

The Righteous One. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 23 May 2012.

As you know, we have been looking for many weeks at the various names and titles of our Lord Jesus. And our talk today centres on the title, 'the Righteous One' – 'the Just One'.

No doubt many of us would more readily associate the Saviour with descriptions such as 'the Loving One', 'the Compassionate One', 'the Gracious One' or 'the Lowly One'. But not so the Christian preachers and writers of New Testament days. Even if we leave aside similar descriptions given to our Lord in the New Testament – such, for example, as that of 'a righteous man' ... given separately by Pilate's wife,¹ by Pilate Himself,² and by the centurion charged with overseeing the Lord's crucifixion³ ... even if we leave aside all such and confine ourselves entirely to the exact title 'the Righteous One', we find that no less than four of the most prominent early Christians use it to describe our Saviour, and that, interestingly, between them they do so when focusing our attention on the four central aspects of our Lord's work. And I want to call each of these four men to the witness stand for just a few moments.

First, I summons *Stephen*, the first Christian martyr of whom we know, who very shortly before his violent death challenged the Jewish Supreme Council, 'Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute, killing those who announced beforehand the coming of the **Righteous One**?' *Stephen* spoke therefore of 'the coming of the Righteous One'.⁴

Second, I call the apostle *Peter*, who sometime earlier – indeed very soon after our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection – had accused the people of Jerusalem that, although Pilate had decided to release Jesus, 'you denied the Holy and **Righteous One** ... and you killed the Author (the originator, the source) of life'.⁵ *Peter* spoke therefore of 'the betrayal and the death of 'the Righteous One'.

Next, I summons the apostle *Paul*, who, at the time of his arrest in Jerusalem some 24 years after the martyrdom of Stephen, related to a large crowd there words spoken to him by a man named Ananias just three days after his (Paul's) conversion, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know His will, to see the **Righteous One** and to hear His voice'⁶ – which words just happen to come from the very passage which our speaker on Monday evening was studying with some of us here in this very room. *Paul* spoke therefore of 'the Righteous One' who he (Paul) had both 'seen' and 'heard' on the Damascus Road – of the Righteous One who, having died, had been raised by the mighty power of God, to which fact he (Paul) could bear direct and personal witness.

And fourthly, I call another apostle ... *John*, who wrote of our Lord as 'the Righteous One', who – in the present – appears before God as the believer's legal representative with God – as his or her 'Counsel for the Defence', if you like. You may remember that I quoted John's words here last time I spoke ... 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar ... But if anyone sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the **Righteous One**, and He is the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice) for our sins'.⁷

There is no question therefore that the early Christians laid great emphasis on the fact that our Lord Jesus was 'the Righteous One'. And scholars tell us that in those ancient days the Greek world thought of a righteous man as one who never failed in his duty to God and to man. And surely there has never been anybody – whether in Israel or anywhere else – who has so perfectly fulfilled His duty to God and to man as did our Lord Jesus. No wonder then that to the early Christians He was 'the Righteous One' *par excellence*.

And I guess that none of us have any problem with that. Our problem stems rather from the fact, that, whereas **He** (our Lord) is righteous, **we** are anything but that – for we have all miserably failed in our duties both to God and to one another. And should our consciences be so stifled and hardened as not to trouble us about our lack of righteousness before God, let Him (God) tell us of it Himself – for both Old and New Testaments unite in telling it straight that, in God's sight, 'There is none righteous, no, not one'.⁸

And so, in stark contrast to 'the Righteous One' (our Lord Jesus), we stand before God, stripped of any pretended righteousness, condemned and lost.

Ah but ... but the marvellous truth of the Christian gospel is that the One who was – and is – righteous once suffered on behalf of those who aren't! Let us hear you say it, Peter ... and I am quoting from one of his epistles found in our New Testament ... 'Christ ... suffered for sins once and for all, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones, that He might bring us to God'.⁹ Yes, that is what happened at the cross ... He, the Righteous One, willingly stood in as our Substitute to take the punishment due to our unrighteousness.

I don't know if you are familiar with the name Sydney Carton – but those words 'stood in as our substitute' remind me very much of him. Sydney Carton was, in many ways, the principal character in Dickens' classic novel, 'A Tale of Two Cities'. To cut a long story short, Carton was a self-indulgent and self-pitying drunkard, who, out of love for Lucie Darnay, took the place of her husband Charles in the Bastille and was beheaded

instead of him – ‘a far, far better thing’, as he expressed it, than he had ever done. It was the case of one man willingly sacrificing his own life to save that of another.

But there is a whole world of difference between Sydney Carton and our Lord Jesus. Not least in this, that, noble as Carton’s act undoubtedly was, it was also, if anything, the case of the bad (of the unrighteous, if you like) taking the place of the good (of the righteous, if you like). Whereas our Lord Jesus was the supremely ‘Righteous One’ who took the place of the unrighteous.

But not only so. For Sydney Carton suffered a quick and more or less painless death by way of the Guillotine. Whereas our Lord Jesus suffered a slow and agonising death by way of the Cross.

But the most important difference lies in this, that the story of Sydney Carton is pure fiction – that the whole of Dickens’ story, though a classic of English literature and though very well researched, in the end is no more than a novel.

Whereas the better story – of the ‘Righteous One’ who suffered on behalf of us the unrighteous – is not fiction. The better story actually happened!

I close with several verses of a hymn, written by a man whose lifetime spanned more or less the same period as that of Charles Dickens. The man’s name was Horatius Bonar ... and his verses run ...

Rejoice and be glad!
For the blood hath been shed;
Redemption is finished,
The price has been paid.

Rejoice and be glad!
Now the pardon is free!
The Just for the unjust
Has died on the tree.¹⁰

Footnotes

¹ Matt. 27. 19.

² Matt. 27. 24.

³ Luke 23. 47.

⁴ Acts 7. 52.

⁵ Acts 3. 13-15.

⁶ Acts 22. 14.

⁷ 1 John 1. 10 to 2. 2.

⁸ Rom. 3. 10.

⁹ 1 Pet. 3. 18.

¹⁰ The hymn begins, ‘Rejoice and be glad!’