

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

**T**HE end justifies the means.' There are few more effective passion-raisers than this hackneyed sentence. To accuse someone of holding the doctrine can cause great offence; and to be so brazen as to defend it in argument may rouse even greater indignation. But what, whether it is true or not, does it mean? What does 'justify' mean? 'To make just' is the obvious answer; 'the end makes the means just'. 'Justify' means to make just, as 'rectify' means to make right. But when a mistake is rectified, something happens, something is put right that was wrong; you had your tie on crooked, and now you have put it straight, you have rectified it. Nothing happens, however, in the same obvious sense, when the end justifies the means, or when (using the word 'justify' more strictly) you justify your actions. You do not make your actions just in the sense of altering them, or of causing them to be just, because you cannot alter an action or cause it to be anything once you have already performed it. You justify your action by showing it to have been just; the end—so some maintain—justifies the means in the sense of covering them with its own justness. 'Justify', then, means to make just in the rather special sense of declaring, or proving, or qualifying something as just.

The object of this procedure of justification, in the normal English use of the word, is almost invariably an action, or a form of behaviour. When we talk about justifying people, it is always with reference to some particular action—'I think I was justified in doing what I did'; never absolutely, in the way that we talk about pacifying someone, or mollifying him. It is in this respect that our ordinary use of the words 'justify' and 'justification' differs most noticeably from the biblical and theological use.

In scripture it is almost invariably *persons* who are justified, whether man or God. It is persons who are shown to be just by their actions, and not their actions which are shown to be just by principles or standards. The context of justification is often a law-suit, whether real or metaphorical, and the party who wins is the party who is justified. When the mutual relations between man and God are pictured in terms of a law-suit, in some of the psalms, in Isaias, and in Job, for example, it is always God who

emerges justified. One might perhaps summarize the developed old testament attitude like this: if ever man finds himself at odds with God, he is always in the wrong. And so the psalmist prays, 'Enter not into judgment with thy servant, because before thee shall no living thing be justified' (Ps. cxlii, 2); which might be paraphrased as: 'Please don't pick a quarrel with me, because you are bound to win'.

St Paul, in the epistles to the Romans and Galatians, presses this intuition to its ultimate extreme and cuts out the conditional: man, left to himself, *is* at odds with God, and *is* always in the wrong. 'Scripture concluded all things under sin' (Gal. iii, 22); 'For all were sinners and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. iii, 23). The result is that 'the whole world is under judgment to God' (*ib.* 19); in the phrase of the medieval lawyers it is 'in mercy' to the court of God, and so we are in no position to justify ourselves, to take the initiative in putting ourselves right with God. This is what those Jews who rejected Christ, and against whom the argument of Romans is directed, failed to understand. 'I bear them witness', says St Paul, 'that they have zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of the justice of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit themselves to the justice of God' (Rom. x, 3). They thought they were justified, and their justice, their rightness with God, was established by their keeping of the law of Moses, by the works of the law. And so they did not acknowledge any necessity of a redeemer, or atoner to put them right with God. But since in fact the whole world *is* 'in mercy', is 'under judgment to God', such a claim to establish one's own justice and vindicate oneself is derogatory of the justice of God, that is of the rights of the divine court—it is a sort of refusal of divine jurisdiction.

For St Paul the facts of the case are clear—no man, whether Jew or gentile, is in a position to assert his justice before God, or while acknowledging that he is perhaps in the wrong to put himself right with God. If we are to be justified the initiative must come from God. God has us at his juridical mercy, he is at liberty either to condemn or to pardon; and he has chosen to exercise his justice by pardoning the sins of men, by providing a propitiation for them in the sacrifice of Christ. Such an exercise of justice is of course a supreme act of grace and mercy, but it is still what St Paul calls 'a manifestation of God's justice apart from the law'

(Rom. iii, 21); apart from the law, because not enforceable at law, being a pure act of grace. And so, he goes on, 'we are justified free by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation through faith in his blood, to demonstrate his justice, for the sake of pardoning the previous sins in the forbearance of God . . .; to show himself just and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus. . . . For we reckon a man to be justified by faith without works of the law' (Rom. iii, 24-8).

Christ's sacrifice puts us right with God—or rather it provides us with the entirely gratuitous means of being put right with God, with redemption and propitiation. Men still have to accept, individually, God's gracious offer of redemption in the blood of Christ. And this seems to be what St Paul means by faith; it is saying 'Yes' to God's offer. We are justified by faith when by trusting in the genuineness and efficacy of God's promise we accept the offered justification.

St Paul stresses that it is by faith and not by works that we are justified, because he is arguing, against the Pharisees who would not believe in Christ, for the wholly gratuitous quality of our justification; it is not something we have earned or can lay any claim to—it is a free gift, a grace from God. And so when he goes on, in Romans iv, to substantiate his argument from the case of Abraham, and quotes Genesis xv, 6, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as justice', he stresses the expression *it was counted to him*, as though to say that while not even Abraham could claim to be just in his own right, on his own merits, God was willing to count him as just simply for believing the divine promise. He follows it up with a supporting text from David (the psalms); 'As David also declares the blessedness of the man to whom God *accounts* justice without works: Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not *count*' (Ps. xxxii, 1).

From this passage could we, perhaps, define justification theologially as God's not counting a man a sinner, not counting his sins, but counting him instead as just? We have seen that in ordinary usage—and the same is true of biblical usage—the word 'justification' does not imply any causing of justice, but only means the showing, or declaring, of an action or a person to be just. So we might conclude that when God justifies us, all he does

is to declare us to be just without actually doing anything to make us just. But if we did do this, we would be falling into Luther's mistake. He attached far too much weight to the word we have translated 'count' by not sufficiently considering the context. St Paul is using a juridical metaphor, which is natural enough since he is disputing about the efficacy of the law, to state as emphatically as possible the pure gratuitousness of justification. Luther interpreted him as asserting that justification is no more than a legal fiction, by which God *imputes* justice to a man and forbears to *impute* his sins to him. The sins remain real, and the justice remains fictitious, but this piece of divine pretending is enough to secure salvation.

There is no harm in talking about God pretending, or employing a fiction, provided we remember that God's pretending is very different from human pretending. Just as when God speaks something happens, so when God, if we may so put it, indulges in a little make-believe, his merciful fancies come true. 'God said, Let there be light, and there was light' (Gen. i, 2). So when God counts a man to be just, that man really is just. God's fictions are real. When God justifies the ungodly man, he actually does make him into a just man, by accounting him a just man, by imputing justice to him.

Justification, then, in its theological sense really does mean 'causing to be just', 'putting what was wrong right—right with God', in the same way as 'rectify' means putting straight what was crooked. St Thomas Aquinas, following St Paul really very closely, analyses four elements in the real, instantaneous event of justification. There is first of all the bestowal of grace by God, which essentially consists in offering the sinner the merits of Christ's passion to atone for his sins, and in helping him, by a movement of grace, to accept the offer. The next element is the deliberate act of the sinner in accepting the divine offer; this is the act of faith, an act of reaching out to God in trust. It has a co-efficient, the third element in the event of justification, and that is the renunciation of the sinner's former life of sin and injustice. These two elements are both expressed in the baptismal ceremonies, in the recital of the creed and the renunciation of Satan and all his works. The fourth element is the final effect of this dialogue between God and the sinner, and that is the forgiveness of sins.

The Council of Trent found it necessary to assert that justifica-

tion does not consist in the forgiveness of sins alone (Decree on Justification, can. 11). This is to guard against the legal fiction view of justification, as the mere imputation of justice and the mere non-imputation of sins. So Trent teaches that justification includes sanctification, and the infusion of the supernatural virtues and gifts; it is in fact only another name for regeneration, re-creation in Christ. Another point the Council made was that justification is inseparably linked with baptism, the sacrament of faith, the sacrament of regeneration. A man is not justified unless he is baptized actually or in desire; one might say that a constituent part of the act of faith by which God's offer of justification is accepted is a desire for baptism, for rebirth in Christ.

In emphasizing these aspects of justification the Council of Trent was doing no more than follow the lead of St Paul, particularly in Galatians. 'So the law was our tutor towards Christ, in order that we might be justified by faith; but now that faith has come we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all *sons* of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus; for as many of you as *were baptized* into Christ, put on Christ' (Gal. iii, 24-7). '... my children, with whom I am again in labour, until Christ *be formed* in you' (*ib.*, iv, 19). Justification that has such consequences and is expressed in such terms, the putting on of Christ, the forming of Christ in us, our being the sons of God, cannot reasonably be regarded as only a pious legal fiction on God's part.

Another point the Council of Trent was at pains to make in its decree is that justification can be increased by the merit of good works performed by the person justified (Cap. 10; can. 24). Here they are undoubtedly using the word in a looser and wider sense than St Paul does in Romans or Galatians, as synonymous, here, with justice or with sanctifying grace, and they support their teaching with texts taken from other parts of scripture (Apoc. xxii, 11; Eccli. xviii, 22; Jas. ii, 24). For St Paul, and for St Thomas expounding him, the word 'justification' means the first event in the life of grace, the transformation from injustice to justice. Taking it in this strict and proper sense there is no question of an increase in justification, because you cannot increase a beginning, or a transformation; we never talk about an increase in regeneration. What increases is the justice inaugurated by justification, the life begun by regeneration. But the Council of Trent found it

necessary to stretch the word to cover the whole life of grace (with good scriptural warrant) and to assert that this life can and ought to increase by the merit of good works, because the reformers took occasion of their own doctrine of justification to deny any validity to the notions of merit or of good works or growth in grace.

The mistake of Luther and his supporters seems to have been the inappropriate application of the doctrine of Romans to a situation which the Apostle did not have in mind, and the treatment of what he has to say in this epistle as an exhaustive statement of the Christian's relationship to God. St Paul had little to say in this epistle about merit or good works or growth in grace, because he was precisely concentrating on the *beginning* of the Christian life. He was arguing against the Jews who would not believe in Christ, and he was in effect telling his readers that by trusting in the law and refusing to believe in Christ the Jews failed even to *begin* to live the life of justice and grace. So the point he fixes on, what he is always referring to by such expressions as 'justification by faith' and 'the justification of the ungodly', is the conversion of the unbeliever, Jew or gentile, to Christ. What he is saying to the Jews is that faith, and not the works of the law, is 'the beginning of human salvation' (cf. the Tridentine decree, cap. 8). But Luther applied what St Paul was saying about the *starting point* to his own spiritual crisis, which occurred in the *middle course* of his Christian life. From so inept an application came distorted conclusions.

If Luther had found solace and enlightenment in Galatians instead of Romans, things might have been different. For in that epistle St Paul is not concerned with unbelieving Jews, but with Judaizing Christians, with a spiritual crisis, that is to say, which had overtaken his converts in the middle course of their Christian life after their conversion. They were allowing themselves to be convinced that as part of their Christian religion and as something necessary for their salvation they must keep the law of Moses. St Paul replies that they had been justified by faith and not by the works of the law, and that if they now started keeping the law as of necessity they were in effect denying the validity of their faith, being untrue to their Christian beginnings, making the death of Christ vain. 'If you get yourselves circumcised', he tells them, 'Christ will be no use to you' (Gal. v, 2).

They were trying to carry on from the true beginning of faith

by re-establishing the false beginning of the Mosaic law. So St Paul has to tell them what the true Christian follow-on from the starting point of faith consists in. In one word, it is charity. 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision (standing for the law of Moses) is of any avail nor uncircumcision, but faith *working* through love' (Gal. v, 6). 'For you were called to freedom (from the Mosaic law), brothers; only do not let freedom be an excuse for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole law (especially the ten commandments) has been fulfilled in one word: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (*ib.*, 14; cf. Lev. xix, 18). He then goes on to contrast 'the works of the flesh', a whole catalogue of vices ranging from idolatry and witchcraft to envy, quarrelsomeness, and fornication, with 'the fruits of the Spirit', charity, joy, peace, etc. It is these that men who belong to Christ Jesus must cultivate and live by. And this, of course, involves *works*. 'Bear one another's burdens, to fulfil in this way the law of Christ' (*ib.*, vi, 2). 'In *doing* good let us not tire. . . . So then while we have time, let us *work* good to all men, but especially to the household of the faith' (*ib.*, vi, 10). Most significant of all for our present purpose: 'Let each man prove the quality of *his own work*, and then he will have something to boast about in himself' (*ib.*, vi, 4). St Paul frequently speaks about boasting; he stresses that justification is by faith in order to exclude all possibility of boasting in one's own deserts, one's own merits, because merits that preceded justification would prejudice the sovereignty of grace. But merits *within* the context of grace, merits which are an effect of grace, and the appropriate 'boasting' or legitimate pride in them, are by no means excluded by St Paul. Time and again he indulges in this sort of boasting himself.

Thus we see that a further mistake of the reformers was to make St Paul's opposition between faith and works far too comprehensive. It was in reality an opposition between faith, as the genuine principle of justification (coupled with grace) and the works of the Mosaic law, including indeed the moral as well as the ceremonial precepts, which uncoupled with divine grace are a false principle of justification. No work therefore done by a man before he believes, done apart from grace, however good a work it may be, is meritorious, that is, capable of earning the reward of eternal life. But faith is not opposed by St Paul to good works as such; for the faith that justifies is inseparably linked with

charity and with the Holy Spirit poured forth into our hearts. And charity is active, the Holy Spirit is fruitful, as our quotations have shown. There is a law of Christ as well as a law of Moses. The good work of fulfilling the law of Christ, which a man performs after his justification by faith, and which is an effect of divine grace and in no way derogatory of the absolute pre-eminence of grace, is capable of earning the reward of eternal life. It is something a man can 'boast about in himself', something he can take a legitimate pride in, provided—and it is a supremely important *proviso*—he remembers that the good he does is worth nothing apart from its foundation of grace.

Luther distorted and misapplied one element of Christian teaching to the point of serious heresy, and with disastrous consequences to Christendom. But he did do Catholic Christianity one important service. In a Catholic society such as Europe was in the fifteenth century, when everyone is baptized in infancy, and everyone belongs to the Catholic Church, it is very easy to take the Christian life for granted and to forget its deep foundations on faith and the grace of Christ. Where this happens Catholic piety and Catholic morality can become depressingly shallow. Shallow morality and shallow piety, as the event showed, are only too liable in time of temptation to fall away. Luther's violent reaction against current superficiality forced Catholics of every degree and station in the Church to look to their foundations, and to thirst more eagerly for the living fountains of grace.



## JUSTICE IN ISRAEL: KEY TO THE COVENANT

By R.S.

### I. *Justice and Judgment*

**J**USTICE or righteousness (they translate the same Hebrew word: *tsedek*) is that by which Israel lives, that by which it maintains its existence as Yahweh's chosen people. To act righteously, or justly, is to act in such a way as to maintain the covenant.

When Yahweh intervened to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, he set them apart from all other nations; and on Mount Sinai he