

When one of my daughters was younger her favourite story was Beauty and the Beast – partly, I suspect, because in the Disney movie Belle spends much of her time reading in the castle’s library, and also because of the ending where the Beast becomes a handsome prince. It’s like the fairy tale about the toad that morphs into a young and dashing prince when kissed – and all these point to the power of a transformation story. The Beast is transformed by love: by Belle’s love for him, and also by his love for her. And that’s what Paul’s getting at in his words to the Christians in Rome.

He wants them – he wants us – to let themselves be transformed by a whole new way of thinking, a way that originates in God’s grace, that comes from the love God has for us. That’s a love that stems not from ourselves and how good we are (because our goodness is always partial and imperfect) but from how good God is. Paul wants us to let ourselves be transformed by the power of grace. When we let God’s love and grace get hold of us we can become different: more able to know God’s will for our lives, better able to love each other and to live together as a community that reaches out to others and draws them towards God.

As always, Paul bases his ethical instructions, his “this is how you should live” on the fact of what God has already done for us. God has done so much for us, God loves us so much, that this is how we’re invited to live in response. That’s what’s behind his appeal “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Let’s think about what Paul’s on about here – because maybe his talk of “sacrifice” is alien to the way we think of worship, or else we associate it with giving something up. But let’s not fall into that trap – Paul’s talking about *offering*: offering to God something living and filled with joy. Unlike the sacrifices of the Temple, this sacrifice keeps walking around, making decisions, serving neighbours, praying, forgiving, and loving. Each of us is being invited to present our whole life as an offering to God. Not just a little bit of our lives, not just our physical bodies or the bit we think of as “spiritual,” not just the Sunday stuff, but our whole lives, bodies, hearts, minds, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. Following Jesus, loving God, is a complete package.

This is about letting our whole lives be shaped by God’s will. It’s about intentionally making room for God, in every aspect of our lives, so that in the end worship is something we live out each day, not something we attend for an hour once a week. And it’s about doing this consciously (because it doesn’t just happen) – but it’s also not something we have to work hard at on our own. It’s not about trying to make something of ourselves; it’s more about allowing the God who made the world and all that’s in it to make something of us. We’re invited to be transformed, to put ourselves into all those stories and see what God’s love can make of us.

And what is to happen with us as individual Christians is also to happen to the community that is the church. What difference would it make, do you think, if we saw this cathedral not as a building but as a community offered to God? If we thought of the Cathedral Parish as something precious offered to God by all of us? Paul’s inviting us to see ourselves, and this parish as a whole, as gifts: gifts that we give to God, and also gifts that God gives to those

around us. I want to remind us this morning not only that each of us has gifts but also that each of us is a gift – and the gifts are different. Different gifts – but all of them are valued. There are no gifts of God that the Christian community can afford to ignore, and no gifts that make one Christian superior to another. So what gifts has God given you, that you can use to show others what God's love looks like? How can we help each other to recognise and to develop those gifts?

Paul's asking us to switch off the autopilot which sucks us into the way the rest of the world works: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." This is really quite counter-cultural, something that goes against how the rest of our society thinks and acts. It's about seeing the world differently, through a new set of lenses. "Don't be conformed to this world," he says, and then he gives an example of what he means, as he talks about how people treat one another. So much of Paul's ethics is about being part of a community. I don't think he'd understand the modern idea that everyone is an individual, intent on making their own way through life and getting their own needs met. For Paul, the Christian life is about community, about doing life together and helping each other switch off the autopilot, put on some new lenses, and follow Jesus more closely, together using our gifts to reach out to the world around us.

We are the community of those who have been called and gifted by God. We are the community of those who can answer, when Jesus asks us who we're saying he is, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God": you are the Christ, the one in whom we see God. Because that's the key question, isn't it: who do we say Jesus is? Who do we believe Jesus to be? In today's Gospel, Peter gets the answer right, but only because God has enabled him to see differently. And that's an invitation to us as well. To be those who can answer, with our words and with our actions, when somebody else asks us, "who is Jesus?" that he is the one who speaks to us so very clearly of God that we follow him and try to live the kind of life that he invites us to live. Paul and Peter could speak as they did, and live as they did, because they'd encountered Jesus, they knew him – and that's the invitation to us as well: to meet Jesus and to know him more each day, and to help each other to do this.

Paul's words to the Romans and Peter's statement of who Jesus is remind us that our identity as church, as the community of God's people, is tied to the identity of Jesus. We are people who live worshipfully, not just here on Sundays but every day of the week, who reach out to others in the name of the living God. If we can do that, we'll be a community of those who aren't conformed to the world around us, but who have the courage and the inner peace to act differently – just as those midwives Shiphrah and Puah acted differently when faced with the pressures of the Egyptian state, as Pharaoh's daughter acted with compassion in the same setting, as Paul continually acted differently. Today is an invitation to get out from under the fairy tales and let God's love transform us into new people.

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