

Archbishop Peter A. Comensoli

Homily at St Paul Outside the Walls | June 26, 2019

Readings of the Day: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalms 105:1-4, 6-9; Matthew 7:15-20

Within some circles and among some people, laying claim to being justified before the Lord is a bit like achieving membership of some exclusive club. It infers a certain status on the one deemed justified: you're a signed up, card-carrying member, with all the privileges entailed. You're in with God, and keen to present yourself before others as one of the insiders.

Of course, justification by grace in faith is not that. It is, rather, simply a way of saying that someone is in a right relationship with God. To use the parlance of Twitter, 'justification' is a #hashtag for 'friendship in the Lord.' Abram was the first of our ancestors to discover this relational understanding of justification. As our reading from Genesis put it: Abram put his faith in the Lord, who counted this as making him justified.

Another way of saying this is that Abram was found by God, and welcomed into a life of friendship with him. Our 'Father in Faith' allowed the gift of faith to bring him into a personal friendship with God. And putting his trust in the Lord, Abram became Abraham.

Saul, that rather earnest Pharisee who seemed to relish his early career in persecuting Christians, perhaps saw justification more in the club-like way, before being knocked off his proverbial horse and introduced – rather dramatically – to God. This was not a God who wanted to acknowledge his pharisaical status among Jews, or confirm his membership of the Chosen People.

Rather, the knock-down, put-in-place God who presented himself to Saul came with a name: Jesus, Son of the Father. This was a God who befriends, not approves; a God in whom to place your trust, not receive your status points. God found Saul on the way to Damascus, and in faith he became Paul, justifiably and recognisably a friend of the Lord Jesus.

We do seem to have found ourselves in a time when the Catholic faith for many can be more like wearing a badge of membership than being found and befriended by the Lord.

When we start to gauge the measure of living a Gospel life by the scale of success or failure, we can be sure we are slipping into a club-like mentality about faith. Clubs live and die on the measure of success or failure. The evidence of Faith, on the other hand, the sign of justification in the Lord Jesus, is best measured in fruitfulness.

Fruitfulness presumes a life that has been nurtured, it come about through tendering, it is a sign of flourishing. These words – nurturing, tendering, flourishing – we associate with friendship, not status. These may not be words which Paul used in his many letters, but they are words which convey something of what he wrote about.

How much might these words be items in our toolkit, to pick up an image from our retreat last week? How much of our missionary effort is centred on nurturing faith in our clergy, religious and people? How much is our daily work focused on tending to the needs of God's *anawim*? How much of our life is a witness to a Gospel energy that allows for a flourishing of the Lord's presence among us?

I have been struck recently by the extent to which Paul's writings reflect the way in which Jesus Christ found reason to befriend that intense and earnest Pharisee, transfiguring his focus, but not his personality – into the greatest missionary evangeliser the Church has ever encountered.

As we gather in this temple of the Lord, dedicated to his greatest missionary, Paul of Tarsus, I invite you to consider what is the fruitfulness of our lives among our local communities of faith, for here is located our justification, our friendship in the Lord. We have in St. Paul a witness to what it looks like to take up our primary vocation: to be a disciple of Christ, found by God, and sent to proclaim his real presence among us.

And in placing our trust in the Lord who has found us – whether on a road to Damascus, or in some more mundane way – may we discover the new name God has gifted to us: my justified; my disciple; my friend.