**7th August 2011**

**Romans 12. 1-8**

Paul, from his letter to the church in Rome appeals to his readers that they should conform no longer to the pattern of this present world, but be transformed by the renewal of their minds. They should refuse to let the present age squeeze them into its mould, dictate how they should think and tell them how they can and can’t behave. Instead they are to be transformed (the word he uses is the Greek word metamorphosis – think of caterpillars transforming into butterflies). Christians are called to be counter cultural – not in all respects, as though every single aspect of human society and culture were automatically and completely bad, but at least to think through each aspect of life.

Conformity is always the easy option. - especially when you are young. One book I have been reading recently is Rob Parsons *‘Getting your kids through church without them ending up hating God’*. It’s a very wise and practical book. One chapter is called ‘*Don’t sweat the small stuff’*.

He starts by recalling how he met a young man called David, in his twenties, who he remembered was part of the church youth group hammering away at the drums in the church worship band. Rob Parsons asked him why he didn’t go to church anymore. He said he started to run around with a really bad crowd and h e got his bottom lip pierced.

He next tells the story of a meeting with a prison governor who was really proud of the fact that his prison was getting over 97 percent of its 46 key performance indicators.

‘That’s impressive’, Parsons said. ‘What kind of things do they measure?

'Usual stuff', came the answer: health and safety, food and hygiene.

‘Do you measure reoffending rates’ – Parsons enquired?

‘No we don’t do that’ Said the governor.

Parsons reflected that one of the most single important indicators of whether a prison has been successful or not is never measured. (it may well be now). He goes on to reflect that every church has a list of key performance indicators that allow its leaders and members to assess how its young people are doing. They may not be written down, but they are always there.

This young man David, had attended a church but somehow it had managed to convey to him that he was failing the test. The simple truth is that the more restrictive the questions, the easier it is to fail. If to be a good Christian you have to attend church once a week, the youth bible study and not have any tattoos nor listen to the wrong sort of music or watch the wrong kind of films your church might be measuring the wrong things.

Of course Jesus told us some of the indicators that he is going to use when we stand before him at the end of time. He will want to know whether we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the prisoners, cared for the sick and welcomed the stranger. These are the equivalent of ‘how many prisoners reoffend?’ question. In heaven’s eyes these are, at least some of the big issues.

Because David’s church had a list of ‘performance indicators’ that were nowhere near what was high on God’s agenda, all he heard were negative comments.

Most people parent and manage people by catching them doing something wrong and criticising them for it. This is how the world works. This is how the Pharisees of Jesus time handled people. And yet an opposite approach is almost always more productive. Catch people doing something right and praise them for it.

One of the difficulties when you start telling people not to conform to the world is that then you are in danger of producing a tick box chart of things they are not to conform to and conversely a number of things which in church they are to conform to.

Jesus said to the religious leaders of his time ‘woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – but you neglect the most important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. It is the duty of every generation of believers to ask God ‘what really matters to you’. But don’t make somebody feel a rebel over things that are not high on God’s agenda. Don’t drive them from the church and into the arms of the enemy over secondary issues. Don’t make them ashamed over things that heaven doesn’t find shameful. Don’t sweat the small stuff.

Having said all that – we still need to transform our minds in light of the truth of the gospel of Christ, and not conform to the world around us. In the next few chapters Paul will spell out some areas where Christians need to resist conforming to the standards of the world. He will discuss how we should love, how we should be generous, how we should respond to people who don’t like us and even hurt us. He will spend a lot of time discussing how we should cope with differences and diversity – how do you get on with people who are not like you.

One of the first things that Christians need to get their minds around is the call to live as different members of a single family – the church - the body of Christ.

When Paul writes this way he does not mean that the church is like Christ’s body. He means the church is Christ’s body. For Paul, Christ’s glorified body is with God, but Christ’s body is also the church. Christ is Lord of the church. Christ’s spirit animates the church. The church lives out Christ in the world.

That is very hard for us to grasp and harder for us to evade. If we are to understand ourselves as Paul would understand us, we are not only Christ’s servants or Christ’s followers: we are Christ’s members, to one another and to the world outside as well. If church for you is just a place to come to get some peace once a week, sing some favourite hymns, or meet some people it is not the church that Paul is on about. The church for Paul lives out Christ to the world.

Of course we are not the whole of Christ’s body, not one of us: not the minister, nor the church secretary or treasurer. Together we are the body of Christ: one by one we are only members of the body, and therefore we need each other in order to be who we are, in order to be Christ.

Paul has already warned the Roman Christians against thinking too highly of themselves (11.25). Paul’s wider purpose will become clear in the next few chapters where he appeals for church unity and growth. The world around us loves to force people into competition and comparison. Put others down so that you can feel better about yourself. Paul is telling the Church we need to renew our minds over this so we protect our unity and respect and value each and everyone’s contribution.

God gives different gifts that are needed for the work of the gospel to flourish. This is partly a matter of what we call natural temperament; some people are natural leaders, some are born teachers, others are naturally open, generous-hearted people. But it’s also a matter of grace, as Paul says in verse 6. God’s grace often enhances the abilities and inclinations people already have; but sometimes when God’s spirit takes over someone’s life, new gifts emerge that neither they nor anyone else imagined before.

It is vital that the church should recognise and value these different gifts – and that those to whom they have been given should place them in the service of the church, as part of our offering of our very selves to God Paul starts this chapter with.

Here we turn into a problem. It isn’t always nearly as easy as in Paul’s analogy of the body.

A clergy man who was preaching on the body of Christ drew attention to a few parts of the body which St Paul hadn’t mentioned. Some of the congregation were like the tonsils, he said, because ‘we’re no worse off when you’re gone’. Others were like the appendix: ‘we didn’t notice you were there until you started grumbling’. And others were like a set of false teeth, ‘sometimes in and sometimes out’.

Sometimes there are people who (so to speak) are absolutely determined that they should be running the show when everyone else knows perfectly well that they would be a disaster at it and are much better playing a distinct role.

Sometimes people speak of ‘my ministry’ in the tone of voice which says that, whether or not the rest of the church wants to recognize it, God has given them a particular task and the church has a responsibility to provide them with an opportunity to fulfil it whether it makes sense or not.

Equally, it often happens that a particular church, for whatever reason, remains blind and deaf to what God is saying in and through particular people, and never benefits from the grace that God wants to pour out through them.

And of course people are so busy doing other stuff that the church doesn’t get chance to use their gifts. But that is not always a bad thing because hopefully those gifts are being used for their Christian witness elsewhere in the world.

Having said all that, it is wonderful to see the ways in which God does indeed provide different graces and gifts and the church does indeed benefit. Verses 6 to 8 list some of them. In other letters Paul list some more.

Most of these tasks involve hard work. The passage has a get your sleeves rolled up feel to it. Find out what your task is and give yourself to it properly: plan the work, think it through, and get on with it. Don’t just play at it when you feel like it. Christina service isn’t a hobby, though people sometimes think of it like that; it’s a divine calling, and if its making cups of coffee after church, that needs to be done with energy, care and flair. People with a gift for teaching or leadership shouldn’t just expect to be able to stand up and say what ever they think at the time; they should think it through, prepare their material, see the larger picture, and communicate better. And so on.

There may be sadly, a scarcity of jobs out in the world and fears of increasing unemployment. That should never be the case in the church. Sadly we can’t pay most of you for your work for us! We still need some people to take on the important job of publicity and communication. We still need some more dedicated youth leaders to work with our youth worker. The success of the family cafe still needs a good band of committed volunteers to make sure it continues. We are training a group of people for the healing ministry – trying to discern their particular gifts and roles and we hope we will bring some names in the near future for the church meeting to recognise their gifts and role. There are plans for a food bank – giving short term aid to those in poverty – but it will need volunteers – is God calling you to be involved in feeding the hungry – because I think that is high up on His agenda. Practical gifts DIY, catering, are so vital to keep this place and our ministry of hospitality and mission going. We thank God for all those who use God’s gifts for the work of the Body of Christ.

When I come back from holiday we’ll look at ways that Paul suggests we should give faithful obedience to our Lord and not conform to the ways of this world. We will consider how we should renew our minds.

For now the challenge is to appreciate the diversity of people and gifts in the body of Christ. The challenge is to discover our own gifts and how we can use them for the glory of God. May the Lord help us in that discernment.

With generous love, God enables us to live faithfully

and nurture the Body of Christ by exercising our Spiritgiven

abilities. What does Paul’s image of the Body of

Christ suggest to you about the life of the church? What

do you think it means to bring our lives – as individuals

and as the church – as offerings to God?

Sacrifice was a key element in ancient Jewish religion.

The practice of offering grain and animal

sacrifice as part of worship goes back to very

early times. In Genesis 4 we read about how Cain

offered “the fruit of the ground” to God and Abel

offered one of the lambs of his flock as a sacrifice to

God. The book of Leviticus describes the details of

offering sacrifices and their meanings:

Sacrifices were always made to God

alone. It was the most powerful way to

worship and have a good relationship

with God.

Sacrifices could be offered by anyone.

In most religions, rituals like sacrifices are

often only carried out by the priests. In

ancient Israel most sacrifices were carried

out by the worshippers themselves. Individuals

could bring sacrifices as gifts or to

*atone –* “make up for”; “pay the price of”;

“make reparations for” – personal sins.

The Hebrew word for *sacrifice*, “korban,”

comes from the word *korav* meaning “to

come close.” So offering a sacrifice was a

way of coming closer to God.

Sacrifices offered by priests were not

only a way of worshipping God, but also

a way to atone for the sins of the people

of Israel.

Sacrifices could be offered throughout

the year, but there were extra sacrifices

offered on the Sabbath and at the

beginning of a month. There were special

sacrifices offered on festival days.

In some writings of the New Testament, Jesus’ death

on the cross is described as the “final and for-all-time”

Learning & Serving • August 21 – 27 • 2011

sacrifice through which people might be put right with

God and made holy (see Romans 3:21–26). Paul taught

that people can enter into a relationship with God because

of who Jesus was and what he achieved though

his life, death, and resurrection. Some Christian teachers

also drew parallels between the practice of Communion

or Eucharist and the Jewish understanding of

sacrifice. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we see the

development of the idea of “spiritual sacrifice.” This

means that every action of a Christian’s life can be an

offering of praise and thanks to God.

Be a living sacrifice – place your life

before God

…Take your everyday, ordinary life –

your sleeping, eating, going-to-work and

walking-around life – and place it before

God as an offering…

…fix your attention on God. You’ll be

changed from the inside out…Unlike the

culture around you, always dragging you

down it its level of immaturity, God brings

the best out of you, develops well-formed

maturity in you…

…let’s just go ahead and be what we

were made to be, without enviously or

pridefully comparing ourselves with each

other, or trying to be something we aren’t.

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n What things might you and your church do in

order to present your bodies as living sacrifices

to God?

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