



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1-2

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We're back to Romans this morning and we'll be looking at just two verses: Romans 12:1-2. Romans 12 begins a new section of St. Paul's letter. People have often said that the first eleven chapters are theology and that these last four chapters are about ethics. That can be a helpful way to look at it, but that doesn't mean that Paul has moved on from everything he's written so far. There's no disconnected between the two. The ethics flow naturally from the theology. Paul has gone on at length to explain how the good news about Jesus, crucified and risen, reveals the righteousness or covenant faithfulness of God and he's also gone on at some length to stress that in his righteousness and through Jesus, God has renewed his covenant and created a new people—this is what all that talk about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles was getting at—and now, here, he works out the practical implications. The good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness of God, but that revealing or unveiling isn't complete until we see how the people of God lives out its—lives out *our*—faith in Jesus as Lord. God's righteousness is unveiled as we see his promises fulfilled in Jesus, but we also see God's righteousness revealed in the life of the Church, in the life of the people of God. That's what this last section of Romans is about.

What Paul has to say in these chapters will range over quite a few subjects, but he starts here in verses 1 and 2 with the heading of “worship”. Now, before we get into what Paul has to say, it's worth considering what *we* mean when we talk about worship, because what we mean isn't

necessarily what Paul means. In the last century and particularly over the last few decades, what many Christians mean by “worship” has been narrowed down a lot...a *lot*. The church I attended in University followed what has become a pretty common trend. The referred to the church proper as the “worship centre”—as if that was the only place where we worshipped. And that's how many people saw it. Worship was what happened in the big room with the pulpit and altar and pews. Other things happened in other parts of the building, but people didn't typically think of those things as “worship”. But at least most people thought of everything we did in that “worship centre” space as worship. In fact, we often talked about what we did on Sunday mornings as “corporate worship”—the whole service, from gathering to praying to hearing the word read and preached to singing to celebrating the Lord's Supper—that was “worship”. But, still, that service was isolated in our thinking. That was “worship”. Other things we did were not. But in the years since then I see many Christians narrowing “worship down even further. Increasingly it seems that many Christians, when they think of “worship” think not so much of the whole Sunday service, but specifically of the musical or sung parts of the service. We used to have choirs. Now we have “worship teams”. But those worship teams don't include everyone who assists the congregation in the service. The worship team doesn't include the priest or pastor usually. It doesn't include the people who read the lessons or the acolytes or the people who clean the church and have it ready for Sunday. No, “worship team” refers very specifically to the group of singers and musicians who lead the sung parts of the service. So, first, we narrowed our idea of “worship” down so that it referred to our corporate gatherings on Sundays, but now we've narrowed it down even further to just the sung parts of that service. More than once I've even had people complain to me that if the

sermon or the prayers or the liturgy are too long, it doesn't leave enough time for “worship”.

Brothers and Sisters, when St. Paul writes about worship he has something much, much bigger in mind. In fact, the Greek word that Paul uses to talk about worship has nothing to do with music or singing. The word for worship that is used in the Bible is a word that refers to the service that people offer to their god. It's a word that, as it's used in the New Testament, refers to the whole of life—to everything and anything we do as an offering or in service to our God. This can certainly include singing and our corporate services, but it also ranges widely to include how we live, how we do business, how we interact with our neighbours, and how we care for the needy. Look at Romans 12:1.

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.

Notice that Paul doesn't say, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the mercies of god to sing some good songs with a lot of feeling, which is your spiritual worship. No. He calls on his brothers (and sisters) to present their bodies as living sacrifices to God. That's worship. It's far more than singing songs and hymns. It's far more, too, than coming on Sundays to join in corporate worship in word and sacrament. It's more than happy feelings about ourselves or good feelings about God. Dear Friends, worship is an all-inclusive way of life. Think about the line of thought Paul has taken through Romans. If the good news about Jesus reveals God's faithfulness, then our “worship”, in some way, must both celebrate and reveal God's faithfulness. That only really happens when it encompasses all of life—as our faith in God's faithfulness permeates literally everything we do.

Think of it this way: Restricting our worship of God to Sunday mornings is like restricting your love for your husband or wife to Valentine's Day, instead of letting it manifest itself in every interaction you have with them.

So Paul begins saying, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers..." He's starting a new section of his letter, but it doesn't crop up out of nowhere. That "therefore" means that what he's saying here flows naturally from what he's already been writing. He appeals to them. It's a strong word, but Paul isn't just pleading with them to do something they wouldn't otherwise do. He's appealing to them on the grounds of what he's said about who God is and what he's done. We get a sense of this in that he addresses them as "brothers". He's writing to a mixed bunch of Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were Paul's natural brothers, but over the last few chapters he's written about what it means to be God's covenant people and what it means to be true Israel. God has pruned the natural branches from the tree and grafted in others and as a result, Paul can now address them all as brothers. In Jesus, God has done something amazing and so he appeals to them based on that.

But, again, what is "that"? What's the "therefore"? Paul writes, "by the mercies of God". For eleven chapters Paul has been unfolding the mercies of God poured out on sinners. The wages of sin is death, Paul wrote in 6:3, and every one of us has earned that wage, but God has poured out his mercy to save us from our bondage to sin and death. God has given his Son to die for sinners and God has given us his life-giving Spirit and made us his sons and daughters. That's mercy. And our worship should be the natural outgrowth of that. This is what Jesus has saved us and made us new for.

And now Paul gets to the heart of it and tells them—and indirectly, tells us—what this all leads us to. He says

that because of the mercies of God revealed in Jesus, because of this new life given by the Spirit, we are to present our bodies—not just our voices and certainly not just our voices on Sunday mornings—we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. *This* is what worship is. Worship isn't something we do once. It's not something we do once or twice a day as we pick up our Bibles and Prayer Books at home. Worship is life. It's *all* of life.

We've forgotten that. A major factor has been the way that Western people have increasingly tended to compartmentalise everything. "Religion" has become simply one compartment in our lives. Even the way we speak of "religion" now reflects this. It's common to hear people today speak about Islam, saying that it's not a "religion", but an all-encompassing way of life. I always find it interesting that this is often thrown out as a criticism, no less by Christians. It says something about what we've lost. Because that's exactly what Paul is talking about here. Christianity isn't just something to fill the religious compartment in your life. It's a whole way of life. The same went—and still goes—for Judaism. It's helpful to reflect on that. Think of the law that God gave his people through Moses. It was all-encompassing. God rescued Israel from Egypt, he made the Israelites his people, and he gave them a law that taught them how to live as his people. The law told them how to live as his people, not just how to offer sacrifices in the tabernacle when they thought they needed something from him or when they wanted a feel-good experience. To be God's people meant being God's people *every day*, from the way you managed your crops and livestock to the way you did business to the way you ate to the way you loved your wife and disciplined your kids to the way you related to and looked after the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner in your

community. To be God's people meant revealing his righteousness to the world in *every* aspect of life.

Israel forgot that and ended up in exile. The prophets spent most of their time rebuking the Israelites for thinking that as long as they circumcised their sons, ate the right food, and offered the right sacrifices in the temple that they were being faithful witness to the mercies of God. Meanwhile, many were running their business in corrupt ways, they turned an uncaring eye on the poor, they took advantage of widows and orphans, they treated foreigners badly, and—worst—they combined the worship of false gods with their worship of the Lord. It's not hard to draw parallels with many Christians today. We think that if we go to church on Sunday, sing some songs and, maybe, even put some money in the offering plate, we're marked out as God's people. Maybe throw in putting a fish sticker on our car or arguing a lot for Jesus on the Internet. And yet, we cheat our bosses or our employees, we invest ourselves in material things, we squander our time on an excess of TV, movies, and Internet porn, we fail to catechise our children and to instill faith in Jesus in them. And, it's no wonder, because, while we come to worship God on Sunday, we spend much of the rest of the week worshipping Caesar and Aphrodite and Mammon, just like the pagans around us.

We are often just like Israel. And so Paul reminds us first of the grounds of our worship: the mercies of God and his righteousness revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And then he urges us to present our bodies—our whole selves and every area of life—to Jesus as a living sacrifice in response. Paul is pointing back to the temple and to the animals sacrificed there. Those sacrifices were pleasing to God even though they were dumb animals with no choice in the matter. How much more pleasing to God is it

when we offer ourselves? But there's the problem. There's the struggle. The animals brought to the temple had no idea what was about to happen to them. They let themselves be led to the priest who would cut their throats. And when they were put on the altar, they just lay there. Dead sacrifices don't put up a struggle or climb down off the altar. A living sacrifice, is different. It's hard to give up our old lives and the things associated with them. We know that going to the altar means sacrifice. And even when we manage to climb up onto that altar to offer ourselves to God, it's a struggle to stay there. This is why Paul points us to the mercies of God. Worship is a response. Having the mercy, grace, and love of Jesus, having before us the sacrifice he has made for us, engenders the loving gratitude that motivates us offer ourselves to him. Nothing else will do. If we see it as nothing more than duty, we will never manage to stay on the altar. If we climb up there thinking that it will earn us something, we will eventually fail. Only love for God poured out in response to his love shown to us in Jesus will truly make us and keep us living sacrifices.

Paul gives us another corrective here that a lot of modern Christians need to hear. An awful lot of the talk we hear of worship today is all about feelings and emotions. And while it's true that our worship should be the natural outgrowth of our love and gratitude towards God, it has become very common to judge our experience of worship based on the feelings that our worship produces in us. To do that, Brother and Sisters, is to turn worship on its head. But Paul also stresses here that this is more than a gut feeling. Where the ESV reads "spiritual", Paul uses the Greek word *logikos*. Some translations read something like "reasonable" worship. The point of *logikos* is that it involves the mind. We don't just offer God our whole selves because of some gut feeling, but because he has mercifully

given himself in Jesus for our sake. We offer our whole selves to him, because we have seen in Jesus that he is righteous and faithful and worthy of our worship. This is why, at least historically, Christian corporate worship always began with the word, moved onto the sacrament, and only then to the congregation's sung praises. God spoke, God acted, and the people sang praises in response. That doesn't mean they didn't sing at other times, but the order of service deliberately made the singing a response to God. That has increasingly changed as "worship" has more and more focused narrowly on singing and on the feelings that arise out of that singing.

Again, this giving of our whole selves to God isn't an easy thing to do, but Paul writes that is holy and acceptable to God. Those are loaded words, especially the second. "Holy" has the sense of being dedicated. It takes us back to the temple and to the sacrifices offered there. The animals, the wine, the oil, the grain that was offered was set apart and dedicated to God and that made it holy. We're to do the same with ourselves. And to do that is "acceptable" to God. "Acceptable" might not be the best translation, because it tends to give us the idea that we're not really all that pleasing to God. We're sinners and we make poor sacrifices. We climb up on the altar, but while we're lying there, we're thinking about how much we'd like to climb down and do something else. But, we think we're there meeting some requirement and so God will sort of grudging "accept" us despite our imperfections. For us Protestants it can be very easy to fall into this way of thinking. Sometime we even balk at the idea that anything we can do could be "acceptable" to God. We're sinners, after all, we think. We're wholly *unacceptable*, but thankfully, God sees the perfection of Jesus when he looks at us. But, Brothers and Sisters, this isn't what Paul is saying. Yes, we're sinners.

Yes, we come before God only by the grace revealed in Jesus. But the sense of the word he uses is that if we will offer our whole selves as living sacrifices to God, he truly does find it pleasing. Hear me: God is pleased when you offer yourself to him as a living sacrifice. And this is because our offering of ourselves as living sacrifices reveals God's righteousness. That we can offer ourselves to him is only because we are in Christ and the Holy Spirit is in us and that has only happened because God has been faithful to his promises to create a people who love him. Brothers and Sisters, your faith is the product of the love, the grace, the mercy of God and when it is on display, particularly when it is offered to God, he is pleased.

Again, this isn't easy, but here's what Paul writes 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.

Paul again points to the way in which we who are in Christ are the new Israel. The old Israel was delivered from Egypt and given a law—a way of life—and told, "You must not do as they do...in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws." Paul now says the same thing to the Roman Christians and to us not to be conformed to the world around us, but to be transformed. J. B. Philips famously paraphrased it this way, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within." There is one problem with Philips' paraphrase. It's that "from within" part at the end. It sounds as if Paul is calling us to retreat from the world to discover some kind of inner spirituality or inner spiritual truth. That's Gnosticism, not Christianity.

But something like that fills many of our churches today where people rely more on feelings and emotions than they do on the mind. That's not to say that feelings aren't important, but Paul's point here is that the body goes where the mind leads. That's how we can offer our whole selves as living sacrifices. Paul stresses that we need to know the will of God by discerning and testing. Friends, if you rely on feelings for that, you'll only get yourself into trouble. We discern and test with mind. We know what is good and perfect and pleasing to God because our minds have been renewed. Paul doesn't elaborate here on how our minds are renewed, but he tells us elsewhere that this happens through the word and the Spirit working in concert with each other. The Holy Spirit regenerates us—he makes new what sin has corrupted in us and that includes our minds—but it is the word—which is itself inspired by the Spirit—and is the revelation of God's will that fills our minds and shapes our thinking. The Scriptures are the place where God speaks to us to make himself and his will known. There is no alternative and this is why we need to steep ourselves in his word. The Spirit makes us hungry for it. The Spirit even gives us a measure of understanding as we read the word. But if our minds are to be renewed, if we are to discern the will of God the word is the raw material we must give the Spirit to work with. That's where it starts. The word and the Spirit renew our minds. Our renewed minds can then discern the will of God. And then the love for God placed in us by the Spirit takes direction from our word- and Spirit-renewed mind to climb on the altar and to offer ourselves as living sacrifices.

So, Brothers and Sisters, immerse yourself in God's word. Immerse yourself in daily worship that is centred in God's word. This is why we have the orders for daily morning and evening prayer in the Prayer Book. There's a host of other

devotional aids out there as well. It's not as important what you use, but that you immerse yourself daily in Scripture, hearing God speak through the Spirit-inspired words and responding to his mercies revealed there. The more you see the righteousness of God revealed there, the more you will know the righteousness—the faithfulness—of God yourself. And the more you know the mercies of God, the more you will be motivated to offer him your all in return. I don't think it's ever easy. If it wasn't easy for Jesus to offer himself for our sake, it will always be a struggle for us to offer ourselves to him, but Paul reminds us to begin with the mercies of God. Know his mercy, know his grace, know his love and lay yourself on the altar. Find assurance in the knowledge that he has given us his Spirit to regenerate and renew us and, too, find assurance in the knowledge that our offering is a pleasing thing to God. And pray to the one who finds our offering pleasing for the grace to stay on the altar.

Let us pray: On this Trinity Sunday, we give you thanks, Father, that you have given your Son as a sacrifice for sin and united us with him and with you through the gift of your indwelling Holy Spirit. Remind us each day of these, your mercies, that we might be moved to offer ourselves—our whole selves—as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to you. Amen.