

## Are you a caterpillar or a butterfly?

### ***'Living Sacrifices***

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.'

Romans 12:1-2 (New International Version)

### **Context**

Paul was writing to the, you've guessed it, Romans in this letter. They were a highly advanced people of their time commanding an empire from the north of England to the Middle East and the North of Africa. It was the most powerful force that the world had known at that time.

The letter is written in around A.D. 56 and the church in Rome had been founded by some of the early believers. It was Paul's intention to go to visit the church in Rome at some point in the future. Rome was a difficult place to plant a church really. The prevailing religion was polytheistic paganism, that is to say that the Romans worshipped many different gods and, when they invaded a 'new' country they quite often appropriated the new gods for their own religion. They 'rebranded' them with a new name and 'hey presto!' another god was added to the (growing) collection. Emperors were also deified posthumously so the people's allegiance was ensured towards the Emperor and State, too.

This was a religion based on superstition and a desire to please the gods who were fickle, at best, and couldn't be trusted. People would thus want to prove their loyalty to a god to curry favour and try, at any rate, to ensure well-being and success. Likewise, it was prudent to prove your loyalty to the State by making offerings to a dead emperor.

So, what does this all do with us? If we walk through London and take in our surroundings surely we are a million miles from this scenario. Does this letter have any relevance 'in this day and age'? After all, we are so sophisticated aren't we, far, far more advanced than our Roman predecessors.

Well this letter does have relevance for us, emphatically so – and the conditions of that time do resonate with our situation now. We may be more advanced technologically and life may have improved in many ways but nevertheless the human condition and the desires that rule the human heart have not. We may not worship gods called Jupiter, Mars and Venus but there are still gods out there – money, sex and power to name but a few. People may think that they don't offer sacrifices to gods these days and in some ways they'd be right – how often do you see people wondering round London with a live chicken tucked under their arm on the way to a temple? However, let's just think a little about this. How many hours have been sacrificed in an office somewhere to make that promotion? To get the pay rise? Depriving one of time with family perhaps? How many people have embarked on romance to seek a little bit of excitement or love? Looking in the right place – maybe not? Sacrificing one's integrity to 'make it to the top'?

So the Romans are encouraged by Paul to make a sacrifice – OF THEIR WHOLE LIVES – to God. This marks a change of their allegiance from the fickle, capricious gods and goddesses they used to worship to a God who is merciful. So what does it mean to change our allegiance?

Let's take David Beckham as an example of this. Mr Beckham started his professional career with Manchester United in 1993, transferred to Real Madrid in 2003 and finally moved to L. A. Galaxy in 2007. Now, if Alex Ferguson were to ring him up and say, 'Oh, David, we've got a

tricky game coming up in a few weeks' time and I was wondering whether you could just pop back for the one game and help us out, you know, just like old times.' What do you think Becks would say? Would he hop onto the next flight back to Blightey to play for Man. U. or would he hang the phone up and stay in L.A.? He'd stay in the US, of course. He'd have explained to Alex Ferguson (if he'd needed it explaining to him) that he now had a new manager and that he was playing for a new team. He wouldn't dream of playing for his old team – they were history. Likewise, the Romans – and by extension, us – are urged to turn away from their old gods towards the one, true God who they now worship. This is a change of allegiance. It is a complete break with the past to embrace the future.

Notice that now they are not making sacrifices in order to win favour from a god, rather they are giving sacrifices out of thanks to God because he has already shown His unconditional love for them, as Paul has set out in the preceding chapters in this letter. It is a different starting point born out of the nature of their relationship with God. It is not a sacrifice out of duty but one out of love. As Paul writes, '... in view of God's mercy ...' our appropriate response is to '... offer (y)our bodies as living sacrifices ...'. Our lives are to be offered up to God for His use, His glory as a measure of our thanks for what He has done for us.

And we have a lot to be thankful for. God has given everything for us. He has poured out His love for us by sending His Son to die in our place. God did not give us the mediocre and he doesn't expect the mediocre in return - He expects the best from us, and rightfully so. Notice how Paul writes that we need to present our lives 'holy and pleasing to God' not just in any old state. We owe God everything and more besides. We need to have an 'attitude of gratitude'.

We see the need for this early on in the Bible in Genesis chapter 3 where Cain and Abel bring offerings to the Lord as sacrifices. I wondered for a while why God looked upon Abel's offering with favour whereas he didn't look on Cain's in the same way. And then it struck me that Cain brought 'some of the fruits of the soil' whereas Abel brought 'fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock' as an offering. Clearly Abel wanted to give of his best to God whereas Cain couldn't really be bothered. And it is the same for us as Christians. This is not for the faint-hearted. It is not the soft option. We don't become Christians and then relax into going through the motions on some sort of auto-pilot. Activating cruise-control can have very undesirable consequences as the following story illustrates:

*Mr. Merv Grazinski of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma purchased a brand new Winnebago Motor home. On his trip home from an OU football game, having driven onto the freeway, he set the cruise control at 70 mph and calmly left the driver's seat to go into the back and make himself a cup of coffee. Not surprisingly the RV left the freeway, crashed and overturned. Mr. Grazinski sued Winnebago for not advising him in the owner's manual that he could not actually do this. The jury awarded him \$1,750,000 plus a new Winnebago Motor home. The company actually changed their manuals on the basis of this suit just in case there were any other complete morons buying their recreational vehicles*

Now, fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your point of view) this story is an urban legend but it neatly illustrates the point that we can't just sit back and expect someone else (God maybe) to 'do the work'. We need to be at the centre of operations, fully involved in how we live our lives before God. So how are we to live our lives? There are some conditions that Paul lays out in the first section of verse 2:

### **Condition**

'... Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...' (Romans 12:2)

Patterns and moulds are used in the mass production of items to standardise and maintain the quality of goods. If I go in to a shop to buy a pair of trousers I can go to the trouser rack with a vague idea of my measurements and 'lo and behold!' if I try on a pair of trousers of a certain fit then... they fit! Not only that but another pair of trousers of the same size and cut

should also fit exactly the same way because they were cut using the same pattern. All the trousers conform to the same design because they were all from the same pattern.

Now, no one wants to conform – we want to ‘stand out from the crowd’. Since the 50s youthful rebellion has been a rite of passage as young people seek to establish their own identity. The only thing is that as they go about trying to do this, they look rather... well, similar! There is still conformity, just a different conformity from everyone else.

And we are called to something similar here. We are being challenged to abandon the pattern of this world to adopt a new pattern – the pattern of the Kingdom of God. We are called to be something new, something different, something... else.

And we do this by renewing our minds by which we shall be transformed!

2 points to note here. Firstly, let’s look at the renewing ‘bit’. When I was little my parents bought a wreck of a house with a view to living in it and slowly, slowly, bit by bit they would do it up to be good as new. And that’s what happened. We lived there and over the next five years they renovated the house and it was a truly wonderful home. It was a complete renewing of the whole fabric of the house. A new roof had to go on for starters!

Now imagine, if my parents had looked at the house and thought, ‘Well, it doesn’t look TOO bad! Maybe a lick of paint. Mend that door. A new carpet might be nice.’ That approach would not have started to put repair the conditions that house was in. It would have been wholly inappropriate! We needed to start again. And so they did – and they did most of the non-structural work themselves, too, they were absolutely amazing. Now, my point is that it would have been no good just tackling the easy stuff and clearing all that up and not trying to repair the more serious stuff, the structural stuff, lying under the surface. If they had done that then the whole lot would have caved in sooner or later. We had to rip all sorts of stuff out, replace it and then build on top of it – a complete renewal.

If we carry on the house analogy we can’t just deal with the ‘cosmetic’ we need to deal with the ‘structural’ stuff, too. If we don’t the whole lot will cave in sooner or later. The renewal will not be lasting and neither will the transformation - we shall suffer serious consequences in our lives. In fact, in Luke 11, the Bible warns us that we could end up in more serious trouble than before. We need the renewal to be complete in order for it to bring meaningful transformation in our lives.

And this leads us onto our second point in this section – transformation. What is ‘transformation’? Is it something very subtle that you wouldn’t really see unless you were looking very carefully or is it something that is noticeable, that stares you in the face – THAT YOU CAN’T MISS?

We are called to be ‘transformed’. Now the word ‘conform’ derives from the Old French – ‘conformer’ (which derives from the Latin: conformare – to shape after) while ‘transform’ comes from the Old French ‘transformer’ (Latin: transformare – across the form). So the change that should be expected in our lives is... TOTAL! Not subtle, not halfway – it’s an all or nothing change. No going back. It is a shift from one mode of operation to another.

An illustration that I feel does this justice is taken from nature: the transformation from a caterpillar to a butterfly. From something that crawls around, a dull brown/green colour, a bit hairy maybe – to a beautiful, brightly-coloured butterfly that catches the breeze and flutters elegantly from here to there. The contrast is quite startling. What a beautiful transformation has taken place. There’s no going back either – the butterfly can’t try to wriggle back into his cocoon!

So, this is what we need to do as well. Do our lives consistently show this renewing and this transformation? Is it something that people are able to notice in our lives or is it something that is subtle and hard to distinguish in the way we live? Are we changing progressively or are we slipping back to ‘old ways’? If so, why? Are we giving up? Have we lost our sense of urgency? This needs to be conscious decision and an ongoing process in our lives.

## **Consequences**

If we do live a life of continual renewing and ongoing transformation then we have a lot to look forward to. As Paul writes here:

*'... Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.'*

In other words if we live like this then we shall, as a consequence of our actions, experience God's will in our lives. Through all the different strands of our personal life with God: prayer, study of His word, the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and our life with other Christians (for instance seeking counsel from those experienced in the faith, whom we trust) we shall be able to ascertain what God's will is in our life and we shall be living in it. We shall be experiencing it. It will not be something that we need to second-guess. Also we shall be afforded His blessing over us. Clearly life will not be perfect: we live in an imperfect world but we shall still know God's blessing and provision when times are difficult. His will, his good, pleasing and perfect will, will be the reality in our life, not just something that we read about and think, 'Oh, what a lovely promise of God's for us' but the experiential reality that we shall know in the fullest sense of the word.

And this will encompass all areas of our lives. Going back to what our brother Pelumi was preaching about last week from 1 Corinthians 3:1-15 our work for the Lord is a part of this living sacrifice along with all the other dimensions of our everyday lives. It is all bundled up as a whole and all needs to have Jesus as its foundation.

So in closing I believe that we need to ask ourselves a couple of questions - each relating to the first sections of this talk:

1. Do we need to change our allegiance from our earthly goals to have God as our one true master? Has this change of allegiance been total in our lives?
2. Are we being transformed? And if not, why not?

If we are able to answer these questions confidently in a positive manner then I believe that we shall be able 'to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.' But if we are not then I think this would be a good opportunity to put things right with God so that we can start, or restart, on the right track once again.