

Epiphany 1

I take as my text today, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And 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.

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer."

This is another one of those marvelous Epistle passages from St. Paul, this one from the 12th chapter of his Letter to the Romans. And, yes, I do often repeat particular sermons, though with some revisions, as with this one, one that delves into our own sacrificial relationship with God.

What we have experienced over the years as a parish, as a Christian family, as individuals; what we have accomplished; and our hopes for this new year, all connect us with this passage, in particular, the first two verses.

If the words have a familiar ring to them, it's because we hear them paraphrased in the Eucharist, during the Prayer of Consecration:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...

In just five verses, St. Paul transitions us from the Old Testament sacrificial system to a wholly new concept of sacrifice in the New Testament, a revolutionary concept that not only redefines sacrifice but also introduces us to another concept: the Christian Ethic.

This new concept of sacrifice under the New Covenant is revolutionary in that it is a *living sacrifice*. For us, the process begins when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, accept God's Grace and his unfathomable Love, declare our faith and submit ourselves to baptism where we are made children of God and become joint-heirs with Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Spiritually, we die unto sin through Baptism but are reborn at the same time, individually indelibly marked as a child of God. This rebirth and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross come together to make it possible for us to be *living sacrifices*.

As *living sacrifices*, we fall under the Christian Ethic which Paul defines under three broad principles:

The dedication of the whole of our lives to God's service;

The conforming of our will to the Will of God; and

The integration of ourselves as responsible members of the Body of Christ.

With these three principles, St. Paul illuminates and embraces the Christian concept of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

This stands in opposition to Greek thinking where the body is seen as being basically a prison for the soul.

For us as Christians, our bodies belong to God just as much as our souls. They stand as instruments through which the Holy Spirit works and provide personal expression for the soul.

The significance of this revolutionary concept of the body as a temple for the soul is brought home by the Incarnation and by the bodily Resurrection, both of which we affirm in the Creeds.

In the Incarnation God took our flesh upon himself to be born as man. In the Resurrection he assumed a glorified body, nonetheless real, yet spiritual.

In the context of the passage from his Letter to the Romans, Paul is saying that we should worship God with our whole being, whether it is in church or not. All that we are and all that we do should be offered up to God as an integral part of our worship.

True worship, according to Paul, is the offering of everyday life to God. It does not begin and end with Sunday services. It is with the totality of self that we should approach God in our daily lives, as well as in corporate worship: the offering of ourselves, an offering that requires a certain sacrifice — not a sacrifice that ends in death — but a *living sacrifice*, again, as we find in the Holy Eucharist during the Consecration:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...

This is truly a remarkable statement, not to be taken lightly. We should take pause to consider those words and what they mean — this whole concept of being a living sacrifice.

In Old Testament times, the essence of the sacrifice was not in the death of the victim, but in the *offering of life* to God, symbolized in animal sacrifices by the presentation of the victim's blood, for the blood was life.

Under the Old Law, we could not, indeed it would be impossible for us, to offer ourselves as *living sacrifices*.

However, through baptism we are in Jesus Christ and not subject to the Old Law, rather the Law of Love, and, therefore, subject to new possibilities which include the capability of being *living sacrifices*.

In his text, Paul uses a word for worship that has its origin in Latin, a word that originally meant to willingly *work for hire or pay*, but since, over time, had come to mean *that to which one gives one's whole life*. Where used in the scriptures, it always refers to *service to and worship of God*.

Thus, we can begin to grasp Paul's thinking: as Christians, we must dedicate all that we are to God, our whole lives, all that we do, else we fall short of true worship in the Christian sense.

To accomplish this, Paul says that we must undergo a radical change, a transformation. The idea is expressed through two words in Greek that he uses.

The first that has as its root *schema*, meaning the *outward form that varies*, and the second that has as its root, *morphe*, meaning *the essential unchanging shape or element of anything*.

As human beings we do change outwardly over time; we're not the same today as we were when we were teens; we change, we even change our dress for different occasions. That, according to Paul, is our *schema*; our outward appearance; and it is continuously changing.

But there is also an unchanging element of our nature, the *morphe*, the inward personality. What we are inwardly today is the same as yesterday, the same always.

So, while we change continuously outwardly, we remain the same inwardly.

However, there is an exception. It is when we become Christians. It is then that something miraculous happens; we are inwardly transformed; our life is now dominated by Christ, by the Holy Spirit.

The very essence of this transformation is a self-surrendering faith in Jesus Christ, whereby we are changed in response to God's redeeming love and *are received by God into a state of acceptance*, bringing us peace and joy, and everlasting security.

The completion of this transformation from the world is a Christ-centered life, where we have been radically changed, and are no longer self-centered.

We undergo a renewal of the mind, not new in point of time, but new in point of character. We become new because the mind of Christ is now in us.

When we become Christ-centered; when Jesus Christ becomes the center of our life; we can worship God truly by offering every moment of our lives, every action to him.

Thus, changed by this faith in Jesus Christ, we become so united in his Life and Death that our hearts are joined with him in communion with God. Our slavery to sin is overcome, as the Spirit of our Lord enters into us, overpowering the sin in our flesh, and enabling us to merge our wills with the Will of God.

Self-surrendering faith, living sacrifice, and merging of wills: as members of the Body of Christ, we present ourselves as *living sacrifices* by responding to God's redeeming love, allowing our souls to be transformed through the Holy Spirit so that we may indeed offer both body and soul in self-surrendering Faith.

Thus, as Christians, we must be so, not by word alone, but by deed as well, seeking to know God's purpose for us and conforming our lives to fulfill that purpose, recognizing our responsibility and obligation to dedicate the whole of our lives to God as *living sacrifices*, and transforming our lives to merge our wills with his Will.

Accepting God's Grace and Love freely given, we can make this transformation, through corporate worship; through reasonable service to the Body of Christ; and, not by just resisting the temptations of the world, but by being godly examples within it.

When we become Christ-centered, we will be unshaken by events, not threatened nor shaped by the fashions and customs of worldly society; rather, through Faith we will continue in the example set for us by our Lord; through prayer and the strength of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to conform our wills to the Will of God; and our worship will be an offering, an offering of our very being, every moment, all that we do, to God, *as living sacrifices*.