

Hinde Street Methodist Church

The Covenant Service Sunday 10 January 2020 11.00am
Richard Shepley

Romans 12:1–2

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to **present your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 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.**

Why do we have the Covenant Service every year?

Paul says, *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to **present your bodies as a living sacrifice.**"*

D L Moody, the 19th Century evangelist commented wryly; *"The only problem with a living sacrifice is that it has a tendency to keep crawling off the altar."*

We need reminding of what we have promised. A few years ago, after hearing a sermon about helping the poor I made a promise to God that I would buy the Big Issue every week. The other day, it hit me that this had diluted down to, "I'll buy a Big Issue most weeks." Then to, ". . . when I can be bothered".

A very trivial example.

But I need reminding.

I probably need to get back on the altar.

Why should I give myself to God in this way?

Romans 12:1–2

*I appeal to you **therefore**, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice*

What's the 'therefore' there for? As I was always taught. Well, it refers back to the previous 11 chapters. Paul is saying, "OK, that was the theory. Now for the practical application.. **Therefore . . .**"

We can summarise what Paul has said in Chapters 1-11 by looking at the introduction to the Covenant Service in the Methodist Worship Book.

“The emphasis of the whole service is on God’s readiness to enfold us in generous love, not dependent on our deserving. Our response, also in love, springs in penitent joy from thankful recognition of God’s grace.”

Let’s hear that again.

Firstly, *“The emphasis of the whole service is on **God’s readiness to enfold us in generous love.**”* We learned in the first 11 chapters of Romans that the creating God of the universe is Love. Pure, compassionate, unconditional, total love.

Secondly, this love is ***not dependent on our deserving.*** We have done nothing to earn this love. God in unmeasurable goodness sent God in Jesus Christ to teach us, to be our example, and ultimately to die in our place. God in Jesus then rose from death to life. Jesus lives now, loving us and staying with us always.

Thirdly, *“Our response, also in love, **springs in penitent joy from thankful recognition of God’s grace.**”* We can do nothing to make God love us more. We can do everything in gratitude for what God has been doing, is doing and will do in us and for us forever.

What does it mean to give myself as a Living Sacrifice?

An invitation to be part of the story of salvation. A way – in fact the only way - to actually transform the world.

Romans 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.**

We are talking about

1. Prayer
2. Attitudes and Priorities
3. Service

Prayer

Prayer is one of the things that marks us out from those without faith in God. Through prayer, we can *“be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God”*.

Listen to this extract from Tennyson's Cycle of poems "The Idylls of the King", which retell the legend of King Arthur.

As it says in the Wikipedia entry, "*The whole work recounts Arthur's attempt and failure to lift up mankind and create a perfect kingdom (and we'll come back to that later), from his coming to power to his death.*"

This is Arthur as he lays dying, speaking to Sir Bedevere:

More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice rise like a fountain for me night and day.

For what are men better than sheep or goats that nourish a blind life within the brain, if, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer both for themselves and those who call them friend?

For so the whole round earth is every way bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

I love it because it says that it is the act of praying that marks us out from the dumb animals, because it reminds us that prayer achieves something

Jesus told us to pray. Jesus prayed to a loving God who will hear us.

And I love this excerpt because I don't even begin to understand the meaning of the last line, "*For so the whole round earth is every way bound by gold chains about the feet of God.*"

I don't always understand prayer either, but I pray as my Lord did, and told me to.

Attitudes and Priorities

Romans 12:2

"Do not be conformed to this world . . ."

The JB Phillips' version of the New Testament puts it rather neatly like this; "*Do not let the world squeeze you into its own mould*".

One of the many powers that tries to squeeze us into its mould - is Consumerism. It is so seductive. And I have picked it out because it seems so harmless.

I need stuff. And more stuff. And more. It is the drug of choice for most of society.

But it destroys lives through debt, the planet through excess extraction of resources, and through that contributing to climate change. And it doesn't result in happiness.

More infectious than Covid, it takes more than a vaccine to get rid of it from our minds and bodies.

As Frank L. Crouch, the Dean of the Moravian Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania says:- *“Not being conformed to this world is a tall order. It takes transformation, **renewal of the mind**, to detach ourselves from the world’s attempts to occupy us with things that do not matter.”*

We have to turn our lives over to God – utterly. Then we can become free.

The Anglican Collect for Peace puts it like this; *“O GOD, the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom stands our eternal life, **whose service is perfect freedom**.”*

Service

The Covenant Prayer is mainly about committing ourselves to service; *“put me to this, put me to that.”*

In other words, it’s about how I use the three T’s

1. Time
2. Talents, and (sorry about this)
3. Tenners – that’s money not Ollie Boe.

Time:

Many of us at Hinde Street give up some of our free time serving various charities and political groups, and/or serving within the church community.

Others through family commitments, illness, age or infirmity cannot volunteer for anything, and they are no less valued members of our church family for that.

But for those of us not in that category, we could ask ourselves: Where can I help? Could I do something? Could I do more?

Talents:

After a church member wrote in recently and offered his services as a photographer should the church need him, the Stewards have decided to ask you If you would like to tell us what your talents are: knitting, playing a musical instrument, phoning

housebound people, organising things, origami. Anything. It could be a way that you could serve the Church family.

But, just as important, could I serve outside the Church? There is always a desperate need for volunteers in all sorts of areas. Could I do that? Now in the present pandemic, could I even be a Covid vaccination centre volunteer?

Tenners (Money):

Shall I just skip on past money? Sorry. We can't.

The Finance Committee has just forecasted a deficit of about £126,000 for the year. This assumes that we will not get back to the lettings situation that we had "Pre-Covid".

But even if we do return to the income level we had pre-Covid, we have been running an annual deficit which teeters around £30,000 for quite a few years now. With our total giving being less than £100,000.

Well, we have an expensive building to maintain. No. The income from lettings over the last 5 years has paid for all our gas, water, electricity, maintenance, insurances, caretaking and cleaning – and we **still** made a profit of £5,000!

That means that we are not even paying our way for basic church costs, ministers and administration salaries and other minor expenses.

We all need to think about this. Each and every one of us. Some members give sacrificially. But do I? Where we are giving £10 now, we need to be giving £13. And some of us are unable to do that, so others of us will need to give more.

A question:

Does my giving affect my lifestyle? If it doesn't affect my lifestyle, can I suggest it is not really giving at all. Am I basically "tipping" God, like a waiter? Giving him my loose change . . .

Should I be giving more? A lot more?

Being a Living Sacrifice

I said earlier that presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice was the only way - to actually transform the world.

The only way? I do believe that.

Remember King Arthur's "*attempt and failure to lift up mankind and create a perfect kingdom.*" OK that is fiction.

But look at the real world. Throughout history, men have had ideas to make the world a better place; Oliver Cromwell, Karl Marx to name but two. Yet all that happens is that one power elite replaces another. Oppression continues with different oppressors.

Even in the church, while at grass roots level beautiful consequences have grown out of the sacrificial lives of women and men throughout history; so often at the higher levels, there have been corrupt, self-interested and power-seeking men all but destroying the Gospel message.

And even today.

Look at the high ideals of the US Declaration of Independence, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness". Where have **these ideals** ended up this week?

The hymn we just sang put it brilliantly in verse 3:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
 the world has suffered long;
**beneath the angel strain have rolled
 two thousand years of wrong;
 and man, at war with man, hears not
 the love-song which they bring.**
 O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
 and hear the angels sing!

So, can the world be transformed into King Arthur's perfect Kingdom?

Certainly not by political systems, or organisations. Only by individuals – famous people like St Francis, Martin Luther King, Pope Francis; or ordinary people like you and me - who turn their lives over to God and thus are empowered to love their neighbours as themselves, to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile; who do not repay evil for evil, who love their enemies.

Who say to God, "I offer myself as a living sacrifice. I am no longer mine but yours", and who, whenever they find they have crawled off the altar, quickly and quietly climb back on

. . . and try again.