

Theme: - Renewal in me and the church

Before we look at the theme of this sermon I want to look at the theme itself. Firstly 'the church,' And I'm not talking about bricks and mortar. the church is all of us sitting here in this building, and those listening at home, we collectively are the church we are the people of Christ. Therefore, we are talking about the renewal of ourselves as individuals and the renewal of ourselves collectively as a family we call the church. Secondly 'renewal,' renewal means to be refreshed or make strong again.

32 years ago, on our 25th wedding anniversary, Jill and I went on a 'marriage encounter' course where we took time to reflect on the last twenty five years, to share our reflections with each other, to renew our marriage vows, and our commitment to each other in love. The outcomes of the course was different for each couple on the course, and was only of interest to the couple concerned, which will also be true of each of us following a renewal of our faith in God, it will only be of interest to each of us and to God, but it may well be reflected in our worship in this place.

That is what John was talking about in January when he spoke about renewal in our church, he said, "Are we going to just survive 2023 or are we willing to look at this new year as an opportunity rather than as a threat?" "Instead of turning in on ourselves and just trying to survive another year, are we willing to turn to God and commit this year to him, trusting him to bring us through, and bring blessing to us and our families, and even to bless other people through us?"

That's the proposal, to reflect on and recommit to God afresh in love, and I am now going to explore that theme through our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Now Christians in Rome at the time of St Paul who would be reading his letter, would be Gentiles who wouldn't know anything about animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins, they would know that Christ had sacrificed himself once and for all for the forgiveness sins effective through faith, because Paul had told them; see Acts chapter 3 verse 25.

In verse 1a of our reading St Paul, who was a devote Pharisee, appeals to the Roman Christians, who have already experienced the mercies of God, that the most fitting, or ultimate act of worship by which they can show their thanks for God's mercies is to offer their own bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God. St Paul was saying to them and to us that we are to present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, and a living sacrifice is a life dedicated to God, a life committed to doing God's will, a life lived in faith and lived out in faithfulness, we are to be a living sacrifice in everything we do and wherever we are. There is no moment or circumstance in which the obligation to be a living sacrifice or to worship God does not apply. The day to day sacrifice we can make is to try and live according to God's plan for our lives, both in body and in spirit, both are essential for a healthy and creative life, and both are compatible with Christian discipleship and our relationship to God.

St Paul wrote in verse 2, "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." The words conformed and transformed are translations of Paul's

original words which were probably Greek. So do not be conformed to this world is St Paul saying that such people who do conform to this world are embracing the philosophies or fads of the day, which can change from day to day or year to year, and invariably never really satisfies and can be likened to a leaf being blown by the wind, never knowing quite where you are or where you will be going next. The second Greek word that St Paul used is translated “transformed,” however, transformed is quite different from conformed, and involves transformation at the core of our being.

Being transformed by the renewing of your minds would probably be written today as ‘transformed by a change of heart’, spending more time thinking about God, trying to please him rather than ourselves, treating our bodies as a living sacrifice. If being “conformed” leaves us adrift like a leaf, being blown in the wind; “transformed” leaves us with feet firmly on the ground, anchored and steady. One reason we have a counselling service here at St Michael’s is because so many people do not have an anchor to cling on to when difficult situations arise.

Paul is calling us not to be caught up in every fad or wafted by every breeze, but instead to let the Holy Spirit transform, or change us at our core so that we can have a faith strong enough to maintain our course in spite of the winds of popular opinion. The hope is that as individuals and together as a church that through renewal of our faith and commitment to God and to his church, we will be transformed to what is good and perfect.

In verse 3 St Paul changes course and reminds the Roman Christians, and us, that it was through grace that they received God’s gifts, and that while they, and we, have the joy of exercising our God given gifts nevertheless the glory belongs to God. So, there is no place for thinking that you are better than anybody else, because the glory belongs to God.

In verse 4 Paul uses the human body with all its parts and different functions as an analogy of the Christian Church with all the different people with their different talents and gifts who make up the church in all its variety. For a more in depth understanding of St Paul’s analogy of the body of Christ read 1 Corinthians 12:12 to 27, where St Paul also stresses the interdependency of each member of the body of Christ to each other.

In verse 5 St Paul reminds us that the body of Christ, which in his day extended to other parts of the Middle East, and which is now worldwide, is still the one body of Christ, but also that we here in St Michael’s while we are members of the worldwide church of Christ, are also individually members of St Michael’s here in Sandhurst.

In verses 6 to 8 St Paul lists seven such gifts, he mentions, prophecy, ministry which is service, teaching, exhortation, by which he means encouragement, giving, leadership, and compassion, which is showing mercy. Now out of the seven gifts I believe that all but one are fairly straight forward, the exception is prophecy. In the Old Testament there are a few people such as Ezekiel, and Hosea who were prophets of God because at the time of their prophecy they were filled with the Holy Spirit, because it was the Holy Spirit which enabled them to prophecy.

Now Jesus before his crucifixion told his disciples as recorded in John chapter 16 verse 13, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.” “He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” So

today it isn't just a few people who have the Holy Spirit to help them, now everyone has the Holy Spirit to help them.

Now some people's gift is of prophecy, and as I understand it they are prophets because they are more in tune to listening to God than the rest of us and may well have a message not only for themselves but also for other people. However, every Christian has the ability, through prayer and the Holy Spirit, to listen to God and work out what God wants for ourselves, and for some people it is to do one thing for others other things, and there are many other things we could do if the right person came forward with the appropriate gift. God's spiritual gifts are principally for us to use for the benefit of other people, and everybody has gifts to share, and it is as we share our spiritual gifts with others that we are being transformed and growing in faith as individuals and as we grow in faith as a church.

In 1 Corinthians 13 St Paul also lists love as the greatest gift, and faith and hope as two more, there are many others as well. God grants gifts to every Christian, and the church is best served by honouring and celebrating each person's gift. Difficulties arise when Christians begin to think that their God given gift is superior to other people's gifts, they forget that it was through God's grace that they received the gift and that it is for them to pass on to others, not to keep to themselves, gifts are not rewards they are gifts to pass on to the glory of God.

In verses 1 to 8 St Paul is showing us what Christian discipleship means, and in a nutshell means life dedicated to God, a life committed to doing God's will, a life lived in faith and lived out in faithfulness. Now in these next five verses 9 to 13 of our reading, Paul lists a number of behaviours that the Christian should aspire to.

The list begins with love, in this case agape love the sort of love that God has for all of us, and which we should show to others and is the greatest gift of all. In exercising God's love, we will not hate anyone, we will honour others higher than ourselves, we will joyfully serve the Lord with enthusiasm, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of others, and extend hospitality to strangers.

Our motives in seeking or accepting church tasks are important. We are to serve joyfully out of love for Christ with no thought of reward, and with modesty, then Christ will bless our service, and we will be a blessing to others, and we would have started our transformation to discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

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