

Shaped by faith

(Romans 12:1-8 & Matthew 16:13-20)

A few weeks ago I went to the funeral of a 92 year-old friend. This friend, Rosemary, until the time I went to university, was one of my youth group leaders and teachers. At her funeral it was said that Rosemary's Christian faith shaped her life.

This little phrase, "her faith shaped her life", remained with me; I can't remember everything that was said about her, but it was clear that her faith wasn't just a set of Christian beliefs, but a reality by which she lived. Her faith shaped her life.

I also remembered that she had given me a book called "The Renewed Mind" based on Romans 12:2. I still have it. Its pages are now a bit yellow indicating its age, not how many times I've read it.

Before we look at the Romans 12 passage, let's start with today's Gospel passage from Matthew 16.

Jesus loved asking questions, and the Gospels show that questioning was one of his primary ways of teaching, revealing hearts, and inviting people into deeper reflection. Today's Gospel passage is a great example.

He first asks his disciples: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" It's a warm-up question, low risk and non-threatening, simply asking them to report what others think, which they do.

Then Jesus asks them a personal question, high stakes, requiring personal conviction: "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter models the confession every believer must make — because the Church is a community of believers built on confessing Christ as Lord and saviour.

Jesus asked, "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" I was out with a friend on Wednesday evening. In the back room of the pub, I asked him a similar question, "Who do you say that Jesus is?" The answers he gave and the discussion that followed was really interesting.

If you asked that question of your friends, you would probably get a similar range of answers, such as, he was:

- a historical figure
- a Jewish teacher
- a prophet
- a good man
- someone who, through his followers, still has an influence in the world.

Some might go further and say, "It doesn't really matter who he was."

Today's Gospel passage invites us to consider the same question, "Who do WE say that Jesus is?"

How we respond matters, because confession leads to allegiance, allegiance leads to discipleship, and discipleship leads to transformation.

Turning now to the Romans passage, Romans 12:1-8.

At the beginning I said that Rosemary's faith wasn't simply a set of Christian beliefs. Her faith shaped her life.

And perhaps the point Paul is making to the Christians in Rome (and now to us) is that our faith in Jesus Christ is to shape our lives.

Paul begins this part of his letter with a word that is easy to overlook, but enormously important:

"Therefore..." What is the therefore there for?

So we look back to what Paul has been saying in the first eleven chapters of his letter. He has been explaining what God has done for us in Christ. Just listen to some of the things he has already told us:

"We have all sinned, yet are justified freely by grace."

"Christ died for us while we were still sinners."

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

"Nothing... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And at the end of chapter 11, Paul breaks into praise:

"For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen."

This is why Paul says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy..."

God's mercy?

He means the whole extraordinary story of what God has done for us in Christ. This is what Paul wants us to keep in view.

That God has acted first. God has shown mercy. And our response flows from that mercy.

The first response is that we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is our true and proper worship.

Paul isn't saying, "Live a transformed life so that God will accept you."

It is the other way round. Through Jesus, God has already put us right with himself through Jesus Christ - our response is to offer our lives to him.

And “bodies” here means much more than our physical bodies. We’re not expected to place our bodies, or an arm or a leg, on the fire. Paul is talking about the whole of our lived experience — our minds, our relationships, our choices, our work, our money, our words — as well as our bodies.

Christian worship, then, isn’t confined to what happens when we gather here on a Sunday. Our whole lives become an offering of worship to God.

And that raises the question: what does a life offered to God actually look like?

Paul’s answer is not a long list of dos and don’ts.

Instead, he begins with something deeper: “Do not conform to the pattern of this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Note that Paul doesn’t tell Christians to withdraw from the world. But he recognises that, if we’re not careful, we can be shaped by the world around us — its assumptions, values and priorities — many of which are not God’s values and priorities.

And notice that he doesn’t say, “Transform yourself.” The transformation comes through the renewing of the mind.

And it’s reasonable for you to ask, “How?” How can we, as a Christian community, enable God to transform us as he renews our minds?

So how does God renew our minds? Paul, in his letter, gives us some clues.

God renews our mind as we continually return to his mercy. The starting point isn’t “we must try harder.” It is remembering together what God has already done for us. May our worship, preaching, prayers and conversations repeatedly bring us back to the story of God’s mercy revealed in Christ.

God renews our mind through Scripture. It’s not about acquiring more biblical information, but we might ask: What does this passage tell us about God? What does it reveal about ourselves? What assumptions of our culture does it challenge? What would be different if we actually believed this?

God renews our minds as we listen to one another. Paul moves from: “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” to “do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...” and then to the different gifts within the one body.

For example:

- someone who thinks differently from me may have something God wants me to hear;
- someone younger may see something I don’t;
- someone older may have wisdom I lack.

Our diversity becomes one of the ways God renews the mind of the whole body.

God renews our minds as we recognise that, in Christ we, though we are many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We practice the gifts that God has given to each of us; Paul lists some of them in today's passage.

And God renews our minds as we practise a different way of living. Paul goes on to give us some examples (the rest of chapter 12):

- Be devoted to one another in love (12:10)
- honour one another above yourselves (12:10)
- Share with the Lord's people who are in need (12:13)
- practise hospitality (12:13)
- bless those who persecute you (12:14)
- live in harmony with one another (12:16)
- do not repay anyone evil for evil (12:17)
- live at peace with everyone (12:18)

Conclusion

Jesus invites us to answer "Who do WE say that he is?" Our answer matters.

And Paul is appealing to us, on the basis of God's mercy, that we as his church, offer everything about ourselves to God, and that we are transformed by the renewing of our mind into the living church God wants us to be.

May it be said of us, both as individuals and as a church, that our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, is shaping our lives.

Amen.

James Parsons

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