

Being the body of Christ - Romans 12:1-8

Our reading today from Paul's letter to the Romans, comes from a time when there were riots among the various Jewish groups in Rome at about the time of Paul's letter. It was a hard time for the early church. The riots were likely the result of problems within the Jewish community caused by some synagogues and/or individuals becoming Christian, and/or by Christian Jews coming from elsewhere to Rome and sharing the good news of Jesus within the Jewish community – bringing in teaching which often went against tradition.

And going against tradition is hard to cope with. Think about the various changes just in this church over its history. How things have changed since worship began here in 1963, or how things have changed since the Uniting Church came into being in 1977. Changes to the way we worship. Changes in the bible translations we use. Changes in technology. Changes in church governance. Changes in the size of the congregation. Changes in the demographics of the congregation. And so on. And on.

But the changes that have been experienced here really aren't as hard as the changes within the synagogues of Rome and elsewhere at the time of this letter. Jesus had not only fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures, but the gospel was being preached to the gentiles! God's saving grace was being extended to not just the Jews – the chosen people – but to all the people of the earth – just as God had promised Abraham back in Genesis 12!

Of course, whatever their backgrounds, they were called to be the church together. As Paul writes to the Galatians (3:26,28), *"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith [...] there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"*.

But all of those people called to be church together were human; they were imperfect; just like us - human and imperfect. Hopefully, we are all being transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit within us and on us, but in the meantime, we will struggle, and we will fall short.

In this letter, particularly in the later chapters, Paul writes to encourage the church in Rome, to focus on what's important, to work together as the church, not as members of an organisation of the world. And in effect, he was also writing to the church in Sydney, and for that matter, the church in St Ives.

We always like to think that we're special, that our circumstances are unique, that what we experience is novel. But the truth is, as the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it, there is nothing new under the sun. The problems we experience today, have been experienced by people before, are experienced by people in all sorts of other places, and almost certainly will be experienced by others into the future.

The difference though, is how we react. Do we ignore problems? Do we run and hide? Do we spend all our time and effort on blaming others? Or deciding that some other approach or person can solve them for us?

Paul is clear on how we should react: he appeals to us – on a very personal level – *“brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, [...] offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship..”* (12:1)

But what does it really mean to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice? Mostly people assume that our traditional offertory is roughly the equivalent of the ancient practice of sacrifice... that just like the Israelites would have sacrificed a bull or a sheep, we now put some money in the offering – or make a bank transfer to cover it.

But when the ancient peoples made sacrifices, the sacrifices themselves were generally destroyed. The sheep was burned – the burnt offering. No one ate it. The wine in a drink offering was poured out onto the ground – the priest didn't get to drink it.

Whatever was sacrificed was given up. Not repurposed. Not given to the church or the priest or the poor. But entirely given up. Entirely given up to God.

Of course, over time this changed, and what was given wasn't always used up. The priests needed to be fed and supported, after all.

But originally, what was given was sacrificed. It was given up entirely. Now, though, because of what Jesus has done for us all – giving himself up entirely for us all – we don't have to make those sorts of sacrifices.

We're actually called on to give more – not merely give 'a bit'. Paul calls on us to present ourselves as a living sacrifice. To give ourselves up to God. But not to die for God – instead to live for God.

And it follows that if we have given ourselves up to God, then we belong to God and we don't belong to the world anymore. So Paul says in verse 2, *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

Paul tells us to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, and then he tells us to allow ourselves to be transformed – to be changed – and in doing that we will know God's ways better; in fact, we will know God better.

But as I said earlier, we aren't perfect. And we aren't going to be perfected this side of the new heavens and the new earth, so Paul calls on us to work together as the church, as the body of Christ.

If we are the body of Christ, we will be, effectively, Christ's body in the world. We will be Christ's eyes, and see people, we will be his feet and walk to them, we will be his hands and reach out to them, we will be his mouth and we will speak to them, and we will be Christ's heart, and we will love them.

Paul implores each one of us – and all of us together – to not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the faith that God has assigned.

Paul is not telling us that we're worthless – he's just telling us to be honest in how we see ourselves, and I think, in how we see others. I've heard explained as: “Being humble doesn't mean thinking less of yourself, it means thinking of yourself less”.

If we're honest in how we see ourselves, and how we see others, then we will very quickly see that we are all very different people, we have different talents, different interests, different skills, different priorities and so on.

And that's okay: *“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”* (12:4-5)

Paul then says that *“We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”* (12:6-8).

There are similar passages in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and in his letter to the Ephesians (4:11) (1 Cor 12:7-12, 12:27-28).

While I don't think those lists are comprehensive ones, one thing that strikes me is how little overlap there is with the typical church roster.

Many things are possible or practical though, only because of how organised the church has become. We need the doors to be unlocked and the lights turned on, we need to be welcomed and we need offertory counted, we need services to be prepared, singing to be accompanied, the scriptures read, sermons preached, prayers prayed, and the website updated, and the newsheet prepared, printed and delivered and posted, and we always need do pastoral care for each other, and have proper governance, and ensure that we're insured, and that bills are paid and all the rest of it.

And it would be really nice if there were always a perfect match of people and roles or roster slots or needs, but we aren't perfect and there aren't always enough of us anyway.

Often we find that things don't always work out nicely, and we struggle to get some things done, and sometimes we find ourselves operating outside our comfort zones.

Of course, we should all be supportive of people who are outside their comfort zones too. And be prepared to give them a break or help them or even takeover from them. As we were reminded last month, Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden is light – let's make sure where not putting any more burdens on ourselves or each other than we need do.

But while we're thinking about all those things we need for the church to function as an organisation in modern day society, we need to make sure we don't skip the other things Paul writes about here in his letter to the Romans, or in his letters to the Ephesians and the Corinthians.

We need to find and explore and use the gifts of prophesying or preaching, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy. These are great things to be doing as part of the church, but often we fail to explore those things because we're more concerned about the day to day mechanics of it all.

We are blessed here at St Ives Uniting with the gifts that we have and share. We should make sure we acknowledge and appreciate those gifts and encourage the people who have them. I certainly feel it. I know I'm

encouraged by being part of the life of the Church in St Ives, people encourage me all the time. Sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, maybe sometimes even subconsciously. But I hope others are encouraged by being here too, and I hope others experience and appreciate that encouragement too.

Often, we will get tied up in the routine of it all, of the weekly and monthly and yearly cycles of the church. We need to get things done by certain times and dates... and it's easy for the encouragement, and the exhortation to slip away. And for being compassionate and generous and cheerful to slip away too. Things can so easily become a duty rather than a joy.

In all things we should be following Jesus' commandment "to love one another". We should be doing all the things we do out of love – love for Jesus, and love for each other – not out of duty.

Paul says as much in the next few verses of Romans 12 after this morning's reading – he writes in verses 9 and 10, "*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love...*"

Sometimes people think of church congregations as organisations or corporations. Sure enough, in many ways we are required to act like companies – workplace health and safety or employment law or whatever, but really, a congregation is not a company where we can rate our performance on price/earning ratios or returns on investment or anything.

And sometimes people think of congregations more as clubs – but it's not simply a Jesus fan club – though I hope we all are fans of Jesus.

It's not a social club either – but we should be encouraged to be social, to have fellowship together.

And nor is it a book club either – even though I hope we're all taking time to read history's greatest best seller.

Although all these things might describe aspects of what we do as a congregation, we are not a corporation, a fan club, a social club nor a book club – we are the body of Christ.

And, as the body of Christ, we need to be Jesus' hands and feet and eyes and mouth and heart, to each other, to all the people of St Ives, and all the people of the world.

And to do that, we need to turn to Jesus, follow his ways, and offer ourselves to God, as a living sacrifice, so that we may be transformed.

To the glory of God.

Always.

Amen.