

**27 August 2023 Romans 12:1-8 Pastor Fraser Pearce**

St Paul starts today's reading with these words:

**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,**

It's easy, as Christian people, to hear this language

Of brotherhood and sisterhood, and not pay any special attention

Because we are used to it – it's there in the bible

And we hear it regularly,

Even if we don't speak that way too much to each other.

But think about how radical the language is for St Paul.

St Paul, born a Jew, born free, is calling gentiles,

Calling people, some of whom are slaves, his brothers and sisters.

And he means brothers and sisters in the one family with God as the one Father.

In the letter to the Romans St Paul has been proclaiming

That God has been creating a new family of faith –

Where, through holy baptism, we become co heirs with Christ,

And receive the Holy Spirit as a gift from the Father.

He has spent the first part of the letter telling us

About what God has done for us:

About how he has shown his justice in forgiving our sins,

In adopting us by his grace into his family, and in giving us his Spirit

So that we may call out to him in our need.

In other words, St Paul has been saying that

There's nothing that we can do, no law that we can keep,

That can make us members of God's family –

It's God's free adoption of us that gives us this freedom

Of living as his sons, as his daughters.

Now St Paul is going to give us good news: God is giving

A new shape of life – a new way of behaving,

Where we receive gifts as his children

So that we may be built up together as one family.

Again, let's hear what St Paul says: **I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, 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 is not coming down with harsh words as a spiritual slavedriver,

But as a brother who encourages us in what flows from God's mercy,

*And he encourages us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God.*

Now this is a message that we need to hear  
If we are going to live as free people of God,  
Because we naturally think of our bodies as our own,  
To do with as we please.

Our bodies are, in fact, *gifts from God*.

Now, God knows we have bodily needs which are very much our own,  
Jesus makes this very clear in his teaching: He says that  
Our heavenly Father knows we *need* things like food and clothing.  
But the problem with treating our bodies as simply our own,  
Without reference to God, is that it does not lead to freedom,  
But to enslavement: to thinking that our appetites  
Must be obeyed, and that we have no freedom in the matter.

St Paul is saying that our bodily freedom comes in trusting God:  
As we live as people with a good conscience,  
Who have had Christ Jesus has paid the debt for our sin,  
And as we come to God not saying 'my will be done'  
But, 'Father in heaven, your will be done'.

Of course, one of the issues we face as Christians  
Is knowing what God's will is.

Now St Paul is going to develop his presentation of the Gospel  
So that in the next chapter he will write these words: **Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.**

So, we can know that when we show love to our neighbour –  
The same sort of love described in the ten commandments,  
The same sort of love that we would like to be shown by others –  
Then we can know that we are on the right track in knowing God's will.

But at this part of his letter, St Paul is coming at things  
From what you could call an intuitive point of view,  
That we get to know God's will in the very act  
Of recognising that our bodies belong to God.  
To put it negatively: if we treat our bodies as our own,  
And approach God as if he is there simply to make sure

That our bodily appetites are met,  
Then we will find it difficult, even impossible, to discern his will.

It's not just presenting our *bodies* to God  
That is part of the process of discerning God's will,  
It is also presenting our minds, our patterns of thought to God  
That frees us to understand more deeply who God is  
And the great good God wills for us  
As we live together in the family that he creates.

This is what St Paul goes on to say: **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.**

Now the fact is that we live a lot of our mental lives  
Deeply concerned what other people will think of us.  
In how we dress, how we speak, how we spend our money,  
We show that we want to fit in with the people around us –  
Or at least with the people whose opinions we value.  
Now there's nothing wrong with wanting to live in harmony  
With the people around us –  
As a rule it's helpful in the human community  
To show due consideration for how others think and feel:  
It's even part of living the law of love,  
Of treating others how we ourselves would like to be treated.  
The problem happens when we treat the good opinion of other people  
As if it is the ultimate thing that matters:  
If we think and act as if human opinion  
Is more important than what God says in his word.

If we have this attitude, then again, we will find it difficult,  
Even impossible to discern God's will: We will miss out on the fullness of freedom  
That God has given us as his people.

That's why St Paul can go on and say these words: **For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.**

God gives us the gift of faith:  
He leads us to trust that we belong together as his sons and daughters,  
And this means we can get a true picture of who we are,  
Recognising that we have different gifts that are mutually beneficial.

Think about a harmonious family:

The different siblings have different personalities, different skills,  
And when the brothers and sisters trust that they do not need  
To compete with each other for their parent's love,  
And when they see that each other's gifts benefit the whole family,  
Then they have the joy of living in reality:  
In living with the freedom that real love brings.

St Paul ends today's reading by talking about the different gifts  
That God gives his people.

First, he stresses our unity by using the analogy of the body –  
That even more than sons and daughters in the same family  
We are members of the one body. Listen: **For as in one body we have many  
members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are  
many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.**

Because the body is a unity, then the different members  
Although they serve varied functions,  
Work properly when they serve the whole body.

Likewise in the church the different gifts that God gives us  
Work together for the building up of the whole church.

This is what St Paul says: **We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to  
us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in  
teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in  
diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.**

Thinking about what these different gifts are  
Is a topic for bible study, but for today, notice this:  
All these gifts are *outward focussed*: they are gifts of service  
That build up the body of Christ.

Dear brothers and sister here at Bethlehem,  
We have been baptised bodily into Christ Jesus:  
We have shared in his death in baptism,  
And so we will share in his bodily resurrection.  
We are declared innocent by God, and we together call on him  
As our Father: so, let's present our bodies to God,  
And let's listen to his word,  
So that we may mature together as we discern God's will,  
And as we see that our Father gives good gifts  
So that we may grow in love for each other,  
And so that his name may be glorified among us. In Jesus' name. Amen!