

## **Romans 3:21-28 (Reformation Day)**

St Peter's 31 Oct 2010

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Reformation Day! Today we are dealing with the very foundation of our faith. This foundation is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. To become joyful and grateful believers, we must understand what happened on the cross of Christ.

We owe our lives to God for two reasons - because we received it from him and it belongs to him, and because we have messed it up and have to repay.

In African traditional religion people give sacrifices to the ancestors on a regular basis, just to acknowledge that they owe their lives to them. They have not created themselves. They do not belong to themselves; they belong to the ancestors who have given them their lives; they belong to the family.

The same was true in ancient Israel, only that the sacrifices were given to God, rather than the ancestors. It is God who used the ancestors to create our lives. We do not belong to our ancestors, we belong to God. He has a claim to our lives. We should give ourselves back to him.

Now we continuously mess up our lives that belong to God. We have to make good. If in African society somebody has done something foolish he needs to be reconciled with the ancestors. For that he must bring a sacrifice. This can be very costly. If the culprit has no animal, the family has to provide the animal.

In ancient Israel, if you transgress the law of God you are not only guilty before your family, or your ancestors, but you are guilty before God. You must put things right by giving God a sacrifice to be reconciled with God.

The ancient Canaanites sacrificed their first-born sons to God because the first-born son represented the father. He would take over from the father when he died. The first-born was the most precious possession they had

The Israelites were impressed by this practice! It even became part of the law of Moses. But the Israelites allowed an animal to take the place of the first-born son. Later on the blood of the animal took the place of the animal.

The prophets strongly objected to this idea – God wants obedience, not sacrifice. Give your life to God, not just part of your possessions! We are going to make a collection today. Don't think you can buy off God – God wants your life.

Jesus was the representative of God on earth. In ancient times the king was believed to be the representative of God on earth. Jesus was proclaimed the king that the Jews expected, the son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Messiah. All these were titles of the king.

Jesus gave his whole life to God. So God acted in and through Christ as his representative. So Jesus became the Lamb of God that God sacrificed for the sins of humankind.

But can God not forgive without demanding such a terrible sacrifice? Of course God forgives freely when we repent. The Old Testament is full of examples where

God forgives when people repent of their sins. Jesus himself forgave repentant sinners before he went to the cross.

But forgiveness is costly! Somebody has to pay for the damage – the culprit or the one who forgives. Recently in our Bible Study we were told of a teenager who got drunk with his friends and rolled his father's car. He has no money to replace the car. If his father wants to forgive him, who will pay for the car? Whenever you forgive something, you suffer a loss. You relinquish your claim to compensation.

That is the background of this text. Paul argues in chapter 2 that we are all guilty because we have all transgressed God's law. This is serious. We cannot just play as if nothing has happened. Things must be put right. And this is costly.

But now something surprising happens. It is not we who give the sacrifice to God, but it is God who gives the sacrifice to us. The whole system is turned on its head.

It is not humans who sacrifice their first-born to God, but it is God who sacrifices his first-born to humans. It is not we who give ourselves to God but God who gives himself to us in Christ, his representative

Christ was the Messiah, the representative of God on earth. When humans tried to get rid of Christ, God's representative, God had to bear the pain.

When we mess up our lives, God has to bear the pain. When God accepts us into his fellowship although we are not acceptable, God bears the pain of our sin. And he does so in and through Christ.

Should we now try to achieve God's grace by keeping the law of Moses to the letter? No, we humbly accept the gift of God to which we are not entitled. That is what faith in Christ means. We accept God's redeeming love in Christ. We simply allow God into our hearts and praise him for his grace. That is faith. That is how we come right with God, but by accepting God's gift.

Of course, God accepts us into the fellowship of Christ, not to condone our sin, but to get rid of our sin, to transform us in his fellowship. He invites us become part of the new life of Christ

Take the wonderful story of the prodigal son. He wasted his father's possessions and turned his own body into that of a pig. When he finally repented and returned to his father, he had nothing to show; he was broke, filthy, guilty, humiliated. He had squandered his own dignity and the dignity of his father and the whole family.

His father had already waited for him. He saw him from afar. He went to meet him. He did not say, 'before you dare to enter my house, you bring back my cattle, you get washed, you put on decent clothes.'

No, the father took this filthy rascal into his arms. He gave him new clothes. He gave him a ring to restore him into the dignity of a son, rather than one of the slaves. He suffered the loss so that the relationship would be restored. It is through the acceptance of the father that the son was transformed.

This is what God did in Christ. When the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities turned against Jesus, humiliated, tortured and crucified him, it is God who suffered all this in his representative. He took the enmity of these people upon his

shoulders – giving an example of his love for all of humankind. But he does so to transform humankind, not to condone their sin.

This is serious. It is costly. If a stressed-out mother works hard to pay for the schooling of her son, he cannot simply exploit her love and heap more and more burdens on her back until she breaks down. He has to respect her suffering on his behalf. Acceptance comes first, but transformation has to follow.

How are we transformed? We join Christ and give our lives to the redeeming love of God. We join God in accepting what is not acceptable so as to transform it. Together with Jesus we become the instruments of God's love.

We accept ourselves although we are not acceptable so as to be transformed in God's fellowship. There are many people who hate themselves. They cannot live with their own failures, with their own bodies, with their lack of performance, with their ugly childhood, with their miserable qualifications. But God accepts them, and so they are entitled to accept themselves, love the way they are and then be transformed into something greater in the strength of God.

We accept others although they are not acceptable to us. This can be our family members, our peers, our colleagues at work, our fellow Christians. We are willing to forgive, to carry the burden, to relinquish our right and our pride – not to condone wickedness but to transform it in the love of God.

This should also be true for the churches. How must we Lutherans be transformed today? By learning to accept each other. We must also learn to accept each other here within St Peter's. We should know that acceptance and forgiveness are costly. If we cannot bear each other's burdens, and each other as a burden, we cannot claim to be true Lutherans, let alone true Christians. Acceptance first, transformation follows – that is the gospel.

We accept our unacceptable society and work with God to transform it. It is also true for our country. There are many things that are wrong in our country – grinding poverty, homelessness, unemployment, self-seeking politicians, corrupt officials, inefficient administration, teachers and nurses that do not do their work, sexual chaos, teenage pregnancy, HIV infection, alcoholism, terrible road accidents, drug addiction, crime – you name it.

The point is not that we should condone evil in any form, whether our own evil or that of others. The point is that we must first accept, then transform. This is where God has put us, this is our land, these are our people, this is where Christ is at work, this is where we have been called to be representatives of God.

We also accept the natural world and allow it to prosper, even if we have sacrifice some of our inflated living standards.

That is the law: Transformation first, then acceptance

That is the gospel: Acceptance first, then transformation.

The foundation of the Christian faith is the gospel, not the law.