

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.

Have you considered that these are very weighty words, which we offer to our heavenly Father on Sundays, inviting him to fill us with his Spirit and put us to work for his purposes? Each time we include it in our liturgy 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, in the ritual way. As the fragrance ascended to the deity, 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 life was spilt, symbolising in a costly way their desire for reconciliation and repair in their relationship with God. It was a sober act.

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, not an abusive one, though we reflect that we would have preferred a less costly path.

While Paul often speaks of disciplining the body in self control and acting for God instead of ourselves, he is not thinking of sacrifice as a way abusing our body as submission to a domineering God. It's important that we understand this. The scriptures tell us to honour the body God has given us, not to mistreat it. Paul is talking about sacrifice as dedication to the work of God.

Similar to the ANZAC sacrifice, he means the sort of noble sacrifice **worth** paying for a higher cause, inspired by the life and work of the Servant Jesus, it involves giving one's all, sometimes the ultimate sacrifice, but not always (remember not all the brave soldiers of Gallipoli died, all of them gave sacrificially of themselves).

Aside from dying, Jesus showed determination to follow the path of righteousness, through hardship, defeating obstacles by looking to the goal and blazing a trail for others to follow the path to life he made.

Paul says 'in view of God's mercy, his opening of a pathway for all to come to find freedom and life, offer your bodies while you live, in sacrifice, a commitment holy and pleasing to God.' What does he mean?

A **living sacrifice** marks a difference from the usual sacrifice. Part of the ritual was that an animal was killed, before being offered. Paul speaks of believers as dying to sin, **but** his emphasis is that believers are "alive from the dead" (Romans 6:2,8,13), using the full energy of their life to serve God.

Jesus did away with the actual sacrifice, he made it possible to be reconciled with his Father once and for all through commitment to him. And as a response to this, we offer our service with gratitude and love, an offering of thanks.

So, each day, with understanding of our new liberty, we walk in God's ways. There's no hint of faith being a spectator sport, 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 we are grateful adopted children who wish to honour their family.

Next the sacrifice is **holy**, which we understand to mean 'dedicated' or 'set apart'. It has an aspect of cleanness and purity about it. Jesus said '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 called apart from the pack.

In the OT, you couldn't bring just any animal to the Temple on the allotted days. 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 price, and bring God 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 symbolically fix things between you and him, it had to be the best. The tithe was a reminder that every animal in the forest, and the cattle on a thousand hills were God's possession (Psalm 50), not yours. It was acknowledgement that he loved to share his bounty with you.

Offering our lives as a holy sacrifice means we intentionally offer ourselves to serve God as our Creator, Lord and Saviour, turning down the desire to give our first commitment to ourself, or to the world around us. We give our primary allegiance to God, in the face of alternatives that look attractive. Instead of giving him what we can get by without, or the leftovers, we give him the first, the best, to show our commitment to honour him rightly, and our desire to remain in relationship with him. It shows he is worthy of our trust and we are trustworthy in his service.

Finally, our offering is **pleasing** to God. Ultimately, we are made holy and pleasing by the cleansing work of Jesus. But there are ways to please God...

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

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)

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. We find out what pleases a person by spending time with them, and by asking what pleases them. The OT and NT are a small library, where we hear what he thinks is good, what brings him joy, what he looks for, what he values. We see what it looks like to be in relationship, and out of relationship with him as we hear the stories of others, as we find our own story in Scripture's pages, as his Spirit breathes life and instruction to us 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.

And we spend time with people who spend time with Jesus, learning what others have learnt before us.

To give ourselves as a living, holy and pleasing offering is to give our lives each day, to God with open hands, in trust and obedience to his ways. The NIV says this is our *spiritual* act of worship, but other translations say reasonable, meaning the service of obedient lives is the only logical response to the grace of God.

Change

Offering ourselves in service to God is no small thing. It will take some work, Paul suggests it will take some change, that we need to undergo transformation so that we resemble the one we follow, so that we bear the likeness of Christ.

This is the deepest, most challenging sort of change. It involves the heart, soul, mind and strength, cooperating with his Spirit's direction. It requires a true and sober consideration of ourselves, an ongoing self awareness and a commitment to follow God's good, pleasing and perfect ways.

Each one of us are called to serve God in the capacity we have, in true devotion and with full hearts. In harmony and interdependence, our faith community is then sent to live and work in the world.

I hope it continues to amaze you that the Father looks at us with compassion, and with love. He sees us as we will be when his work in us, our transformation to maturity and wholeness, is complete. So, what can we do to cooperate with the process of renewal ?

- Check how we are going with our allegiance, and ask for help;
- Offer ourselves in commitment to the Father's plans of personal and community transformation, recognising your gifts and use them in the setting in which you find yourself
- Learn what pleases God and follows Jesus footsteps and walk in cooperation with his Spirit's guidance;

Say these words reflecting on the meal of companionship we share...

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.

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.