

TJW, HT, 3.5.09
9.15am & 11am
Union: joined together with Christ

Six weeks ago a man called Sean Hodgson was released from prison after serving 27 years for a crime he didn't commit. He finally won his appeal after the DNA evidence proved he was innocent.

He was interviewed this week. He said that he was missing some aspects of prison life: "I miss the crowds in prison," he said. He was used to being surrounded by people - and now he's free, but lonely and confused. "In prison you've got to go to bed at a certain time, and you've got to do this and you've got to do that. I don't miss it, but I don't know where it's all gone."

He's free - but he's not yet living like a free man. He's free - but he doesn't yet feel free.

When someone puts their trust in Jesus Christ, God does something cataclysmic - something life-changing - to our standing, our status with him.

What he does is this: he gives to us the same things as he's given to his Son, Jesus Christ.

He unites us with Jesus Christ. And he binds us so closely to Christ that it's natural for him to give us a relationship with him like the one that Jesus has.

It takes Christians a life-time to learn how to live out the fact that God really has freed us from sin for this new relationship with him.

And till the day we die we will often feel as if it hasn't really happened.

But Sean Hodgson has the court-papers that prove he's a free, innocent man, even when he doesn't feel like one.

And we Christians have Jesus Christ, who's poured out his Holy Spirit into our lives, to prove to us our new standing, our new relationship, with God, even when we can't quite believe it - don't feel it - fail to live up to it.

That's a taster of where we're heading this morning. But let me just look further ahead and say something about the series of sermons that starts today, and run on for the next five Sundays.

In each sermon we'll home in on just one word. All of them reveal something vital about Jesus Christ and what God has done to us through him. Some of the words come directly from the Bible. Others have been used by Christians over the years to sum up what the Bible says.

Most of them end in "shun": adoption, justification, propitiation, and regeneration. Hence the title of this series: "Big words that end in 'shun'"! By the end of May, at the end of this series, you might feel that you've heard the same thing pictured with five different images, from five different angles, with five different words. If you do, you're getting the point.

You see, in the Bible God gives us different ways of getting into our hearts and minds how wonderful his salvation is. Each one gives us a new angle, so that the picture builds up for us - like someone who's

got wonderful news to share with you, and keeps coming up with new ways of describing it to you.

Now this morning we're focusing on one picture, one word. I have to say that, unlike the others, it doesn't quite end in 'shun'. But it's crucial, because in the Bible it underlies all the other big words, and makes them all make sense.

It's this: if you've put your trust in Jesus Christ, then **you are united with Jesus Christ.**

So the word we're talking about is union: the union of the believer with Christ.

(If you think you've heard this before recently, you have. I preached on it on Easter Sunday, and today's sermon is adding more. If you missed Easter Sunday, do catch it up by listening on-line, or by requesting the tape.)

You won't find the word 'union' directly in the Bible. But it sums up what God's telling us every time the Bible says that the Christian is "in Christ", which it does fully 164 times. You get the same when the New Testament says that something has happened to us 'with Christ'.

Now in the Bible God gives us three pictures of this union that we have with Jesus.

The first is a tree and branches. Jesus himself gives us this image - and I suggest you open the Bible with me to see it - John 15, verse 4 [READ verses 4-5].

We've got a couple of apple-trees in our garden, which produce loads of apples - so many that every autumn we bring lots over to church and hope that you'll take them away with you. (Otherwise I'm eating apple sauce with every meal all winter.)

The branches are simply part of the tree. You get apples on the branches because they're joined organically to the roots and the trunk of an apple tree - they're just part of the same organism.

That's how closely woven together the Christian is with Jesus Christ.

There's another picture of this union with Christ. It's of a head joined to a body. Turn on a little to - Ephesians 4.15 [READ verses 15-16].

This pictures Christ as the head, and us as the body.

How closely is your hand linked up with your head? How intricate are the connections between your brain and your body?

They couldn't be closer, could they? Everything from the raising of your little finger to the beating of your heart comes through living links between your head and your body.

That's just a picture of how intimate and close the union is between Christ and the believer.

And there's a third picture of this in the Bible: husband and wife.

On the same page in Ephesians, look over at chapter 5 verse 31.

These are instructions to husbands and wives, and it ends in verse 31 with a quotation from the Old Testament [READ verses 31-32].

The union of man and woman in marriage is so close that the Bible calls it being 'one flesh'.

Sexual intercourse is the physical sign of that union - and it's the physical expression of an emotional unity that at times, when marriage works well, makes a husband and wife feel like they're almost one person.

Tree and branches. Head and body. Husband and wife. God is saying: when you put your trust in Jesus Christ, I unite you with Jesus, in Jesus, more closely than you could ever imagine.

Do you see the big idea here? It's this: what God does for Jesus, he naturally does for us who trust in him.

Think of it this way. My wife Erica is naturally more out-going than me. But I think that, since we've been married, people treat me as if I were more out-going and gregarious than I really am. Why? Because I'm united in a one-flesh marriage-relationship with her. And if that's the way she is, it's natural for people to treat me as if that's the way I am.

We're so united with Christ, if we've repented and trusted in him, that God naturally gives to us the same as he's given to Christ.

You see, here's what you could call "the eternal story of Jesus". Jesus is God - the eternal Son of God.

Before time began God the Father chose that his Son would come to the earth in human form, and the Son willingly agreed. He chose that he'd die, bearing God's own righteous anger at his creatures for rebelling against him. He chose that three days later he'd raised him back to new life, never to die again. He chose that he'd bring his Son back to his side, to reign as king, and be worshipped and praised for eternity.

That's the eternal story of Jesus. And if we've been united with Christ, God makes it our story too.

Let me show you how that flows through the Bible. Get ready for a little of page-flicking - or just listen, and the verses are written for you on the notice-sheet, to take home.

Go back a page to Ephesians 1.4 [READ 1.4].

If you're united in Christ, then you were chosen by God in Christ.

Before the world was made, God the Father chose that his Son would go through all those things. And right at that moment, before we were even created, God chose us in Christ. God the Father can't conceive of his Son without thinking of you being in him, if you're a Christian. And he can't conceive of you without seeing you in Christ.

And as Jesus' story moves on, so does ours. We have been crucified with Christ. Turn back two pages in the Bible, to Galatians 2.20 [READ].

The old you was under God's condemnation. You were 'in Adam', not 'in Christ' - you were in humanity cut off from relationship with God - just as Adam and Eve were banished from Eden. But that old, condemned 'you' died spiritually on the cross with Jesus.

And we've been made spiritually alive with Christ.

Turning on a couple of pages, to Ephesians chapter 2, verse 4 [READ verses 4-5].

God raised Jesus from the dead. And spiritually we were raised with him, too. God gives to us the same new life he gave to Jesus.

And spiritually every Christian already has that new life. That's why every Christian is alive to God, wanting to please him, feeling troubled when we mess it up.

The story keeps going: as our lives as Christians continue, we grow in holiness in Christ. We've already heard from this passage from John chapter 15, so you might just like to listen to it [READ John 15.4-5].

The fruit Jesus is talking about here is a life which shows the same character-traits as his own life. The Bible gives us this fruit in a list: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Of course we have to work at them. But in every Christian there is some natural welling up of a desire to live like that.

That's because you're in Christ. It should feel unnatural for a Christian not to grow in holiness - like it would be unnatural for a branch of an apple-tree to grow turnips.

And then, if we're trusting in Christ, we will also die in Christ. There's a final verse to turn on to - 1 Thessalonians 4.16 [READ].

Why is it only those who trust in Christ who will spend eternity alive again with God? Do you see the answer now?

If we die in Christ, then God will take us with Christ to where he went beyond death - into a new eternal life together with God. If we die outside of Christ, not trusting him, then we've got no one who will take us there.

Do you see the big picture here?

Here's how God saves us. His own Son willingly comes down into our troubled sinful world, goes through death, comes out the other side of death, into a new eternal life with his Father.

And the way God offers to bring us into that life is to unite ourselves with Christ - to ride his coat-tails - to be brought back to God "wrapped up", if you like, in the perfection and glory that only Jesus possesses.

Now I want to say that this image of our union with Jesus, by faith, is the fundamental truth of our salvation. It's the truth that makes everything else in the New Testament hang together.

I can't say that I was particularly taught it much as a young Christian.

But being united with Christ is the fundamental truth for a living relationship with God.

Can you think of a time when you felt so deeply at one with another person that you couldn't quite believe that it was happening? Maybe it was just a fleeting moment. Maybe you've never felt like that, but you can imagine what it might be like.

That is just a small glimpse of the closeness of the union that God has brought you into, with Jesus Christ, if you've turned and trusted in him.

It's a union that will change some of your basic feelings and emotions, if you understand it right.

It will bring you assurance. God has worked your entire salvation out for you in Jesus. He's achieved it all. We don't drift in and out of belonging to Jesus. If you feel like you do, your feelings are lying to you. Once you've come to him, you belong to him. The relationship is sealed. The deal is done.

And that assurance will bring you a warmth, and a joy, and passion with God. Your union with Christ is the place to go, if you feel you've lost those things.

Not even our greatest failure can break that union. Nothing that can happen at your workplace can break it. Nothing in your family-life can break it. Not even death itself can touch it. That's how close your union with Christ is.

God hasn't done a transaction with you. He hasn't struck a deal, hoping you'll be grateful. He's united you in his own Son, to bring you to himself.

That's the thing that can turn coldness into warmth, despair into joy, and lifelessness into passion.

And our union with Christ is also the fundamental truth for Christian living.

You see, if the new you is now "you in union with Christ" - then when we turn back to sin we're fighting against ourselves - fighting against who we now are in Christ.

It's like Sean Hodgson, that innocent man, freed from prison, going back and banging on the prison door begging to be let back inside and treated like a guilty man again.

That's why sin never really satisfies the Christian for long. When you indulge in sin, you're indulging the old you that's now dead.

You only exist now 'in Christ'. The only way to live now is to live out who you really are.

I know that maybe there's been a lot to take in this morning. But take away whatever it is from this that feeds your heart and mind.

This union with Christ is the key to who God is, and who we are.

If your trust is in Christ, you are united with Christ.