

Northolt Park Baptist Church

New Minds – Romans 12:1-2

Churches like ourselves who are reflecting together on what it means to be a 'church' could do a lot worse than learn from Romans 12, where Paul lays out a vision for God's new people.

We have already thought about the opening word – Therefore! How important it is to note that Paul doesn't begin Romans with the church. He begins with *God*; he begins with men and women being separated from God, lost and without hope; he begins with the gospel of Jesus Christ, with Jesus dying to save men and women from the consequences of sin; he begins with God bringing us into a new covenant relationship with himself through faith, making us alive when we were dead, giving us his Spirit, and uniting Jew and Gentile with each other in one new people, fulfilling his promise to Abraham made years ago... That's the message of Romans 1-11: we are God's new people. And then comes Romans 12:1 – *therefore*... this is how we live as God's new people. And, as we look at the first two verses, we'll see that Paul makes three points about the Christian life.

1. A life marked by dependence on the mercies of God

The argument of Romans reaches a peak at the end of chapter 11, where Paul refers to God's mercy (11:30-32). That's why Paul says: 'I urge you, brothers and sisters, *in view of God's mercy*, to offer your bodies...' (12:1). His call to live this kind of life as God's new people is grounded in God's mercies. The Christian life is not just a life marked by dependence on the mercies of God, it's lived as an outflow of the mercies of God.

There's a practical point to this. It may well be that some Christians read passages like Romans 12 and think: 'Well that's certainly not describing me!' They feel guilty and powerless. But when we understand this chapter in the light of what's gone before, we

know that we *are* guilty people; but we are guilty people who have been forgiven in Christ. We're saved because of God's mercy! Before we get to this point, then, Paul has gone to great lengths to describe the amazing things we have in Christ. Christianity is about what God has done in Christ for the world. Christian living flows from that, but it begins with Christ not with us.

But it's also important to note that Paul's main concern is not the character of the individual Christian, but the character of the *church*. Paul actually says: 'Present your bodies (*plural*) as a living sacrifice (*singular*).' In other words, the exhortation is not said to individuals but to the *whole* community of Christ, in its corporate life. So much of the New Testament is not about me as a Christian, but about *us* as a *church*. Together we make up the people of God, and it's our relationship as the new covenant people of God that's in view here.

2. A life marked by ongoing sacrifice of our bodies

If God's mercy is the basis and ground of Paul's appeal, what is his actual appeal? He urges them: 'offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship' (12:1).

Paul uses the language of the *temple* here – in words like 'offer' and 'sacrifice' and 'worship'. But he transforms them. The sacrifice God looks for is no longer an animal in a temple, but the daily commitment of a life. And we don't sacrifice in order to receive mercy; God's mercy provides the basis for a life of sacrifice. In that sense, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was always a shadow of the real thing – not just the sacrifice of Christ, but the offering of ourselves as a living sacrifice.

What is it we offer? Our bodies, says Paul. As Christians, we can get a bit embarrassed about our bodies – because we think souls are far

more important. But Scripture always talks about bodies when it talks about our relationship with God. When Paul speaks of human depravity in Romans 3:13-18, it's clear that it reveals itself through our bodies: in *tongues* that practise deceit; in *lips* which spread poison; in *mouths* which are full of bitterness and cursing; in *feet* which are swift to shed blood; in *eyes* which look away from God. Romans 6:13 and 19 call us to offer our *bodies* not as instruments of wickedness but as instruments of righteousness. Romans 8:18-27 looks forward to the redemption of our *bodies*, not our souls. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that our *bodies* are the temple of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that we are looking forward to the resurrection of the *body*. The Christian message is that God saved us – the *whole* of us! And he calls the whole of us to be committed back to him – our hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouth.

Paul explains it with a number of adjectives. It is a *living* sacrifice – which is a nice contradiction! In other words, it's a sacrifice which is characterised by an ongoing commitment in daily life. It is also a *holy* sacrifice – meaning it is set apart for God, belonging to God. And it is *pleasing* to God – God enjoys what's going on when we worship him! All of which shows us that we're not thinking about what goes on just on Sunday, and we're certainly not thinking just about the times when we sing in church. This is worship which involves our total selves for the total of daily life.

And it is our 'spiritual act of worship'. The NIV uses the word 'spiritual', but it's not quite the right word. It might be better translated as 'reasonable', or perhaps 'rational' or 'logical'. Logical worship? We wish Paul hadn't written that! It's a worship which engages the mind, which is not mindless or empty. Paul picks up this point in the next verse (12:2), and our final reflection.

3. A life marked by transforming renewal of our minds

We are not to be conformed, but transformed. That means we need to recognise the power of social groups, of cultural norms, of

institutions, and traditions, all of which mould our patterns of behaviour. Paul warns against being transformed to a pattern of anything other than Christ. How do I resist the squeeze of this age? By the renewing of my mind, says Paul.

It's clear that what is being spoken of is not an outward conformity to a pattern of behaviour, but a renewed mind. This emphasis on the mind can sound a little threatening, because we're all too aware of the danger of a merely intellectual Christianity. But there is a need for the mind to be a part of our discipleship. There is a danger of mindless Christianity, in which we don't think at all. And especially because, so far as the Bible is concerned, our mind has to do with *living*, not just thinking. Wisdom in the Bible is not about thinking right thoughts, but living a right life.

Ephesians 4:17-24 is helpful here, because it also speaks of the Christian life in terms of *thinking*. 4:17-19 is clear that at the root of immorality is darkness of mind. Paul emphasises the same point several times – 'futility of their thinking', 'darkened in their understanding', 'separated from the life of God'. Because of this darkness, people have become insensitive, and have given themselves up to sensuality. This ultimately stems from ignorance of God. We can perhaps understand why some people say that you can't change how society *lives* without changing how society *thinks*. And then comes the contrast in 4:20. What happens when we become Christians? We come to *know* Christ. They *learned* Christ. We sometimes speak of making a commitment to Christ, which is all well and good, but the language Paul uses here is slightly different. They had *heard* it, they had been *taught* it, they had *understood* it, and they had *learned* it. Those things have to do with the mind.

Ephesians 4:24 tells me that the new nature is Christ working in me. We must put this new nature on. But, how do I do this? Verse 23 tells me: I have to be renewed in the Spirit of my mind. Whenever there's talk of renewal in the church, we have to remember that one important aspect of that is that we must be renewed in our *mind*.

Again, we're not talking about being intellectuals; but in Paul's version of Christianity, you cannot live a Christian life without *thinking* about what you are doing. The break with the past is not just a matter of heart, but a matter of the *mind*. Let's pray for the renewal of our minds.

Back in Romans 12:2, a result of this renewed mind is that we will be those who test and approve God's will. In Romans 1, the mind was darkened and the body was corrupted, and people suppressed the will of God; but now we are able to think, discern, discover, and do the will of God. The gospel has to do with the remaking of human beings – bodies and minds.

And once again, this is a *corporate* and not merely an individual process. There is a reversal of the story told in Romans 1, where the mind, heart and body became corrupted and disintegrated. We see Paul's vision of how God puts together human beings. We see a reversal of Adam's sin, and a getting right of what it means to be the people of God. The Christian life is not focused on the sacrifices in the temple, and is not determined by the law. There is still sacrifice, and doing the will of God is still crucial; but it comes through ongoing sacrifice of ourselves and through constant inward renewal.

May God help us all, as individuals and as his new people, to live in the light of his mercies, offering our bodies together as a true sacrifice, and renewing our minds in conformity to his will. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 29 April 2007