

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

St. Paul here mentions *sacrifices*, and so it's important for us to remember how the Jews worshipped in the Old Testament. They offered sacrifices that pointed to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ to come. They brought animals to the Temple, and those animals were offered on the altar, flesh and blood. Yet these offerings were only pleasing to God through the faith of those offering them, in so far as they brought to mind for the faithful the sacrifice whose fulfillment we New Testament Christians celebrate every time we celebrate the Holy Supper, the Body and Blood of Christ offered and poured out in death on Calvary for our justification and life.

Now some of us might think this cruel, that animals were sacrificed for something they didn't do. First, how many of you have had a hot dog or turkey sandwich lately? The sacrifices in the Temple were eaten, just as many of us eat meat. It's just that, rather than being slaughtered in a factory, these animals were consecrated to God, which was also a useful reminder that it is God who provides our daily bread. In that way also, however, the forgiveness of sins was attached with a meal, as it is in the Lord's Supper today.

Second, it *was* cruel, or at least unfair, in the sense that the people and not the animals had sinned. And it was meant to be that way. It was meant to drive home the seriousness of sin. Ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden, sin had brought death. God dressed Adam and Eve in animal skin to leave no doubt about the connection between the two, sin and death. Fig leaves wouldn't do. Through their sin, death came not only to mankind, but to all creation. Sin is no joke. And forgiveness isn't fair, at least for the substitute to be sacrificed. But thanks be to God, fair or not, in His compassion our Lord was willing to be the Victim of what He didn't deserve to spare us what we do deserve.

St. Paul now calls us, spared eternal death and hell through Christ's sacrifice, to offer our lives to God, not in death, like those Old Testament animals, or as Christ did for us, but as *living sacrifices*, spared death through Christ's death and alive through His resurrection. He calls us to do this "***by the mercies of God,***" that is, moved by the compassion of Christ demonstrated in His Passion. St. John puts it like this in His first letter, "***In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.***" Love breeds love. Love from God breeds love for God and those He's called us to love.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

As Christians, we are ***not to be conformed to this world.*** The word church means "those set apart." It should be no surprise when God wants for us something different than what the world considers good and right and expedient. If God says something, as we are ***transformed by the renewal of our minds,*** that thing that God says becomes paramount in our thinking.

Along those lines, as Christians, we dare never insist on understanding why God has commanded something before being willing to obey, or on agreeing with what God has commanded before obeying, or even on liking what God has said before obeying, but rather, as we obey ***by the mercies of God,*** we must continually ask in moments of doubt concerning God's commands, "How can the God who has given His life for me not want the best for me, whether or not I understand how it is best at the moment?" That is part of our ***transformation in the renewal of our minds.***

Why are our minds being transformed? ***“That by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*** The Christian life is not so much about what I want, but what about what God wants for me. Do the two sometimes meet? Yes, oftentimes what I want is what God wants, and what God wants is what I want. In fact, when my Christian life is strong, that happens more and more. But sometimes, because sin is still crouching at our door, because the sinful nature still hangs around our necks, what I want is at odds with what God wants—whether it comes to how I do my job at work, how I parent, how I relate to my parents, how I view my role in my marriage, how I carry myself in the classroom or on a football field or basketball court, what my living arrangements are, or whatever the situation might be. At such times, what course I choose to follow, His or mine, says a lot about who my God is, whether He is my God or I am my god.

Sometimes people, even Christians, though weak Christians, will try to dismiss something God calls sin by saying that so long as they personally don’t think that thing is wrong, so long as they don’t feel bad about it, it must not be wrong. When you are tempted to think in such a way, ask yourself this question: Was Jeffrey Dahmner justified in killing and eating young men because it didn’t seem wrong to him? Sure, I know I’m using an extreme example, but that is the logical end of such thinking, and even civil law doesn’t work in that way. Would I get off for speeding if I told the judge I didn’t agree with the speed limit? Would I get off for shoplifting if I told the judge that I didn’t agree with that law? Would I get off for dealing drugs if I told the judge that it didn’t seem wrong to me, that it didn’t seem wrong to me? No, the judge would scoff at our foolishness, and the fact that we felt no remorse for our wrongdoing might even lead to a harsher sentence. The state’s law is the law. Even more, God’s law is the law.

St. Luke provides a wonderful example of this ***transformation by the renewal of our minds*** in the nineteenth chapter of his Gospel:

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector, was welcomed by Christ into the kingdom of God. Though he had sinned, bilking his own neighbors and countrymen for their oppressors, the Romans, and to line his own pockets, Christ came into His house, and not only that, but into His heart through faith, and Zacchaeus was set free, not to sin, but from sin. And what happened next. ***“Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.”***

Jesus has forgiven even you. And yes, forgiveness isn’t fair, but Jesus, who had no sin, was willing to be sacrificed for your sin, His blood, still present among us in the Supper, your redemption and life. That is no mere fact to stick in the back of your minds, but an event that, if received through faith, transforms minds, as we see with Zacchaeus. So ***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*** Amen.

