

Sermon for 23rd August 2026, Year A, Pentecost 13

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Romans 12:1-8

Sermon

For our reading from the New Testament epistle today we're given eight verses from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. This letter, in case you're not familiar, is often considered to be Paul's greatest work, and it's certainly his longest – not quite a summary of all the theology he taught, but coming close. He wrote it after spending several years evangelising around the Aegean Sea, around 55 to 57AD, when he was beginning to think about travelling to spread the Gospel in Spain, and hoping to visit Rome and spend some time with the Christians there while on his way.

Chapter 12 is a particularly beautiful passage, full of advice to people living among a culture that was both antagonistic towards them, and also easily capable of corrupting them back towards selfishness and wickedness. We're only given the first eight verses today, but the rest of it comes next week and it's full of admonitions to love one another, to live in harmony together, and to bless your enemies.

But before all that, Paul starts by pointing out that the reason we are to behave in this very unusual and counter-cultural way is because of God's love and mercy for us. It always starts with God's unconditional love. God doesn't love us because we have proven ourselves worthy of it, but simply because God is Love. And, Paul argues, our reasonable response to this gift is our worship, in the form of living sacrifice. Not the dead sacrifice of animals burned on an altar, but the living sacrifice of a life turned from selfishness towards open-heartedness, from

individual success to seeing oneself as part of a community – a body that flourishes together or not at all.

I always think it's significant that Paul emphasises this transformation occurs through the renewing of our minds. When I was younger, it always seemed to me that once you'd become a Christian and been baptised and confirmed, then there really wasn't anything more to our faith, except coming to church on Sundays, receiving Communion, catching up with friends, perhaps serving in some role, and giving a little of our time and income to support those less well-off than ourselves. And these are indeed all good things, but to me there's something more important that transcends these good works, and that's the inner renewal and transformation of our minds that gradually makes us into a new person, someone who is not only able to resist temptation and act with selfless love, but who does this naturally without any inner fight or struggle. It's one thing to be someone who valiantly fights temptation and tries to do the right thing; it's quite another to become humble and loving to the point where the temptations don't even occur to you.

I've always felt that this is the true goal of Christian faith – not a religion that constantly makes us feel guilty for never being quite good enough, but a spiritual path and practice that actually transforms us and makes us kinder and more compassionate, so that our lives become ever more about the wellbeing of others and less obsessed with ourselves.

You'll notice that Paul recognises the potential pitfall in what he's saying, and immediately warns us against any big-headed pride that might come with spiritual progress. "Don't think of yourselves more highly than you ought to," he says, "but with sober judgement," and this always reminds me of the prioress of Mallory Abbey when I was a novice nun, who told me – as I'm sure you remember, "Don't think too highly of yourself, and don't think poorly of yourself, but rather think of Christ who loves you, and forget yourself entirely."

Personally, I've never met anyone who could just 'think' themselves into becoming a better person. That would be like lifting yourself up by your own bootstraps; instead, real saints contemplate and focus on the beautiful love of Jesus Christ, and everything else follows on from that.

Unlike Paul, who often tells us to 'be transformed' into the likeness of Christ without actually offering much guidance on how that might happen, I felt that the prioress's advice revealed the core of Christian spiritual practice. Just as religions like Buddhism have meditation as a practice that eventually leads to enlightenment, we Christians also have a practice – consistently and prayerfully paying attention to God's Love – that, over time, leads to inner transformation of heart and mind, and this is what it means to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. We keep our minds on Christ, even within all the distractions of the world.

I've long suspected that the reason Paul had such problems with his churches was because although he himself had been transformed in heart and mind by a profound spiritual encounter with Jesus, and could therefore wax lyrical about what perfectly loving communities should look like in God's kingdom, he struggled to offer spiritual advice on how to get there. This is also why, I think, so many of Paul's letters are so full of very pragmatic advice about how churches should be run, such as his insistence that everyone has been given different gifts and no gifts are superior or inferior to any others, with everyone having a role to play.

This is all very helpful, but there's a sense in which this perhaps would not be so necessary to explain if we were all already Christlike in our character, but as Paul often bemoans, he is writing to people who are children in the faith, who perhaps have fallen in love with the Gospel message, but who are yet to be transformed by it. Loving one another is much easier said than done!

At times you can sense Paul's frustration – he wants everyone to be united in love and full of mature understanding right now, ready to make manifest a small piece of heaven on earth, but instead his church communities are squabbling and holding grudges against each other and trying to figure out who is the greatest, who is included and who is not.

Church communities today face exactly the same challenges. We can see in scripture many wonderful depictions of what a healthy, loving Christian community should look like: self-sacrifice, radical commitment, sacred mindfulness, transformative grace, communal unity, and awareness of our gifts and calling as part of one body. But how do we become that? Do we stand around praising God and waiting to be zapped into holiness? Or do we assume that it's all down to our own efforts to work hard to become the people God wants us to be?

Too much emphasis on God's grace may leave us apathetic about the importance of our own involvement in the process of becoming more loving, but too much focus on our own efforts is liable to make us forget that only the Holy Spirit can truly transform human hearts to make us more Christlike.

In reality, there is a continual ongoing process of divine-human interaction. The Spirit inspires us to seek God and we take a small step towards the love we perceive; then God transforms us a little, stripping away part of what holds us 'conformed to the world', and so we move deeper into Love, and as our attention is held by that Love, so we find ourselves growing closer to all those around us.

How much of this is our own effort, and how much happens by God's grace? I have no idea. Perhaps, when all is said and done, they might be the same thing?