

Sermon on Romans 12:1-2, Leith Valley, October 20, 2013

Reading: Romans 11:33-12:8

(Preacher: Paul Trebilco)

The Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans. It was a pretty amazing place – this is what it looked like. First there's the huge court – 300,000 people who could gather here. Then there's the Temple proper – much smaller, but hugely ornate. This is where the sacrifices happened.

Now note Rom 12:1. Here Paul uses the *language* of the temple and its worship – and applies it to everyday life.

Rom 12:1: 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'

- To 'present' – this is used of presenting or offering a sacrifice in the temple.
- 'A living sacrifice' – used in the OT of sacrifices – though note this sacrifice is 'living'.
- 'Holy' – sacrifices were to be holy, set apart for God.
- 'Acceptable' – the right sacrifices – unblemished ones – were acceptable, well-pleasing to God.
- 'Spiritual worship' – the word 'worship' here is used in the OT to refer to *worship* in the temple.

So right through this verse, Paul is consciously echoing language that applied to sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. He's writing to readers in Rome – but he's *not* talking about them *going* to the Jerusalem temple. He is picking up the language used in the OT about the temple but he is applying it to their everyday life. He's not talking about presenting an ox or a ram or a pigeon as a sacrifice on an altar = not 'your bodies'. And of course, normally a sacrifice is killed – but our bodies are to be a 'living sacrifice'.

So why does he use this language – and what is he talking about?

Well – How are we to worship God? Of course, we are to worship God here together, in church, week by week. We belong to the body of Christ – all of us together. We come together especially on 'the Lord's day', the day of resurrection, to worship God, to express our praise and thanks, to pray, to learn.

BUT Paul is not *just* talking about that. He is talking about us 'presenting our bodies' – wherever we are, whenever – to God. 24/7. All the time.

It's not about *doing* particular stuff – like going to Jerusalem. It's not about *going* to a holy place to worship. Worship *was* done primarily in the Jerusalem Temple – but now Paul is picking up that language, and applying it to all we do, our whole lives. Our worship – giving ourselves as living sacrifices – continues 24/7 as we all worship God, day by day, wherever we are. It's like me saying 'Now play a fair game this week – and play by the rules, and listen to the coach'. I would be using the idea of a game for our week –

applying that idea to our lives. *Paul* uses the language of sacrifice and worship and applies it to *their* lives.

It's about being set apart for God – in all we do. He's using the language of sacrificing lambs or goats. He's thinking of the priest in the Jerusalem temple taking a sacrificial animal to the altar – and killing it. But then he twists the metaphor. God isn't wanting our death – but *our life!* Christ has died for us as our representative – the sacrifice is complete! Christ is the final *actual* sacrifice!

It is *because* of Christ's sacrifice that we are able to bring ourselves as *living* sacrifices – made holy by Christ. And so we live on – but we live as a living sacrifice – *as if* we had placed our lives on the altar – as people who are set apart, dedicated to God. Paul is thinking of us as walking, breathing sacrifices – lambs and pigeons if you like – not sacrifices that will die, but rather as *constantly dedicated* sacrifices in everyday life – that will go on living in the world – but precisely *there in the world* – out there – being holy, dedicated to God, day by day, acceptable to him – through Jesus. God is not looking for the sacrifice of animals in the Jerusalem temple – but the daily commitment of living sacrifices – in all our relationships. From the Temple – to the world! This is the sacrifice God now wants. And its not just done by priests in the Temple – but by all of us – Paul democratizes worship!

Notice that Paul talks about 'presenting *our bodies* as a holy, living sacrifice'. Its not just our 'spiritual lives' – he's not talking about just offering our spirits – but rather the real stuff that makes us up – all of us, our whole personality. *Everything* we do in our bodies!¹ In all our relationships, day-by-day. As one author puts it: 'It is as part of the world and within the world that Christian worship is to be offered by the Christian' (Dunn, Romans, p709).

Sometimes we can become very focused on life in the Church – and that life together is very, very important. But its not all there is to it of course! Just think of all the worshipping going on out there in the 160+ hours when we are not together (there are 168 hours in a week I discover!). All that we do – out there – is worship.

So, *whatever we do* is to be regarded as worship. Of course there's our recreation – perhaps we find it easy to enjoy 'spiritual worship' when we are on holiday, or out walking ... But *whatever we do* day by day can be worship- all we do in the body..

If you are a student – then studying can be worship. If you are bringing up children, or focused in the home – then this is 'spiritual worship' to God. For those who are without a job and looking for one – the things you do day by day can still be worship. For those in work – what we do, day by day can be – is – worship. Anything, anywhere.

I think of people like the College Wardens in our congregation – Ziggy, Scott, Peter, Chris and Nick. What they do, week by week, in caring for hundreds of students, is worship – and in doing that worship they are ministers before God. I could say the same for everyone here – in our being living sacrifices – in loving God and loving others

¹ And our bodies are valued by God

– we can be, we are, worshipping God, a complete offering of our very selves to God, for that is worship. It becomes worship simply by the day-by-day act of presenting our bodies to God.

So that subtle tendency to think of what we do in Church as the most important thing is to be resisted. Of course, its vital! But worship is all day, everyday. Our Monday-Saturday lives are as much lives of Worship as Sunday and small group.

And I've noted that we are to 'present our bodies'. Many of the early Christians were slaves – their bodies were owned – literally – by their masters – and were at their master's disposal. Their bodies were *not* valued, or respected. When Paul writes that they are to 'present their bodies' to God – it is saying that their bodies are hugely valued – hugely esteemed by God.

I think this is a word our culture needs to hear. We tend to worship the body – rather than present our bodies in worship – at least the bodies of the sport-star or of the model! Somehow we are all expected to look like Sonny-Bill Williams, or like Rachel Hunter. If we don't look like them, we should want to. It's the cult of worshipping the body.²

Paul says our bodies are to be *presented to God, are to worship God* – as living sacrifices. Our bodies find their *true* purpose when they are worshipping God – not worshipping other bodies – *and* God values our bodies enormously – as fitting for worship. Slaves in Rome would have found this wonderful, amazing – that their degraded, exploited bodies were precious, valued by God.

So 'present your bodies' to God ... And so it doesn't matter that I'm not like Sonny-Bill Williams – or if you're not like Rachel Hunter! God values our bodies. Full stop. Our bodies find their truest vocation in worshipping God – and then all other things – like exercise, food, sexuality – find their true perspective in the light of our true vocation to worship with our bodies.

But then Paul goes on in Rom 12:2: 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.'

You might be out there in the world – anywhere, everywhere – worshipping God, **but** do not take as your pattern 'this world' in which you are living, where you are worshipping. Do not follow the world's ways. Do not be conformed to the world – do not be squeezed into the world's mould, the world's way of doing things.

² The other tendency in our culture is to over-sexualise the body – what matters really is sex! That's solely what the body is for – so our culture would tell us. And so we're supposed to be fixated with sex – isn't that what bodies are for?

Note it is ‘Do not **be** conformed – by something – the world itself’ – Paul recognizes that the world is a force or power which tries to mould us and shape us – our culture tries to shape our behaviour, our attitudes – all that we are.

When we lived in Durham in the UK in the 80s we went to a Methodist church – and it described itself as one of the ‘non-conformist churches’. This is in comparison with the Church of England – the established Church of the UK. But actually all Churches – all Christians – are to be ‘non-conformist’!! Do not be conformed ...

But rather – ‘Be transformed’ – literally – be metamorphosed – changed into another form. We know the verb from the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a chrysalis and into a butterfly. The verb is used in the Transfiguration:

Mark 9:2-3 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was *transfigured/transformed/metamorphosed* before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them

So Jesus was ‘transformed’ into dazzling whiteness – shining radiance. Its that sort of ‘metamorphosis’. Radical stuff.

So not *conformed*, but *transformed*. But note it is ‘**Be** transformed’ – *not* ‘transform yourself’. Of course, it is God the Spirit who is doing the transforming – in 2 Cor 3:18 Paul speaks about is ‘*being transformed, metamorphosed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

We are simply to let that happen. The Spirit changes us – from the inside out. ‘The source and power of such a transformation is wholly and solely God’s’ (Dunn).

And note the connection with the previous verse – we are to worship God anywhere – in the world. But that very world seeks to force us into a mould – so that we *can’t* worship God, but rather follow the world’s way. What are we to do – we are to be transformed by the Spirit – so we *can* worship anywhere – freed from the world’s subversive grasp.³ And note that all of this is corporate – Paul isn’t just talking to me – or to you as individuals – he’s talking to us all together. The Spirit is at work – in us together – to transform us all – as Christ’s body.

How does the Spirit transform us: ‘by the renewing of your minds’ ‘Renew’ is a much bandied about word. We renew our car’s registration, or renew our membership, or our subscription to a magazine. But its much more radical than that. It such that he can talk in 2 Cor 5:17 about us as ‘a new creation’ through renewal. That’s how ‘new’ it is. We are to have *new* minds! [Just an ad break at this point: The Bachelor

³ If you worshipped in the Jerusalem temple you did *distinctive* things – just there. But once you worship *anywhere* – there’s a need to underline how differently one is to live – out there.

of Theology degree offered by the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Otago is good for this!]

The phrase ‘Our minds’ does not simply mean ‘our thinking’ – we are not simply to think new thoughts – as helpful as that is! It is to do with our understanding, thinking, attitudes, commitments. It’s about all that distinguishes us as humans from the rest of creation – our ability to plan and to reason, to be determined and to think things through. Its about our attitudes and values.

What does this transformation look like in general? What is ‘renewal’ then?

- Its like the difference between Black and white and colour. Its like the untransformed mind – being conformed to the world – only seeing in Black and White – but those with Spirit-transformed minds see in colour!
 - Its like the difference between a brochure of a place, or a photo on the web – and actually visiting it – no comparison to being there!
 - Its as if the world lived in the pre-digital age – no computers, no cell-phones, no web. But Christians had all those things!
- This calls for a ‘transformation of the imagination’ – for seeing things differently! The worlds twisted way of thinking is changed!

Let me give three quick examples of the sort of thing I think Paul is talking about – areas where we are *not* to be conformed to the world – but rather to be transformed by the Spirit – areas where there is a contrast – a ‘renewing’ between the world’s thinking and the transformed mind:

1) In the ancient world, the rich were regarded as the worthy, the right, the virtuous. If you were rich, it was because you were good – and the gods were looking down on you with favour. By contrast, the poor were getting what they deserved. They were not ‘the good’ – but the bad – they were morally inferior. That’s why they were poor.

Jesus *completely* transforms, metamorphoses, this way of thinking. He pronounces blessing on the poor. It is the poor who are particularly close to God – the rich must abandon the view that they are virtuous – and come to God in humility – and live quite differently. In fact, even ‘the wise’ must give up their pretense to ‘worldly wisdom’ and realise that in Christ crucified is the wisdom of God.

2) Note Mark 14:21: For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

Quite a different logic here! We would think – if this is God’s plan (‘the Son of Man goes as it is written of him’ – ie written in Scripture), then how can Judas be responsible? God planned it. *Yet*, Judas is responsible – guilty – ‘woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed’. It’s a both-and. Our western logic tends to want an either/or – if God

planned it, Judas isn't responsible. This is the issue of predestination and free will – Scripture affirms both! God's logic is often paradoxical (not a 'logical' either/or) – it's a transformation of our way of thinking!

3) Our culture values self-fulfillment. We are to seek what makes us happy, what completes us, what brings us fulfillment.

By contrast, Jesus teaches that:

Mark 8:35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

It is in self-denial, in giving ourselves away – to God and to each other – that we are to find life. Paradoxically, we are more when we give more of ourselves away. If we seek to fulfill ourselves, for our own sake, we lose ourselves.

In all these things – and much more – the Spirit seeks to transform us, to metamorphose us! – away from 'conformity to the world's way of thinking' and to the 'renewed way' of God.

And note the result of this: 'so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.' The renewed mind, a result of the transformation by the Spirit, enables us to know God's will.⁴

But I've left out the most important word of the passage: 12:1: I appeal to you *therefore*, brothers and sisters, *by the mercies of God*, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

Why therefore? Note what had come before 12:1-2 – in 11:33-6:

This is Paul's summation of the Gospel – after 11 long chapters! 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! ... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.'

This is what the 'Therefore' is all about! Because of all that God has done – *Therefore*, Paul appeals to us 'to present our bodies as a living sacrifice'. It is pure response, pure gratitude! A sacrifice of *thanksgiving*! And Paul has spent 11 chapters in Romans describing the human predicament of being lost in sin – but then speaking of Christ's death for us, on our behalf and as our representative – and out being made new through dying with Christ and being raised to new life. And in 12:1 he can helpfully describe all of salvation as '*by the mercies of God*'. It is *because* of God's super-abounding mercy, grace and love to us that we live!

Therefore – by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice. This is our *response* to all God has done.

⁴ There is no mind/body dualism – renewal of mind is bound up with presenting of bodies. As we present our bodies, our minds are renewed.

And this is our worship – our response of thanksgiving to God for his mercies. Our response – therefore – is to live as set-apart-for-God people – as living sacrifices, who have been, are being and will be transformed by the Spirit day-by-day. The more we are transformed, the more our minds are renewed – by the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God, through the work of the Spirit – the more we find ourselves able to present our bodies in worship – anywhere, everywhere! May it be so!

To God be the glory. Amen.