

Holy Trinity 23rd August 2020 Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Romans 12:1-8

In my last sermon, on 2nd August, I referred to the suggestion that Romans could be seen as the Himalayas of the NT and chapter 8 as Mt Everest. And the absolute peak is found perhaps in 8:28: 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' Ultimately, all that matters is the 'purpose' of God.

From that position, Paul now looks out at the world and the church from a Christian perspective. He began in chapters 9-11 to look at the whole nature of the church – a community of people from all backgrounds – Jew and non-Jew. Now he starts to look at the practical implications for the day-to-day running of the church – and the day-to-day living of Christian people.

Over the next two weeks I shall be looking at the whole of Romans 12 – another glorious chapter. This week, verses 1-8, next week verses 9-21.

Verses 1-8. Verse 1: 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters,' As always, it's sensible to ask when you see a 'Therefore', 'What is it "There For?"' We don't have to look far, because the previous verse (11:36) says, 'For from him ['God'] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.' That is 'God is God.' He is the true Creator of all that there is. All other so-called 'gods' are merely human imaginings. 'Therefore', we need to live our lives in recognition of that fact.

'in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God this is your spiritual act of worship.' Your 'bodies' are a 'gift from God' – they are not to be abused – gifts can be abused. But used 'as a living sacrifice' – in other words something to give pleasure, or express gratitude, to God. If you've got an NIV open in front of you, you'll see that the word 'spiritual' in the phrase 'spiritual act of worship' has a footnote attached to it. The footnote suggests another translation, that is, 'reasonable act of worship'. The Greek word translated 'spiritual' or 'reasonable' is *logikos*. It sounds familiar – especially if you pronounce it with a soft 'g' – from which we get the English word 'logical'. In fact, that is closer to the meaning of the Greek word than 'spiritual'.

What Paul means is that 'to offer your bodies as living sacrifices' is a 'logical act of worship'. If God is God – so we should offer Him all we are. The commentator William Barclay sums it up well when he says, '[Someone] may say, "I am going to church to worship God," but he should also [not either/or but both/and] be able to say, "I am going to the factory, the shop, the office, the school, the garage, the locomotive shed, the mine, the shipyard, the field, the [cowshed], the garden, to worship God.'"

In the light of who God is, our 'logical' response is to live for Him every moment. As Paul put it in Colossians 3:23, 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, and not for human masters.'

Next, in verse 2 Paul works out this principle a little more. 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' You may well have heard it said before that the word translated 'transformed' is the same verb that is used of Jesus' transfiguration described in Matthew 17 and Mark 9.

Perhaps more interesting from the point of view of this verse is 2 Corinthians 3:18 where Paul writes that 'we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory [comparing our situation to that of Moses who'd been in the presence of God on Mt Sinai], are being transformed [the same verb] into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.' Clearly we are expected to be people being transformed. And we're being 'transformed' to become more like Jesus. If we measure ourselves up to Him and find that we are falling short, as we surely will – we need to do something about it. That will be a 'logical' part of our 'worship' – a 'logical' response to what we know about God and ourselves. 'Worship' without transformation is worthless. But notice carefully what Paul says here in Romans 12:2: 'be transformed [how?] by the renewing of your mind.' The 'renewing of your mind' is something you have responsibility for. It's training your mind to think differently. Professor James DG Dunn describes this verse 'as a reminder that for Paul spiritual renewal of the people must begin in the inwardness of a person... and must include not least the person's power of thought and reason.'

Our brains are God-given. We are intended to use them in the service of God. How do we bring about this 'renewing of [our] mind'? God has provided means to enable us to think 'Christianly' – the Bible, Sermons, Christian books, discussion with other Christians. But, in the words of James 1:22, 'Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. [a challenging turn of phrase] Do what it says.'

Next Paul comes on to some practical outworkings of 'offering our bodies as living sacrifices'. He speaks of the church – as he does elsewhere – as being like a human body. Every part of a body has its value and uses. A theme he takes further in 1 Cor. 12. Here he writes, verses 4-5, 'Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so it Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.'

The two words, 'in Christ' are key. If we claim to be 'in Christ' – we lose our individual rights. Some of us find that incredibly difficult to take. If you don't believe that that's what Paul is saying I challenge you to read 1 Corinthians 9. But that's another sermon! Paul is saying that being 'in Christ' – means that we are duty bound to do the will of God. So we use our lives – our 'bodies' and our 'gifts' – to please God.

The best way to understand Paul's meaning here is to see what he calls 'gifts' in verse 6, as being almost synonymous with 'opportunities'. 'We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.' Undoubtedly, there are some 'gifts' that are more clearly a particular 'gifting' than others. Perhaps because of character, or genes, or training, but often, circumstance. If an opportunity arises where I need to do something for God – then I must do it out of obedience to Him.

Let's just look at Paul's list of 7 such 'gifts' in today's passage – and I think it'll become clear what I mean.

Firstly, he mentions, 'prophecy'. 'If [someone's] gift is prophesying, let them use it in proportion to their faith.' What is 'prophesying'? It's speaking what you believe to be God's word for a situation. Some people seem to have a particular sensitivity to this – but Paul's 'in proportion to their faith' means 'but be careful' – don't be overconfident that you've heard the word of the Lord for someone. All of us can at times feel we have something appropriate to say to someone – but we need to be humble and careful. Not so much 'Thus says the Lord...' but more 'I feel the Lord might be saying to you...'

'If it is serving, let him serve...' All of us can have opportunities to 'serve' – for some it might be their full-time occupation – Paul says, 'Get on with it then...'

'if it is teaching, let him teach...' Probably, Paul has in mind the 'teaching' ministry in the church. In fact, what I hope I'm doing now! In other words, he's saying if you're gifted in a particular way – just get on and use your gift.

'if it is encouraging, let him encourage...' I've often felt that the 'gift' of encouragement ranks as one of the most needed in the church. Life is full of discouragements – often we fail rather than succeed. Some people are good at 'encouraging', but it's certainly something that all of us can on occasion be called upon to do. Often, in my experience, it's not so much saying something – sometimes our spoken words can seem trite. But just being with people – standing at their side.

'contributing to the needs of others' All of us are called to 'give' financially and in many other ways – our time, for example. Some may be blessed financially, and can help in that way. But all of us can give in one way or another.

'if it is leadership, let him govern diligently' The word for 'leadership' in Greek is literally, 'one who is set before'. All of us can be in a position of influence and responsibility. Paul says, do it 'diligently' – the Greek word literally means 'eagerly'. Sometimes we can see our 'responsibilities' as a burden – but a change of attitude (think back to that 'renewing of your mind') can make all the difference.

Lastly, 'if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully'. I think 'showing mercy' has to do with forgiveness. As Christians we are called to forgive. As Jesus taught us, 'forgive us our sins as

we forgive those who sin against us'. The word translated 'cheerfully', is a lovely word actually, it's the word *hilarotēs* – from which we get our word 'hilarious'. It's a form of the same word Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 9:7 where he says, 'for God loves a cheerful giver'.

In these verses, we see that there's much for us to think about. But the key thing is to ensure that you are putting into practice 'the renewing of your mind.' Next week, we shall continue to look at the rest of this chapter.

Today's Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Now the prayer that Jesus taught and that unities all true Christians:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.
Amen.**

