**Romans 12:1-8**

**Renewal and Transformation of the Body of Christ**

This morning, I want us to think a bit about the first reading we heard from Paul’s letter to the Romans, and for us to build a little more on what we were thinking about together last week from this chapter.

We reflected briefly on part of this passage last week, on verses 1 and 2: “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, through the mercies of God, to present your bodies a sacrifice, living, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” And if you remember, we thought about Paul’s underlying theme, which is that there is a natural link between theology and practice. Theology is not theology unless it impacts on the way we live our lives.

And in this passage, Paul is relating the lifestyle we are called to live to the cult of sacrificial worship that had been at the heart of Jewish practice for centuries. As the Jewish people had offered sacrifices to God through the years, now the sacrifice we are to offer is ourselves.

Paul says that it is our ‘bodies’ that we are to offer as a sacrifice: not our physical bodies as such, which is represented by the Greek word ‘sarx’, but in another sense, because Paul uses the word ‘soma’ here, which has more to do with who we are in relations to society and the wider world. The spiritual discipline that we are to offer as a sacrifice to God is worked out in how we relate to others and to the world in general.

By relating to other people and the world in a manner pleasing to God is our ‘spiritual worship’ or, as Paul puts it, our ‘reasonable religion’. And the emphasis here is on the use of the reason and rationality as our offering to God. Our rationality is what marks us out from other creatures. Our rationality is how we comprehend and experience God in our lives, and so we must be rational beings in our life of sacrifice, our life of worship if we are to fulfil our destiny as human beings. The Greek philosopher Epictetus once wrote: “If I were a nightingale, I should be singing as a nightingale; if a swan, as a swan. But as it is, I am a rational being, therefore I must be singing hymns of praise to God.” It’s who we are – it’s how we have been made - the worship of God is our rational response to the truth of our creation.

And as a result of pursuing our destiny in this way, a transformation comes over us, verse 2: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may ascertain what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect.”

We must not be conformed. Instead, we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. And that’s an interesting couple of words to put together: transformation and renewal because ‘transformation’ suggests continuity with the old and ‘renewal’ suggests discontinuity. So as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, we don’t leave behind who we have always been but our attitudes change, our character is reformed and renewed and the old becomes new.

And the purpose of this transformation is made clear in verse 2: “so that you may ascertain what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect.” We become transformed so that we are able to make assessments about our behaviour, our thoughts, or words: to test and discern and work out whether we are behaving in a manner that is pleasing to God or not. And then transform our behaviour accordingly.

And Paul then moves on to describe what that transformed behaviour looks like in practice and it is no surprise that the first thing Paul deals with is how a transformed and renewed mind changes the way we relate in the church community. As Christians, we are all called to a new life in community with each other. We cannot live out the Christian life without being rooted in the church. We are to be rooted in the life of the church; the life of the body of Christ and find our true identity in that community, and so Paul has this as the first and primary point when he comes to consider the implications of a renewed mind.

And what is interesting about Paul’s words of encouragement about the church is that he is concerned predominantly with the need for moderation. Verse 3: “Observe proper moderation, as God has measured to each a measure of faith.” There is no place for excess or unbalanced and extreme forms of spirituality in the Christian church. In this chapter, Paul is clearly calling for a moderate approach to spirituality; passionate and Spirit-filled, yes but moderate in its outworking. And the moderating influence must be that we behave according to the measure of faith, which God has given us: no more and no less. Each one of us has a different measure of faith, of course, and so how we live out our faith will be different for each one of us. But we must not pretend to be who we are not or pretend to have more faith than we have, or less faith than we have. Instead, we discern our measure of faith and live in accordance with that.

And as we all have different measures of faith, we all have different gifts too: “For just as in one body we have different members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we are all one body in Christ, and individually members of one another – having charisms which differ in accordance with the grace given to us.” So again we note just how important it is to Paul that we work out our faith in community with one another. Your faith is not a private matter; my faith is not a private matter. We are in relationship with each other and we work out our faith as a body; a community of believers.

Quite simply, the Christian faith is a community experience and, crucially, the church is a charismatic community.

Now the word ‘charismatic’ has been somewhat hijacked in recent years and is taken to describe just one wing, or expression, of the evangelical church and is seen to describe a way of doing worship that some will find very attractive and others will find uncomfortable. But theologically, we need to give back to the word ‘charismatic’ its original meaning, which is to say that all churches – the Church – can only exist and minister and worship in the grace of the charisms of God, which are the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

All churches function through the gifts of the Spirit. That is a simple, theological truth. For some, that will manifest itself as what we call ‘charismatic worship’. For others, it will manifest itself in the quiet, contemplative atmosphere of the monastery. Both are charismatic in the true sense because both are reliant on the gifts of the Spirit.

And so, in the broadest sense, Paul is calling us back to being a charismatic community, wholly reliant on the gifts of the Spirit in our corporate life together. And that charismatic community will inevitably be diverse because God has given a diversity of gifts. It stands to reason, doesn’t it? We are not one body despite our diversity. We are one body because of our diversity. Our diversity is to be celebrated, not suppressed. If everyone was an ear, and the body of Christ was just one, giant ear, it would be a monster! If everyone was a toenail, and the body of Christ was just one, giant toenail, it would be useless and very ugly. But we are diverse; we are ears and eyes and toenails and hearts and livers and tongues and added together, with the diversity working in unity, the body of Christ is very beautiful indeed. So we celebrate our diversity and we thank God for it…

And then Paul goes on in verses 6-8, to describe some of the functions of the body.

Pride of place goes to prophecy, and that is because prophecy is the speaking out of God’s word into a situation and so there is nothing without prophecy. If there are no prophets, the church cannot function because the church cannot hear the word of God into its situation.

However, we need to be a bit careful here because there are two Greek words for prophecy, which carry quite different meanings. One word is ‘mantis’, which is the type of prophetic behaviour that is spontaneous; when a revelation of God is given to a person and that person immediately speaks it out. But Paul doesn’t use the word ‘mantis’ here. Instead, he uses the word ‘prophetes’, which has a more ordered behaviour attached to it; a more considered approach by which the prophet acts as a spokesperson for God into the community in the sense that a priest would have spoken for God in the Temple. It is that type of prophecy that stands at the head of the list so that the church can hear God’s word to them and then live it out in its corporate life.

Next, Paul mentions ‘serving’ and this word has a wide range of meanings. But its likely that Paul meant it here as an *ad hoc* approach; meeting people’s needs as they arise rather than dedicating ourselves to a ‘life of service’ as it were.

Then Paul refers to ‘teaching’, which, of course, can be closely aligned to prophecy in the sense that Paul has just used that idea. But as a gift of the Spirit, teaching is not just the passing on of information but is instead a more interpretative role: the teacher gains the knowledge and then discerns how that knowledge should be passed on for the benefit of those he or she is teaching.

Next comes the gift of ‘encouragement’, which is a beautiful gift to have How the church needs encouragers! There is nothing more wearying for leaders, nothing more destructive of Christian community than those people who see it as their life’s work to whinge and moan and complain and undermine. How much more beautiful to be an encourager. How much more Christlike to encourage and support, even if that does involve constructive criticism and occasional chastising…

Next come those who ‘share in sincere concern’ and there is something of the spirit of generosity here as these people share willingly of their own possessions and goods for the well-being of others. Again, there is something so beautiful about the person who doesn’t cling to their own possessions but sees everything as a gift from God to be shared with others.

Then comes the one ‘who cares with zest’. And this word, takes on the sense of being a protector: someone in the Christian community who is able to look out for those who are vulnerable or on the margins or being denied their rights. Perhaps someone with wealth or social standing in the wider community or someone who has the knowledge and ability to advocate for the oppressed.

And then finally, we have those who ‘do acts of mercy’. Perhaps Paul has in mind here people who actively work on behalf of the poor and needy.

So this list isn’t complete by any means, but there are some beautiful ministries outlined here: Speaking God’s word into a church community, Meeting the needs of people as they arise, Teaching and interpreting the word of God to others, Encouraging others, Sharing possessions with those in need, Advocating on behalf of those who have no voice, Meeting the needs of the poor. It would not be a bad vision to have to see each of these ministries come to maturity in our own church. Then we truly would begin to reflect Christ to the world, wouldn’t we?

And so Paul sums all that up, and begins to relate it to further instructions in a beautiful and simple phrase in verse 9: “Let love be sincere”.

That’s it – that is the sum total of the Gospel life. “Let love be sincere”. That is our calling as Christians: to share love with one another and with the community around us. That is our ultimate calling as a Church.

Next Saturday, at 10.00, we will have our APCM here in church: our annual meeting when we look back at what has happened over the last year and look forward to where God is taking us in the future. It’s a really important meeting for us to reflect on the work of God in our midst and I would urge you all to come to that, particularly in the light of this passage, so that we can move forward as the Body of Christ together.

Soon afterwards, I will share a Report with you that I have put together in the light of the Listening Exercise we recently did in anticipation of creating our new Mission Action Plan. And in that Report, I will be outlining all that I believe God wants us to achieve together over the next 12 years, to 2030. I hope that you will be excited by that Report and will want to recommit yourself to the mission of our church here at St. Andrew’s.

In this passage, Paul calls us to renewal and transformation and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we believe that God is constantly renewing and transforming St Andrew’s so that we fulfil our destiny as the people of God for this generation. In this passage, Paul calls us not to be conformed to the present age. Let’s do all we can to move forward together as the Body of Christ into the future that God has for us.