

# 40 Days of Fitness

A daily devotional by Rev Garry Hardingham

## DAY 25 – Faith and the Church.

*What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.* Romans 4:1-5

Yesterday, we looked at whether the Catholic Church is right that the church is a sacrament. The Reformed view, of which the Uniting Church clearly sits in, is that the church is NOT a sacrament because a sacrament is God's action and the church is clearly not an extension of the Incarnation of God. (see Day 19).

The relationship between the promise of God that, through Jesus, creates the church and what a sacrament is was decisive for the Reformation. Martin Luther in "the Babylonian captivity of the church" writes this, "*the sacraments are not fulfilled when they are taking place but when that are being believed. For where there is a word of a promise keeping God, there is needed the faith of man to accept it. It is plain that our salvation begins in faith as this clings to the word of God's promise and God, apart from and before all that we can do, manifests His mercy which is unearned and profits us His word of promise as the Scripture says 'He sent His word and healed them.'*"

Luther is saying that the presence of God within the church and therefore the being of the church as God's people depends not upon the church's action, but upon God's promise. That God promises to be the One who reveals Himself. "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." This promise is fulfilled by Jesus Christ becoming the new covenant.

For Luther, faith is not a religious disposition. It is not as though some people have in their brain a quirk for religion. It is not something genetic. Faith, for Luther, is the only way in which we can receive a gift. Faith is simply another way of saying that the truth about our relationship with God is one of receiving a gift. Luther and Calvin denied any human activity as validating God's promise. God's promise was God's promise fulfilled, once and for all, in Christ. It does not need to be validated by any human action.

So according to Romans 4:5, Paul says "The believer is one who does not work." For the church to be a sacrament, then it would result in us understanding the church to be an institution of salvation. It arouses the suspicion that faith clings to the church rather than to Christ's promise. And the sacrament, the mystery, is changed from being a work of grace, God's work, into a human work.

This might all seem pretty pedantic, but it has real world consequences for how we understand what it means to be a member of the church and how we view people outside the church mowing grass and watching "Insiders" on a Sunday morning.

The church does not save. Jesus saves. The church is not some magical place where becoming a member automatically confers salvation upon you. As Keith Green once quipped, "Going to Church doesn't make you a Christian, any more than going to McDonald's makes you a hamburger." He went on to say, "It's time to quit playing church and start being the Church."

And being the church is what we will explore tomorrow.

### PRAYER

Faithful God,  
Why do we work so hard in the church?  
Why do continually believe that we have some kind of magic?  
That we can say "God was really present here today"  
When clearly You are always present in Your Church  
For this is Your promise and not our work.  
Help us to find peace in the truth of what the church is  
So that we worry less and worship You more.  
Through Christ who is the Head of Your church. Amen