



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### A Living Sacrifice Romans 12:1-5 & St. Luke 2:41-52

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In our Gospel lesson today St. Luke tells us about an incident that took place when Jesus was twelve years old. He and his family travelled to Jerusalem for the annual Passover festival, going along the road with friends and extended family from Nazareth. Everything went perfectly until the trip home. It was a journey of several days and on the first night, as Joseph and Mary set up their camp, they discovered Jesus was missing. Maybe Joseph needed help setting up a shelter. Maybe it was when Mary called him to supper and he didn't come. They assumed that he was walking with friends during the day's journey. They asked around, but no one had seen Jesus.

Anyone who has been a parent can sympathise with the sense of panic they felt. They'd lost their son—and more than that, the Lord had entrusted them with *his* son!—and they'd lost him in the big city. And so they turn around, making the day's journey back to Jerusalem. They spent a third day combing the city for him. They didn't find him. And finally they wound up at the temple—maybe to pray and to ask God for some hint as to what had happened to Jesus. At any rate, Luke doesn't give us the impression that they went to the temple to look for him there. But to their surprise, there he was, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46).

Again, anyone who has been a parent can sympathise with how

angry Joseph and Mary must have been with Jesus. “Why have you treated us this way?”, asks Mary, “We were worried sick about you!” Most kids would be sorry or ashamed, but not Jesus. He responds, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (Luke 2:49). A better translation of the Greek, since Jesus refers to his Father and says nothing specifically about a house or temple, would be “Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?” Luke says that they didn't understand what he meant at the time. Jesus never intended to upset or dishonour them, but he explains that there's something more important than them. The chief duty of every Jewish boy or girl was to honour his or her parents—to obey and to respect them. On the surface it looked like Jesus had done just the opposite. But then he reminds us who his *real* Father is and we see he wasn't dishonouring Joseph or Mary at all. If Jesus wasn't going to do the work of his Father there was no point in him being born. And his Father's work, as we saw in our study of Luke's Gospel has a lot to do with the temple. Luke brackets his gospel with the temple: with Jesus staying behind to interact with the teachers here at the beginning, and then at the end, with the disciples, having seen their risen Lord, going to the temple to worship and to praise God. And in between we see Jesus, over and over, confronting the priests and scholars who governed and ministered in the temple. They had perverted the whole system of worship and sacrifice and Jesus rebukes them over and over, calling them back to God, calling them back to true worship, back to Israel's true mission in the world, and warning that if they don't turn, the Lord's judgement will come soon and not a

stone of the temple will be left standing.

Jesus keeps bringing us back to the temple and he keeps connecting this idea of being about the Father's work with the temple. First Jesus, then his disciples. On the Epiphany we read in Ephesians about the Lord bringing Jew and Gentile alike, those who were already near and those who have come from far off, together into one body. Writing to the Gentile converts in Ephesus he says:

**So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.** (Ephesians 2:19-21)

This is one of Paul's many illustrations of the Church. And it's appropriate. A temple is a dwelling place for God and it is his people, those who make up his Church, in whom he has come to dwell in the person of the Holy Spirit. The old temple was torn stone from stone, but in the Holy Spirit a new and better temple, this time one not made by hands, has been built. The Jews had returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple, but God's presence had never returned to it, but in the Spirit, God has truly returned to visit his people, making his presence with them—with us.

In the Gospel Jesus points to the purpose of the temple: it's where the Father's work is done and when we think about the temple the first thing that ought to come to mind is “sacrifice”. Sacrifice wasn't the only thing that took place in the temple, but it was the most

important. And it was the sacrifices in the temple that pointed to and that foreshadowed Jesus. He was about the work of his Father and his entire life and ministry centred on sacrifice, from the way in which he humbled himself—God taking on human flesh and being born of Mary—all the way to his ultimate rejection, suffering, and death at the cross. Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice for the sins of his people. But he then calls his people to sacrifice their own lives in response. Jesus reminds us over and over in the Gospels that there is nothing more important than this business, this work of his Father. Even his obligation to honour his parents, Joseph and Mary, took second place to the work of his true Father. I was thinking on this during the past week after reading Matthew 8. We read there how one man saw how Jesus speaking and acting with authority, so he pledged himself to follow Jesus wherever he would go—but first, he said to Jesus, he had to bury his Father. That might have meant that his Father had just died and he had an immediately obligation to deal with the funeral arrangements or that his Father was old and sick and needed his care for some time before he could follow Jesus. Jesus' response was shocking: "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead" (Matthew 2:22).

To follow Jesus means to sacrifice everything—to set aside even those otherwise good things we might do if they interfere with truly following Jesus. Jesus might have known in the case of the man who spoke of burying his father that this delay would lead to another delay and that would lead to another and the man would put off following Jesus so long that he would forget about it entirely. How often do we do that? I know what Jesus demands, I know what I need to do, I know what I

need to sacrifice—but I'll do it next week or I'll do it next month or I'll do it next year when I have the time or the money or the energy to do it. And then it never happens. Brothers and sisters, that's not sacrifice. That's letting the things and priorities of the present age govern our lives instead of Jesus and the priorities of his kingdom.

This is what St. Paul gets at in our Epistle today, taken from Romans 12. Look at verse 1:

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

As the Jews had brought their animals to be offered to the Lord on the altar of the temple, in this new temple that the Lord has made in the indwelling of his people, we offer not dumb and unwilling animals, but ourselves. In Jesus, God has given his own life as a redeeming sacrifice for our sins. He has conquered sin and death for us. In his resurrection he has freed us from their bondage. So the sacrifice Paul is talking about here isn't a sacrifice for sin. No, Paul is calling us to sacrifice ourselves as a thank offering to the Lord—an offering made in gratitude for the love and mercy he has shown us in Jesus.

This is our "spiritual worship". In some translations you might see "reasonable worship" instead of "spiritual worship". The Greek word there is the word from which we get our word "logic". This sacrifice of ourselves on the altar of the Holy Spirit's temple, this giving of ourselves is what constitutes the true worship of God, if you "reason" it out, if you "think" about and "consider" what God has done for us

in Jesus. Jesus gave his life for you and for me, the only reasonable response, the only logical response is for us to give our lives to him—our time, our talent, our treasure, our everything for his sake and for the sake of his kingdom.

No, this doesn't earn us anything with God. Earlier in Romans Paul stresses that forgiveness for sin comes only by grace. We can add nothing to the sacrifice that Jesus has made for us. As the Prayer of Consecration in the Lord's Supper makes so clear, Jesus at the cross "made... (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world". There is nothing we can add to Jesus' sacrifice. He stands by the waters of baptism as Moses stood by the parted waters of the Red Sea. The work is done, all we need to do is pass through the waters in faith to the life waiting on the other side. And yet, Paul says, it is this sacrificing of ourselves, this reasonable worship, that is holy and acceptable to God. It pleases him the same way the smoke of the thank offerings in the old temple pleased him as it rose up from the altar.

But there are so many things that compete with this idea of sacrifice. And so Paul goes on in verse 2:

**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

Do not be conformed to this world. This is one of the most powerful statements in the New Testament. But it's a little bit misleading as it's usually translated in English. The word translated "world" is that Greek word we visited a few weeks

ago. It's the word for *aeon* or *age*, and what Paul is referring to is that Jewish idea of history divided into two ages. There's the present evil age and then there's the age to come, ushered in by the Messiah. The present age is a mess, full of sin and suffering and death, but in the age to come the Messiah will set the world, will set all Creation to rights. The Jews, for the most part, made the mistake of assuming that the change would happen virtually instantly at the Messiah's coming. This is why they had so much trouble accepting that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus didn't come that way. To bring the age to come, to set everything to rights overnight would mean condemning virtually all of the human race. That's not the Lord's way. He and the angels rejoice to see a repentant sinner redeemed. He desires all men and women to be saved. And so in Jesus he came to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He provided a means of redemption. In his death and resurrection he dealt a death blow to the present evil age and sent the clear message that its days are numbered. And in his resurrection he inaugurated the age to come. It is here and it is now, but not in all its fullness. Jesus is in the *process* of setting his Creation to rights and part of that process is the Church's proclamation of the Good News throughout the world—the Good News that Jesus is Lord, that his kingdom has come, and that the old age and the old way of doing things are passing away.

The good news is that redemption from sin and a new way of life in the Spirit is available for all. The bad news is that the present age and everything about it refuses to accept that Jesus has won. Like the dying villain at the end of movie trying to do as much damage as possible while he takes his final gasping

breathes, this age tries to lure us away from giving our all to Jesus and his kingdom. And we all know how effective the present age, the world, is at doing this. How often do we spend our time on the things of this age that we know are passing away, how much of our money do we spend on the things of this age that are passing away? We know better. But we still invest ourselves in this age rather than in Jesus and in the things of the age to come. We foolishly invest in things that won't last instead of the things that will last.

Instead, Paul says, we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This is Paul's way of telling us not to be stupid and not to be duped by the world, by Caesar, by money, by "stuff, by sin, and by selfish desires. If offering ourselves as living sacrifices is the reasonable or logical worship offered by those who are in Christ Jesus, it follows that we need to *think* this through with our sanctified and renewed brains instead of letting the world fool us and entice us.

Think of it, again, in terms of exodus. Through Moses God rescued his people from Egypt. He parted the sea and the people passed through in faith to the other side and to a new life. And on the other side the Lord met them at Mt. Sinai and gave them the Law. This was the Lord showing them, explaining to them, how to live the new life he had just given them. He rescued them from bondage. The Law was many things, but one aspect of it was that it showed them how to live in a way pleasing to him out of gratitude. Of course, as we read the Old Testament, we see that it didn't work out very well. The problem was that the Law was written on tablets of stone. Israel was freed from her

slavery to Egypt, but not from her slavery to sin.

Jesus has solved that problem. In his death and resurrection he has freed us and by his Spirit he's written his law on our hearts. The stone tablets were an external law. The Spirit lives in us. So as he freed the Israelites from bondage and led them to a new life, so he has freed us from bondage—from our bondage to sin and death—and he has given us new life. And he's given us his Holy Spirit to regenerate our hearts and to renew our minds so that we can live the new life he's given. Having been given this wonderful gift of grace—and remember: this is a gift of *grace*, this is gift we did not deserve or earn. We were in sinful rebellion against God, but he loved us so much that he gave his own life in Jesus to restore us to his fellowship again—having been given this gracious gift, what does it say of our ingratitude when we return to our old ways, to the ways of bondage? When we allow the present age, when we allow the world to dictate our thinking and our desires and our actions, we're like the Israelites grumbling against God and pining away for the fleshpots of Egypt.

No, Paul says, be transformed by the renewing of your minds. The Holy Spirit has changed the way you think. He's cleared the worldly fog from your mind so that you can know what is acceptable and perfect to God.

The rest of Romans is Paul's description of what this life in the Spirit looks like as it's applied to life in the Church and in the world. And the very first thing he says about it ties right back into the humble sacrifice that God has made in Jesus. Look at verses 3-5:

**For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.**

Notice how Jesus and the Good News are at the centre here. Paul warns us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. He reminds us that in the Church, in this temple built alike of Jews and Gentiles—of men and women, of rich and poor, of slave and free, people of every tongue, tribe, and nation, people of every imaginable background—we are *one* body in Jesus the Messiah and that means that as we belong to him, as we find our life in him, we belong to each other and we should be living together in the same way that the parts of our own bodies live together. He goes on to talk about the gifting of the Holy Spirit and how some are given this gift and another that gift, not for our own benefit, but in order to show love and honour to one another. In fact, in verse 9 he talks about outdoing each other in showing honour to one another. And Jesus is our model—he’s the standard by which we do all of this.

When Paul says that we should “think with sober judgement” and treat each other accordingly he says that we ought to do it according to the measure of faith God has given to us. Paul is not saying here that we’re all given different measures or amounts of faith and so some will do this better than others. When he talks about the measure of faith God

has given each of us he’s talking about the Gospel, the good news: *Jesus is Lord. For our sakes he died and rose from the dead.* Brothers and Sisters, it’s by this profession of faith that we are in Jesus in the first place, and it is this profession of faith by which we measure everything in the Christian life. Paul sums this up in much the same way in Philippians 2:

**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.** (Philippians 2:3-8)

Brothers and Sisters, this is the nature of sacrifice! We need to have this mind—the mind of Christ—among ourselves. We don’t have it by birth. It conflicts with the mind of the present evil age. But the present evil age is passing away. Jesus has given us new birth. In baptism we’ve passed through the sea to the new life of his kingdom. We’ve become a part—and not just a part of, but ambassadors, witnesses, missionaries of the age to come. And so as Jesus humbled himself, as Jesus sacrificed himself for the sake of the world—for our sakes—we are called to respond in joyful gratitude by humbly sacrificing ourselves, giving our all and our everything for Jesus, for his kingdom, for each other. This loving giving of ourselves builds up the body, the

Church. And the built-up Church witnesses the loving grace of Jesus, our Saviour.

Do not be conformed by the word. Do not be conformed to the thinking, the values, the priorities of this age. Instead, be transformed by the renewing of your minds by the Holy Spirit. Each of us like a carefully cut stone. Together the Lord gathers us and fits us together, building a temple. And having built his temple he indwells us and call us to be about his work—the work of making his love for sinners known, the work of calling sinners to repentance, the work of announcing in the midst of this present evil age that the life of the world to come is breaking in and that Jesus is Lord of all.

Let us pray: Father, in the Collect we prayed, asking you to make known to us the things we ought to do and for the grace and power to faithfully do those things. We ask this again. Your Spirit has regenerated our hearts and renewed our minds. You’ve given us your Word. You’ve set before the humility, the love, and the sacrifice of Jesus as a model. Give us the grace now to persevere in following Jesus, to steep ourselves in your Word, and to think with the mind of Christ rather than letting the values of this age shape our thinking and priorities. Amen.