

Romans 12:1-8

Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work for your praise and glory.

They are weighty words, which offer to our heavenly Father, inviting him to fill us with his Spirit and put us to work for his purposes. This morning we have the opportunity to consider why we say it and what it might mean to us the next time we dare to utter those words.

Romans 12 is the passage of Scripture from which this prayer is drawn.

As we make a start we notice the passage begins with a 'therefore.' We cannot move forward until we ask what the therefore is there for.

In chapter 11 Paul talked about two olive trees. A cultivated olive tree Israel, onto whose pruned rootstock the wild olive branches of the Gentile church that had been grafted.

The chapter contained words of caution to the Gentile church, to respect the Jews on whose shoulders they stood, for although they had rejected Jesus as Messiah, their journey with God had brought the Gentiles life. Paul also urged them to learn the lessons of Israel's history and avoid becoming complacent in their new faith, and to look ahead to the time when the community of Israel would returned home and recognise their Saviour.

Paul spoke of the day when a united people would display the mercy and faithfulness of God. It caused him to burst into praise in the last verses of the chapter.

As a consequence of the knowledge these the awesome plans of God Paul urges the church to offer themselves in service to their Maker. Just as his hymn of praise was an appropriate act of worship, so their conduct as believers could be a worshipful response to what God had done for them. And he is about to describe what it looks like.

That's what the therefore is there for. He is saying because you know all this...(Chapter 11), live like this...(Chapter 12).

A living sacrifice

First-century people were familiar with sacrifices. They stood by an altar and watched an animal be slain and offered in the ritual way, as it's burnt fragrance ascended to the deity they worshipped it symbolised a price being paid. They knew the death of the animal didn't REALLY equal their own debt to God, but it took their place as it's life was spilt, symbolising in a costly way their desire for reconciliation and repair in their relationship with God. It was a sober but positive act.

Sacrifice for us usually implies something negative. Parents of Olympic athletes make financial sacrifices for the training of their children. We might sacrifice pleasures when a we fall on hard times. A heroic soldier sacrifices his life to save his comrades or his nation. This last example is one of the few involving a physical body. We think of this on ANZAC day, we consider it a noble

and awe inspiring sacrifice, rather than an abusive one, though we reflect that we would like a less costly path.

While he does often speak of disciplining our body in self control and acting for God instead of ourselves, Paul is not thinking of sacrifice as a way of suffering the abuse of our body as a sign of submission to a domineering God. It's important that we understand this.

It shows dedication to the will and the work of God that results in the use of our gifts through the body. Similar to the ANZAC sacrifice, it is the sort of noble sacrifice that we consider **worth** paying, inspired by the life and work of the Servant Jesus. Who showed determination to follow the path of righteousness, though it meant hardship, defeating obstacles by looking to the goal and blazing a trail for us to be able to follow the path of life after him.

Paul says 'in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.' What does he mean?

Living marks a difference from the usual Jewish sacrifice. Part of the ritual was that an animal was killed, and then offered. Paul speaks of believers as dying to sin, **but** his emphasis is that believers are gloriously "alive from the dead" in Jesus (Romans 6:2,8,13). He describes demands not the destruction of the self but the full energy of life.

Jesus has done away with the need for an animal sacrifice, and made it possible for us to be reconciled with the Father once and for all. As a response, we offer ourselves in his service with gratitude and love, it's a thanksgiving sacrifice.

Our living sacrifice is an also an active life of service to God. Each day, with understanding of our new liberty, we walk obediently in God's ways. There's no hint of a spectator sport, no cheering from the sidelines, it's getting your hands dirty, running the race, throwing off the things that weigh us down and finishing the race that Jesus has set before us. It is a continual act of worship, not because we have to, but because as children we desire to please our Father.

Next this sacrifice is **holy**, which we understand to mean 'dedicated' or 'set apart'. It also has an aspect of cleanness and purity about it.

The sacrifice is still a sacrifice. Life lived with Jesus is not necessarily easy, it did not come cheap and it is costly to walk with him in faithfulness. It will test our motives, and our perseverance, at times we may want to turn aside from the path. For each day lived in allegiance to God, means turning down the call to give our first commitment to ourself, and the demands of the world around us. Giving our primary allegiance to God as a living sacrifice means putting our belief into practice each day, in the face of alternatives that look attractive and worthwhile.

While Jesus did say seek first the Father's righteousness and all the other things of life will fall in their right place, he also said enter through the narrow gate, take up your cross, deny yourself and follow me. We are a people set apart.

And in the OT, you couldn't bring just any animal to the Temple on the allotted days, for an offering. The book of Leviticus is very particular...specific types of offerings for specific times,

specific alternatives if you were poor, with instructions about the first of the harvest, the best of the flock.

You couldn't just give God the left overs. You couldn't save your best for the highest market price, and bring him the half blind, nearly lame, diseased, mangy old ewe that was of no use to you any more. Hoping he wouldn't notice.

A sacrifice was meant to fix things between you and him. It was meant to cause you to be humble in your approach to God. Reminding you that his standards of excellence were unreachable, and his ways perfect. The tithe was meant to remind you that every animal in the forest and the cattle on a thousand hills were his already his possession (Psalm 50), and you were merely the manager of his resources. You were meant to comprehend that he could legitimately demand your whole crop or herd, but his generosity and loving provision allowed you to share his bounty.

Offering our lives as a holy sacrifice means we intentionally, honestly offer ourselves to serve him in acknowledgement of his claims on us as our Lord and Saviour. Instead of giving him what we can get by without, or the leftover portions, we give him the first, and the best, the entirety of ourselves to show our commitment to honour God rightly. It shows he is worthy of trust and we are trustworthy in his service.

Finally, the offering is **pleasing** to God. What **is** pleasing to God?

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)

Believe in the one he has sent (John 6:29)

I desire mercy, not sacrifice, acknowledgment of God not burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6)

Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me (Matthew 11:29)

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...Keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:23,25)

These are just a few examples. Really we only find out what pleases a person by spending time with them, by asking them what pleases them.

The most practical way to find out what pleases God, is to read his words to us, handed down through his people. The OT and NT are a small record of his relationship with humanity, and in the pages of this library, we hear what he thinks is good, what brings him joy, what he looks for in humanity, what he values and what pleases him. We see what it looks like to be in relationship and out of relationship with him as we hear the stories of others, and we find our own story in Scripture's pages, as his Spirit breaths life through the paper and ink.

To know what pleases God also means we interact with him personally. Speaking and listening and becoming familiar with his voice, growing to recognise his Spirit as she stirs our spirit during times of prayer and reflection.

Another way we can find out what pleases him is to spend time with other people who have an active and genuine relationship with him. Those people who we know spend time with Jesus can help us to learn what pleases God.

Ultimately, we are made holy and made pleasing to God by the cleansing work of Jesus. I hope it continues to amaze you that instead of seeing us as broken humans, the Father looks at us through the perfect and unblemished purity of Christ. He sees us clean, and as we will be when his work in us is complete.

Any of our pleasing actions and words come as a consequence of this work of salvation in us. As we are daily transformed into the likeness of the Son, by the work of the Spirit.

To give ourselves as a living, holy and pleasing offering is to give our lives each day, entirely to God with open hands, in trust and obedience to his ways and purposes. It is a strong and meaningful image.

The NIV says this is our *spiritual* act of worship, but other translations say reasonable, or logical act, meaning the service of obedient lives is the only reasonable or logical response to the grace of God toward us.

Change

The second point Paul makes in this passage is about change. He describes being pressed into the mould of the world, in outward conformity, or undergoing metamorphosis into the image of Jesus through inner transformation.

Transformation is not some sentimental gooey thing, it is the deepest, most challenging sort of change. It involves the heart, soul, mind and strength committed in service to God, cooperating with his Spirit's direction. It requires a true, sober and correct consideration of ourselves, an ongoing informed self and community awareness and a following of the Father's instructions. It includes testing God's ways - weighing them up and choosing to walk in them because they are good, pleasing and perfect.

The flow on from transformed individuals is a transformed community. Again we call to mind part of the prayer book service:

We who are many are one body - for we all share in the same bread.

While some may think too highly of themselves, and others assume they have nothing to contribute, both these perspectives are faulty. The body of Christ is unified and diverse, all are called to serve God in the capacity they have, in true devotion with full hearts. Everyone's gifts are needed for the living body of Christ to function. Then in harmony and interdependence, full of the Spirit, the community can be sent out to live and work for the Father's praise and glory in the world.

So, what can we do to cooperate with the renewing of our minds?

- Be responsive to God by offering ourselves willingly in his service;

- Commit to the Father's plans of personal and community transformation, understanding we are a people set apart, dedicated to his good purposes; and as we check how our heart is going with the other things that call for our allegiance, we set things in their right order;
- Develop a mindfulness, self-knowledge and wisdom in our daily life, that enables us to discern who we are, in sober reflection;
- Learn what pleases God and walk well in his ways by his Spirit;
- Pursue communal unity that recognises and nourishes the interdependent diversity of the body of Christ; and recognise our vocations and gifts so we can use them diligently in God's service in the setting in which we find ourselves as a joyful and generous act of worship of our Creator (vv. 3–8)

Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work for your praise and glory.

We say these words as we conclude our service, reflecting on the communion meal we have shared with our Saviour, and looking ahead into the week we are about to enter. May you speak them with humble devotion and genuine commitment and walk them out in the week ahead in company with the Lord and your brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.