

The Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 20:7-9
<i>Response</i>	O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee;
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 12:1-2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 16:21-27

The twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. And here we move into chapter 12 of Romans, which is after the conclusion of Paul's treatment of the drama of the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles. And now he moves into a series of more ethical exhortations addressed specifically to the audience to whom he's writing. So this is a wonderful section of the letter if you're looking for moral guidance or spiritual guidance from Paul on how to live the Christian life and how to live the life in Christ.

And so he begins this—we might call it a more ethical, a more spiritual section of Romans—with an appeal to his readers. And this is what he says in chapter 12, verses 1-2:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, 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 you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so the first thing that you might notice is the liturgical language that Paul uses. Some scholars would call this the cultic language. Now by cult there, we don't mean a kind of religious cult the way we think of it today, but the ancient Latin way—which, a *cultus* would mean some kind of observance of an offering of sacrifice or making an oath. It was just a standard term for the worship that would be offered to God in a temple. So you had Greco Roman cults, like the worship of Athena or the worship of Zeus. But you also had the Jewish cult, which was the worship of the one God of Israel. So cultic activity is activity that takes place in a temple through sacrifice and through worship.

And so Paul here is taking the language of sacrifice and of the Jewish temple, but he's applying it to Christian believers when he tells them to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God as their spiritual worship. Now the Greek word that Paul uses here for present, *paristimi*, is the very same word that you would use in the Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures when you talked about presenting an animal to God, offering sacrifice in the Jewish tabernacle—the sacrificial worship of the tabernacle or the temple.

Now, if you know anything about Jewish temple worship or ancient Israelite worship in the tabernacle, you know that there really is no such thing as a living sacrifice, at least when it came to the animals. Because what would happen with animal sacrifice was precisely that you would take sheep or a bull or a goat or a turtledove, and then you would put those animals to death. You would either slit the throat of the animal, or with the birds you could break the neck, and then the dead animal would be offered to God as a sacrifice. Like in a whole burnt offering, you take a lamb or a goat, and you would burn the animal in its entirety and offer it up to God.

When it came to Passover, for example, you would slit the throat of the lamb, pour out the blood of the lamb, and then the blood would be poured on the altar as a sacrifice to God. And the reason it was done this way—you could go into a lot more depth on this than I'm doing now, but just in a nutshell—was because it was a symbolic self-offering to God of one's own life. It was a way through sign and symbol and sacrifice to offer one's self to God. Sacrifice was seen as a form of

prayer. It was meant to atone for sin, to be sure, but it was also an expression of self-offering to God.

And you can actually see this in Leviticus 17:11. The reason the blood would be poured out to God was because the life of the flesh was seen as being in the blood. So Leviticus says:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life.

And the Hebrew word for life there is *nephesh*. It means life but it can also be translated as soul. So the offering of one's soul, the offering of one's life to God was expressed ritually through the offering of animal sacrifice. So Paul is doing something really fascinating here. He's taking the language of Jewish sacrifice, the language of the Jewish temple, the language of animal sacrifice...but he's applying it to the individual Christian, to the individual believer. And he's saying:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies...

Not the body of a goat or the body of a bull or the body of a sheep or the body of a dove, but:

...present your bodies as a living sacrifice...

Not a dead sacrifice, not a bloody sacrifice, but a living sacrifice...

...holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

He's calling—I keep saying Christians but every time I say it, I remember, he doesn't say the word Christian. What does Paul say? He calls believers "saints," which the Greek word literally is *hagioi*, holy ones. So notice what he says here:

...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...

So that terminology of “holy” would be something that would be applied to sacrifices in the Old Testament, because the word “holy” means to set apart—*kadosh* in Hebrew, as well as *hagios* in Greek. It means to set apart. So when an animal was deemed to be holy, it would be set apart for sacrifice, for offering in the temple. You only offered God holy things, things that have been set apart for Him.

And so what Paul is doing here is he’s telling Christians that they are going (in a sense) to take the role in the new covenant that animal sacrifices had in the old covenant. But they’re going to present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to Him, set apart for God who is their spiritual worship. Now what does that mean, spiritual worship? This is a tough expression to translate in Paul. The Greek is literally *logikē latreian*. Now *latreia* is just the standard Greek word for liturgical worship or cultic worship...or sacrificial worship would be the best way to translate it.

But Paul adds the adjective *logikē* to it, which literally means “logical” or “rational.” The RSV translates it here as “spiritual” and that’s okay, but it really is “offer it to God, which is your rational worship” or “your reasonable worship” or “your logical worship.” And scholars have gone back and forth, back and forth about what exactly that adjective means. What does he mean, logical worship or reasonable worship? And frankly, I still need to do more research on that, because it’s kind of a unique phrase. So there’s more to be said. You could describe it as christological, in the sense that this is the worship of the new covenant, because what is Christ? He is the *logos*, He is the word made flesh. So it’s worship in accordance with the word.

But that’s actually something John says in the Gospel. It’s not Paul’s normal way of talking about Christ as the *logos*. He has other terms that he uses. So it’s kind of a mysterious expression here, but one thing is clear: he’s contrasting it with the bloody animal sacrifice of the Old Testament. So this is a new form of worship, a new form of *latreia*, in which what’s being offered to God in worship is actually the bodies of believers themselves.

So one suggestion here about what Paul means by this can actually be found earlier in the letter to the Romans. He appears to be alluding to something he says earlier in the letter. In Romans 6:12 and following, he talks about the body of a Christian. And he uses the same language of presenting your body to God as a sacrifice. Listen to what he says about how he imagines this being done. Romans 6:12 and following. He says:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not [present] your members...

And the Greek word there for “present” is the same word he uses in Romans 12 for present a sacrifice. So don’t present your members, meaning members of your body.

Do not [present] your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but [present] yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.

For just as you once [presented] your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now [present] your members to righteousness for sanctification.

...or for holiness. That’s Romans 6:12-13 and verse 19. You might think, “Well, Dr. Pitre, that doesn’t actually clear it up. That passage is obscure in its own right.” And I understand it, but let me just sum up what Paul is saying there.

Paul is describing the whole human life and the moral decisions we make, not as a list of rules, like “do this” and “don’t do this.” He’s describing the moral battle between sin and righteousness—that moral decision that we make between sin and righteousness—as a liturgical act, as a sacrificial act. In other words, I’m either going to offer my body to sin or I’m going to offer myself and my body to God. One of them leads to wickedness, and the other one leads to holiness. So the essence of holiness for Paul is setting my body and myself apart from sin and for God, just like the animals in the Old Testament were set apart from the world and set apart for God by being offered to Him, by being presented to Him.

In fact, some of the later rabbinic traditions describe them cutting different portions of the animal and then offering literally the members: the leg, the shank, and different parts of the animal to God in sacrifice. And then other parts would be eaten by the participants in worship. Here, Paul is using all of that language of animal sacrifice, but he's saying, "You present your body, present your members, to God as an offering that leads to righteousness and holiness."

So in other words, Paul thinks of the morality of the Christian life as a kind of liturgical act, as an act of worship, so that when you choose the good and you choose the holy, when you choose what is right, it's offering glory to God. It's a way of worshipping God. You may think of worship as "I go to worship on Sunday, I worship God for an hour, and then I just live my life for the rest of the week." That's not how Paul sees it. Paul sees every moral choice that we make, every decision we make about what to do, especially with our bodies, as an act of either offering oneself to God (which is worship) or offering oneself to sin in opposition to God.

So, it's a very different way of looking at the Christian life. And that's how he begins his chapter—the next couple of chapters—where he's going to be talking about various ethical issues and moral issues about how to live out the Christian life. So it's a very different framework and a very powerful one. And it's in that context that Paul says:

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind... (Romans 12:2a)

So this just points up, once again, that for Paul, salvation is not just getting out of hell. It's not a "get out of hell free" card. That's a quote from Dr. Michael Barber...he always used that expression. It's not just saving you from something; it's saving you *for* something. So Paul expects Christians to be changed, to live differently, to no longer be conformed to this world.

Now pause there. You'll recall in previous lectures, I talked about Paul's theology of the old creation and the new creation. He has this idea of these two spheres of

reality, the old fallen world of creation and then the new creation, which is the realm of the spirit. And Christians, although they live in this world (the fallen world), they're not supposed to live of this world. They're not supposed to belong to it. They're not supposed to conform to this world, because this world is a world of sin and a world of death. So what Paul is saying is, don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed...be changed by the renewal of your mind.

And I think that's actually the key to what he means by *logikē latreia*—rational worship. In other words, Christianity is not just a religion of the heart; it's a religion of the mind. It's not just a changed heart. It's also a changed mind. We think about things differently. We see reality differently. When we look at the world, it might look like this world is all there is or that we're made for this fallen world, but logically, according to reason, according to what God has revealed, we're actually made for the world to come. And so:

...be transformed by the renewal of your mind...

Now, the Greek word here for transformed is *metamorphoō*. We get the word metamorphosis from it. So Paul expects Christians to really change the way they think about things. And the closest synonym to this change of mind is actually a word that Jesus uses in the Gospels—*metanoia*. It means repentance. It's translated as repentance, but it literally means a "change of mind." The Greek word for mind is *noús*. So *metanoia* means to change your mind. And here Paul's talking about the transformation of the mind.

So the primary thing he wants the Romans that he's writing to to do is change the way they think about sin and the way they think about holiness...and help them understand that the call of the Christian is to live a life of self-offering to God with every moral decision that we make, with every act that we engage in. And when we begin to think differently about the world and about ourselves, it actually will lead us to change the way we act. This is very important. If you don't change the way people think, you will very likely not change the way they act. So the intellect and the will—or the mind and the heart, to use biblical language—are both crucial to the transformation of a Christian to living the Christian life.

And you can actually see this in one place where Paul uses the same word. So there's another passage where he talks about being transformed and the mind being transformed. And it's in 2 Corinthians 3:18. He's talking about reading the Scriptures. Because you might be thinking, well, how do I change my mind? Well, Paul tells you. Here he's describing fellow Israelites of his—other Jews of his day—who read the Scripture but they don't see Christ in the Old Testament. So Paul says this:

...to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord...

...think of conversion here, to Christ...

...the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being [transformed] into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

So in other words, for Paul, how do I get my mind right? How do I change my mind? It's through the reading of the Scriptures. It's through meditation on Scripture that Paul says when a person converts to Jesus, to faith in Christ, and begins reading the Scriptures, he says the veil is lifted. And then we begin to be transformed into the likeness of Christ from one degree of glory to another. Notice, it's a process. Salvation is not just a one-off event. It takes time, from one degree of glory to another, through the power of the indwelling Spirit that Paul mentions elsewhere.

So I just bring this up because a lot of times people will say things like, "Well, you know, I've been a Christian a long time" or "I've been a Catholic a long time...I don't see any real change in me. I'm still just as impatient or prideful or lustful or greedy as I was when I first became a Christian." Maybe you've had that experience of feeling like you're not making any progress. And my question would be: Are you changing your mind? Are you forming your mind with the Scriptures? Are you reading Scripture every day? Are you meditating on the word of God? Because according to Paul, that's how you transform yourself into the likeness of

Christ. By lifting the veil of the Scriptures and reading the Scriptures and meditating on the Scriptures, we actually can be changed from one degree of glory into another into greater and greater likeness to Christ.

That's why Paul begins his ethical section with the Romans here, by saying...don't be conformed to this world. In other words, don't keep sinning as if you belong to the world. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind. So Christianity is not an irrational religion or an a-rational religion for Paul. In fact, Christianity is the *logikē latreia*. It's rational worship, logical worship. It's rooted in the wisdom of God that Paul just finished describing in Romans 11.

So I'll close then with a little quote from the living tradition here. St. John Chrysostom, who I've mentioned before—4th century bishop of Constantinople and commentator on all of Paul's letters. In his *Homilies on Romans*, chapter 20, which is on this chapter 12 of the letter to the Romans, Chrysostom raised this question: How do I not be conformed to the world and make myself a living sacrifice? How do I actually do that? This is what he says:

How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it has already become a sacrifice. Let the tongue say nothing filthy, and it has become an offering. Let your hand do nothing evil, and it has become a whole burnt offering. But even this is not enough, for we must have good works also. The hand must do alms, the mouth must bless those who curse it, and the ears must find time to listen to the reading of Scripture. Sacrifice allows of no unclean thing. It is the first fruits of all other actions.²

John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 20. That's perfect. Chrysostom nails it. He gets it exactly right there. So if you want to make your body a living sacrifice, then ask yourself: What am I putting in front of my eyes? Let my eye look on no unclean thing. What do I watch? What kind of shows do I watch? What kind of entertainment do I view? If I let my eye look on no evil thing, it's already become an offering to God.

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 20; in *NPNF1* 11.496

“Let the tongue say nothing filthy..” What do I speak? Are the words that I speak...are they an offering to God or are they being conformed to this world? What do I do with my hands? John Chrysostom says here, it should be giving alms. Is it greedily acquiring wealth myself? Or has my mind been renewed and transformed to give alms to those who are in need?

And then finally, my ears. What am I doing with my ears? What do I listen to? He says it “must find time to listen to the reading of Scripture.” That’s how the mind is transformed. It’s through the reading of God’s word. And just as sacrifice allows no unclean thing, it has to be holy. You can’t give the diseased animal to God on the altar. You have to give a clean animal. So too, we have to make our bodies holy and acceptable to God who is our rational worship. And that offering to God will be the firstfruits of all our other actions and will help us begin that process of being transformed by the renewal of the mind and being changed from one degree of glory to another into the likeness of Christ.