

Philippians 3:4-18

I like pictures, but I don't have a favourite painter, that would be as uncomfortable as having a favourite child. You are allowed more than one. Up there with the best painters, however is Rogier van der Weyden, and amongst his paintings, the Beaune Altarpiece.

I am going to tell you about the Beaune altarpiece, but this is not a sermon about a painting. I want to tell you about the Epistle to the Philippians this morning and a word that kept cropping up in our reading – *righteousness*

not having a righteousness of my own ... but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God

Righteousness is a big, tough idea, to try to get the idea of righteousness across we will start with the Beaune Altarpiece. It is monumental, over seven foot high and it is nearly eighteen feet across. That is important we are talking about drama and power. Those are the kinds of words you need for righteousness. This picture is a blaze of gold. Looking at the Beaune altarpiece you are staring straight into heaven; straight into heaven at the moment the Kingdom comes. It is the Last Judgement. An angel in brilliant white weighs souls in a balance. Other angels blow trumpets; our hair should be standing on end. Above them sits Christ, on a rainbow, in scarlet; in majesty, his feet resting on a golden orb. The sword of judgement, the one that executes judgement, hovers by his side. The apostles are seated on either side and below them all the resurrection is played out figures rise from graves into judgement to be shepherded to glory, or harried and hurried to hell.

The picture now has a room to itself. It is beached in a safe, desolate space, so that people like me can stand and stare. It is all wrong. This picture was painted for the Hospice de Beaune, for a hospital built round about 1450. Hospital then was not like hospital now. We go to hospital hoping to be made better, you went to Hospice de Beaune to die. There, you would find yourself in a large single ward, beds ranged down both long walls, and at the far end there was the Altarpiece, Christ in Judgement. As you lay dying there were two texts to consider issuing from Christ's mouth

VENITE BENEDICTI ... Come ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom ... DISCEDITE A ME MALEDICTI ... Depart from me ye cursed, into everlasting fire,

Perhaps it is just as well that virtually none of the patients could read.

If we are ever to get our heads around the idea of righteousness we have to think big: gold, trumpets and swords. We have to think about what God is and how different he is from us. Inevitably we have to think about judgement.

Righteousness leaps off the pages of the bible. It is what we long for

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
Amos 5:24

Righteousness is what God has and we lack

ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God ...they have not submitted to God's righteousness. Romans 10:3

Righteousness – there's a Hebrew word and a Greek word and both are both big, rich words. You can write books about this word. If I tell you, righteousness is a word you can use about God we only get half way there. Look at Canon Michael for a moment. We know that Canon Michael is the sort of person who has ridden a motorbike through India, driven across the United States, played in a band. You could say that Canon Michael is quite *cool*. 'Cool' is a word that describes him – the cool Canon, cooler than the Dean (though that is not saying much). But, like all the rest of us, Canon Michael is variable, I am sorry to say, he steals my coffee pot in the morning, he also has two strangely affectionate cats. A witches cat is called a 'familiar'; Michael's cats are 'over familiar'. So, it turns out, even Canon Michael is not utterly cool, all the time. God however, is righteous in a way that Michael is not cool. God's righteousness never wavers. God cannot help be anything but righteous. His righteousness, his faithfulness to his own justice, his own mercy, is unwavering.

Righteousness is *rightness*, it is what puts you right and keeps you there. Tyndale translated it as *rightwise*. Our holy God is *utterly* rightwise – you can find no fault. And this righteousness of God is dazzling, overwhelming. See it, know it, hear of it and you know - you know with every fibre of your being, that this is righteousness that belongs to God and not to me. God is like this, I am not. That is what van der Weyden was painting, that is what they stared at in Hospice de Benue.

And not just in Beaune. Go to Autun and stare up at the carving over the door made in 1130, another judgement scene another discernment of righteousness of God. Go to Fairford, in Gloucestershire, every time you leave that church you turn to face that scene of judgement. How do we live with the holiness of God? How can we be made righteous? It was the question that possessed Martin Luther and launched the Reformation. Righteousness and our lack of it was the language of the English Church for centuries. The Book of Homilies, the official preaching of the English Reformation told us we lacked righteousness

For of ourselves we be crabtrees, that can bring forth no apples. We be of ourselves of such earth as can bring forth but weeds, nettles, brambles, briars, cockle and darnel

John Donne agonised over this

*I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;*

Righteousness matters, it really matters. It is genuinely a matter of life and death. It is drama we do not feel nearly so acutely or discuss nearly as often. There are all sorts of reasons for that. Some of the language of righteousness, frankly the terrors of the Beaune altarpiece were spelt out not to make us faithful but to make us afraid and something of the loving mercy of God was lost. Faith is not the same thing as fear. Perhaps too, we are all just a little less certain than we were, fake news, relativism, mistrust, we do not see in black and white, nor indeed in shades of gold.

But Philippians wants us to sit bolt upright and take notice, actually scripture wants to do that, Christ himself wants us to do that.

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled
Luke 12:49

Christ really does not want us to miss the moment; he wants us to see,

Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. John 1:51

If there is a central truth to get hold of in Lent it is this, that God is holy in a way that we are not. All the discipline of Lent, all the veils that appear in the cathedral are supposed to remind us of how far we have to go, how little we have really seen.

This is what Paul was talking about in the letter we heard read. It might have sounded boastful

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews

Yet that was Paul telling us that all the holiness he could scrape together was nothing.

whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ

And that is the message that Philippians wants us to hear. It wants us to know that this righteousness that is God's, the righteousness that we lack is seen in Christ. The sheer shock and start of that is too often lost to us. When Moses wanted to look on the face of God he was told he could not it would kill him. When Isaiah was in the temple, he was overwhelmed by a vision and learnt that it was just the hem of God's garment he had seen. Daniel could not even bear to look on an angel. Yet, says Paul, in the grand second chapter of Philippians (just before what we read today),

at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father Philippians 2:10-11

The God that Isaiah, and Moses, and Daniel could not look upon, that blazing righteousness, is now seen in Christ. That is why Paul wants to set aside all the other things he has said, and done, and known; all the other things that he has relied on. As he explained in the passage we did hear this morning

I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

Paul, who has worked so hard and so long at doing righteousness, being righteous, keeping the faith, obeying the law, even persecuting Christians in his zeal here gives up on all of that, he renounces his life's work. Work is not righteousness; work is my *effort* to be righteous. Righteousness never looks like me, however hard I try, righteousness is found in God and shown to us in Christ. Righteousness is never ours, always his; never earned; always given to us. It is given to us in Christ; given at the cross, in pain and death; given in Betrayal and injustice. There is nowhere that this righteousness cannot follow us and find us. In the next two weeks we will make the journey to the cross, see it as a journey into righteousness. In the next two weeks walk with Christ and know what he gives you.