and absolute judgment by a God who knows and sees everything.

A God who never, never goes back on his word. Now this should shake us to our bones because God is giving a judgment on you and I that is a guilty judgment.

A very prominent Australian who died in the last decade was interviewed before he died and he admitted to packing in what faith he had as a child.

God didn't meet his particular terms if you put it that way. He had walked away. There is no God. And the interviewer said, knowing that this man was ill and knowing that this man was, yeah, he's not going to be around for much long, he said, what if you're wrong?

What if there is an accounting for what we do? And this guy just smiled and says, well, I've got a few things up my sleeve. There are no sleeves before God.

[15 : 31] We are naked before him. There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed. There is no new argument that we can bring to him that will catch him out.

We are naked before him. There's anyone here tonight who is still confident of fronting up to God and claiming a place in heaven on the grounds of our works, our good intentions, our Christian family background, our church attendance.

Then can I say to you, you are wrong, as I was once wrong. Only perfection can stand before the perfect judge.

In these terms, we have nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. So who can possibly save us from the judgment of God? What hope is there?

Who can save us except God himself? And this is why Jesus comes, to show us that the only thing that is as relentless and as precise as God's justice is God's mercy.

[16 : 52] Jesus comes to do for you and I what we could never do for ourselves. us. We who are in our weakened, condemned and powerless state. He comes as a saviour to a drowning man.

He comes to rip from the fire a woman caught in the house. Romans 5 verse 6 it says this, for while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. There's such a clear sense of purpose here, isn't there? There's nothing vague or indistinct or accidental about the death of Jesus.

In each of the four accounts in the Bible of his life, of his ministry, the key point in most of those Gospels is the point at which he turns and faces Jerusalem and he heads off. he sets his eyes resolutely for that city and more accurately for the little hill outside the walls which overlooked the garbage heap, the place where the worst of the worst died.

[18 : 10] And in that sense, I like to think of all of Jesus' miracles and all his parables and all of his teachings are like arrows in flight and they find their mark.

on Calvary at that cross in an act that I believe has no historical parallel. In verse 7 it says this, Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

one of the things that always moves me about Anzac Day, and I was reminded again on Thursday when we visited the memorial shrine in the city and looking out through those dark, heavy doors to Melbourne, is the fact that each year, the 25th of April, or March as it is, the papers carry great stories, moving stories of mateship, of struggle and hardship in the battlefield, and in particularly the prison camps.

And one that I heard this year, not for the first time, was the one of the prisoners who had been called to attention at the end of a long day and told that the shovels had been counted and one was missing, and that they would be killed one by one until the culprit stepped forward.

And in the silence, all I could hear was the cocking of guns. They waited, a few more guns were cocked, and then one man, one prisoner, stepped forward and was executed.

[19 : 57] They then went and counted the shovels again and found that they had miscounted, and they were in fact all there. An innocent man had died for good men, for his mates, whom he had grown to love in the horror and the rigours of a prisoner of war camp.

Jesus is also an innocent man, and he's also driven by love, but he's not dying for his mates. He's not dying for good men.

In verse 8 it says, but God proves his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. You see, the only way that that story of the prisoner of war camp could apply here was if one of the guards was going to die, and one of the prisoners stepped forward to take the beating.

God, the perfect judge, so loves his enemies, so loves you and I, that he is willing to pour out the wrath and condemnation that we deserve, and place it on his son, his sinless son, so that we might return to him, forgiven and free from condemnation.

If I was to put the cross to you in the most raw and personal terms that I could, this is how I would say it.

[21 : 33] This is what I see when I look at the cross. That's my sin struggling for breath up there. That's my pride bleeding into the late afternoon.

That's my rebellion. shriveling under the intense heat of God's perfect judgment until it is finished. Until it is finished.

And Jesus has taken on all that I deserve and both he and my old sinful nature die. As a consequence of that one act, I stand here tonight a man right with God.

Not because of anything that I have done, but because of what Christ has done for me. I have cried out for mercy and he has heard my cry.

He has heard because he lives. The cross is not the end of the story, but it is the junction. It is the seminal point.

[22 : 46] God is good. God is God is risen. God is risen. But the thing I want you to note tonight is the fact that he rises a scarred lord.

He has scarred hands, feet and side. He shows them to his disciples. He ascends to heaven and sits in authority with scarred hands, feet and side.

Jesus will always bear the marks of the cross as a testimony to that moment when justice and mercy met.

As an abiding witness to what sin does to us and what it costs for us to be saved. What does the cross mean to you?

Is it just a symbol? Are you prepared to test God's absolute justice? Or will you accept his offer of mercy?

[24 : 02] Jesus says this, I tell you the truth. Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned.

Will not be condemned. If you are prepared to claim Jesus tonight as your Lord and Saviour. If you know that you stand condemned before God and he is your only hope.

Then we're going to put a prayer up on the wall. A simple prayer of commitment to him. I'm going to read through it first and then I'll read through it slowly.

And if you are prepared tonight to claim Christ as your own. Then I ask you to pray it along silently with me. It says, Dear God.

I admit that I have sinned against you and my own efforts cannot save me from your perfect judgment. Thank you for sending Jesus to die in my place. Please forgive me.

[25 : 05] And help me to live a new life with Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. Let's pray. Dear God.

I admit that I have sinned against you. My own efforts cannot save me from your perfect judgment. Thank you for sending Jesus to die in my place. Please forgive me. And help me to live a new life with Jesus as my Lord and Saviour.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

[26 : 46] Thank you.

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