

1.7.2024 Epiphany 1 (Romans 12:1-5)

Several of the Gospel passages we read through the season of Advent focused in different ways on God's promise of a coming Messiah who would "*save His people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). Then, on Christmas Day, through the inspired words of St. John we learned that God fulfilled that promise in a way only He could, in a way infinitely greater than anything we could ask or imagine. As John, in his gospel, unfolded for us the great mystery of the Incarnation, we learned that the One sent to save us was not merely a man or woman, an Old Testament prophet or judge, the Messiah was not even a perfect creation of God. Instead, the Promised Messiah, our Redeemer *was God* clothed in human *flesh* (John 1:1, 14). Through the seasons of Advent and Christmas, as we considered these prophecies and the birth of our Savior, all that God sacrificed to be born in a stable, to enter His creation to pursue and to die for us, we certainly concluded that we cannot fathom, nor can we deny, the infinite depth of the love of God.

As we gather once again in His house, the inspired words of St. Paul found in our Epistle this morning prove to be an appropriate extension of all that we've read through these seasons. Paul wrote, "*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service*" (Romans 12:1). Needless to say, St. Paul is entirely correct. When we taken even a moment to contemplate who God is and was and will always be, when we consider the personal and sacrificial way in which He fulfilled His promise to save His people, the only correct, sensible response is to offer and present unto Him "our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice." To offer such a "living sacrifice" is to dedicate all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do to God in humble gratitude and heartfelt praise for His amazing grace, His mercies that are new every morning, and His perfect, full, and sufficient sacrifice that saved us all, and prepared an eternal place for us all, with Him in His heavenly kingdom.

With these thoughts in mind, let's consider this idea of presenting ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, and ways that we may begin this reasonable service. In our day, the word sacrifice is normally defined as giving up something of value for the sake of something we consider more valuable. In

baseball, a batter might hit a sacrifice fly deep into the outfield allowing a runner to score. In chess, a player might sacrifice a pawn to expose their opponent's king. In life, we might sacrifice a day's wages to gain quality time with our family. We view sacrifice as giving up something of value for the sake of something we consider more valuable, and St. Paul is speaking in those terms as well.

In his day, in the temple at Jerusalem, the sacrifices and offerings presented to God were valuable - they were spotless domestic animals or food which took a substantial amount of work to prepare. At the temple, people would take these valuable offerings, have them placed on the altar by the priests, and by the mercy of God, in giving up something of value, they would receive something endlessly more valuable - the restoration of a right relationship with Him.

When St. Paul exhorts Christians to present our bodies *as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God*, he has this image of temple sacrifice in mind. He views the reasonable Christian as one who responds to the loving-kindness of God by offering something to Him that is of great value - our selves, our souls, and bodies. As we offer all that we are to Him, as we place our lives on His altar, we die to sin, we die to self, and we position ourselves to receive something of infinite value - a life lived in, with, and for Christ. This thought is also expressed in a letter Paul wrote to the Galatians, in which he stated, "*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20).

We recognize in that verse the way Paul is describing a living sacrifice. He describes himself as being crucified with Christ, he has been sacrificed, yet he lives, and he lives for Christ - constantly. Not just for an hour on Sunday morning, but all week. Not with just a tenth of his money, but all of it. Not just sacrificing to God that which he feels like offering, but truly loving God with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, and all his strength. All that he is, all that he has, and all that he can do is completely and unconditionally offered to God on a daily basis as a living sacrifice. Clearly, Paul heard and received what Jesus declared when He said, "*If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me*" (Luke

9:23). These are words of sacrifice. Deny yourself. Take up your cross daily. Give up something of value for the sake of Someone more valuable: Christ.

In order to deny ourselves, to take up our cross daily, and to offer our lives as *“a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God,”* we will have to resist the temptations of this world. St. Paul, again in our Epistle, tells Christians, *“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God”* (Romans 12:2). Here, Paul tells us that we can’t have it both ways. We can’t be set apart as holy, living sacrifices to God, and at the same time, model our thoughts and behavior after the ways of this world. In a familiar verse, our Lord said it like this, *“No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon”* (Matthew 6:24). Each of us must make this choice: Offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, or give ourselves up to the world. C.S. Lewis wrote about the consequence of our decision, saying, “Earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, a region of Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.”

In conclusion, consider once again all that we learned through the seasons of Advent and Christmas about what God has done, what He has sacrificed, to manifest the depth of His love for us, because this is the basis of Paul’s statement, the reason why presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice is our reasonable service as sensible people. Consider our Lord, who ruled the universe that He created from His throne in glory, who reigned in majesty so far beyond anything we can imagine, how He fulfilled His promises and prophecies in a way only God could, by entering His creation. The Word was made flesh, and so humbly, as a babe born in a stable and laid in a feed trough. The Father, through the Spirit, sent the Son, *“that the world through Him might be saved”* (John 3:17).

We’ve heard the truth of what God has done for us. We’ve read Paul’s inspired words that describe a reasonable response. Now consider the way our Creator has honored and loved us by allowing you and I, His creatures, to choose whether or not we will respond to His love. Only Love would offer us such a choice, the freedom to love God or to love the world, and the thought

that God would allow us to reject Him makes me wonder what hurts more: Suffering and dying for the ones you love, or seeing so many who go about their business as if they couldn't care less. By the grace of God may we never act in such an unreasonable, callous manner. May we who have heard the Truth be those who respond to the Good News that God has declared through the blood of His Son, and may it be our daily endeavor to place our lives on His altar as *a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God*. May we give up something of value, our selves, our souls, and bodies for the sake of Someone infinitely more valuable, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.