

(Note that the printed sermon is taken from the 9am service. The podcast is from the 10:30 all age worship service)

I wonder what is the kindest or nicest thing someone has ever done for you? And what was your response?

Whatever it was what Paul speaks about at the beginning of Romans 12 is much greater. There he speaks of "God's mercy". That mercy of God has been the central theme of the letter and no where clearer than in 5:6-8 "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Here we see God's mercy, his love for us which we don't deserve. We see that great act of grace in the death of Jesus. This, if we are honest, is the greatest thing ever done for us.

In the light of this act of mercy Paul encouraged these Roman Christians to respond. 1. by offering their bodies 2. to be transformed in their minds and 3. to use their God-given gifts.

1. offer your bodies

This is there in v1. In response to the sacrifice made for them by Jesus Christ Paul urged them to respond by offering their bodies back to God. As Peter put it "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24), so they were to offer their bodies. This was to be their worship, their offering to God. Their bodies to be a spiritual sacrifice, not made in the temple but in the home, in the school, in the office or wherever. For as we help and serve others we do it not simply because we care for them but because of what God has done for us. So tomorrow morning as you fling your legs out of bed and sit on the side of the bed offer to God your lips to speak for him, your feet to follow the way of Christ, your hands to serve him as you serve others and your mind to think his will, which leads us neatly on to...

2. be transformed

A second response is there in v2. In the light of Christ's sacrificial love don't allow the world to squeeze you into its mould but approve God's will that is want to do God's will. This would happen as these early Christians were transformed through the renewing of their minds. As the Holy Spirit changed their minds so they would have the mind of God and think and will with his heart and mind. One of the ways that may have changed them as God wants us to change is so that their treasure would be in heaven not on earth - can you see the transformation so that it is God's desire not human desire that rules the mind of humans?

But it is the third that I wish to focus on more this morning

3 wisely use God's gifts

This is what we see in vs 3-8. With their renewed minds Paul urged them to have a right view of themselves and then in the light of that to play their part within the body of Christ.

The main thread in these verses is Paul's encouragement to them to use the gifts God has given them for the benefit of the whole body but we should not miss the rider with which he begins, there in v3 he says, "think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Here faith is the measure given in that they can do nothing without God and that is the sober judgement. Perhaps you've seen the drunk outside the pub who is willing to fight anyone that comes. Sober judgement helps us to realise we aren't superman and that without God we are nothing. Without his grace we are outside the kingdom. Without his gifts we have nothing to contribute to the body of Christ.

However we do have gifts given to us by God and, in view of God's mercy and recognizing God's ability and power to use us, we are to use those gifts. However I'm not sure we always do.

I remember some years back travelling back from London to Oxford on a coach. I picked it up at Marble Arch and it went along to Shepherd's Bush. I then expected the driver to take us up the short section of motorway to the A40 westway out of London but he didn't. We got to the next point to turn up to the westway and he carried straight on. We got to the north Circular but he didn't go up to Hangar Lane. He went on into Ealing. I said to Anna who was with me - this is crazy why is he going this way? But he was driving and I was a passenger so all I could do was sit. Besides I know they have radios and can be in touch with the HQ and get instructions on road traffic and so on. So we went on through Ealing which I do know having lived there for four years. "I can't believe it," I said to Anna. "Surely he isn't going to try and get onto the Western Avenue at Perivale." But he was. So we queued, "crumbs," " moaned to Anna "I could have told him what the traffic would be like here." as you can see I'm a very patient traveller! As we sat in the traffic I said to Anna, who was probably getting fed up with me moaning but is too nice to tell me, "he should turn along Ruislip Road and go up through Greenford." "Why don't you go and tell him then?" she asked. "Well it's nothing to do with me," I said, which patently wasn't true. "I mean he's up there in control and I'm just passenger. I can't do anything." Just after that the driver stalled the engine in the traffic and I turned to Anna and said "and if he thinks I'm getting out and pushing he's got another think coming. I'm only here for the ride!"

I think there are parallels with that bus and the church. I think that many of us when it comes to church have a view of the church a bit like a bus and I'm not just thinking of this church. I have been a member of many churches during my Christian life and spoken to people from scores of others and everywhere is the same. For many the church is a bit like a bus. We pay our fare, or drop our coins in the collection plate sit back in our seat and that is it. We may not always like the direction we are being taken in. We may not like this hymn or that initiative, this reading or that sermon but it is nothing to do with us. He's up there controlling and I just sit here. And anyway he has a direct link with H Q. so he should know what he's doing. And as for me getting out and pushing or helping move the church forward well you must be joking that's not why I got on the bus.

However, Paul's view is different and it is here we need to listen to the word of God as God speaks to us in v5 of his church as a body and each of us belonging to the other.

That's the image we have here from Paul. We are all part of the body the family the church we are all involved. We are not passengers.

This picture of the church serving each other is not a picture of a bus. If you want a different picture let me suggest it is the picture of a boat. So another story. A few summers ago we were on holiday in France and I went white water rafting with the children. At least they went in one boat with the young people and I went in one of the older people's boats. Children can hurt can't they! Anyway there were eight in each boat plus a guide. We were given our instructions as to what the commands meant. Forwards and back paddle was easy enough. Paddle right meant just the four on the right paddle and paddle left the opposite. Stop meant stop and crash meant dive into the middle of the boat because we were about to hit something and might be thrown out, and indeed two of the guys in our boat did get thrown out. But the point was we were all involved it wasn't a matter of just a few paddling. We all paddled and we put every thing into it. Yes it was a very bumpy ride and at times our paddles knocked against each other but very quickly working together we began to grow as a team. So that when the guys fell out of the boat it was as a team we hauled them back in. That is a much better picture of the church where each and every person, through being joined to Christ, is joined to each other and is involved actively in the life of the body. It is not a case of he's up there let him get on with it.

So what does this means for us? It means that all of us who count ourselves followers of Christ are called to serve in the church and in the world. That means all of us without any exception. Yes God can use you and wants to use you. We are not on a bus sitting back and enjoying the ride we are in a boat and we are all paddling.

The point Paul was making was that each has gifts and those gifts are given by God to be used - that is the point of them, that we use them.

During the break after Christmas I was in our lounge at home, doing a jigsaw and listening to a CD when my son Philip came in. "That's what I like to see," he said. I realised that he had given me the jigsaw and the CD and was pleased I was using both. The regular refrain in these words here is "If a man's gift is... let him use it". God's gifts given to be used. But given to be used for the benefit of the body, the church. Look again at v5, "so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Can you see that - we belong to each other and our service, the use of our God-given gifts is to the benefit of each other? Are you using that gift which God has given you?

And note the gifts as they are set out in vs 6-8.

They are different, some are spiritual, prophesying. Some are practical giving. Some may put us in the limelight such as teaching or leading and others put us in the backroom serving or showing mercy. But they are there and they are to be used. We may think I'm too young or I'm too old. We may think I've done my bit already or I'm too new to do my bit. No the passage makes it clear each of us in the body has a part to play.

Now as I look around I thank God that many of us are involved and are using our gifts. Perhaps some of us are being asked to do too much but I want simply to pass on the word of God which calls each person who is a member of the body of Christ to play his or her part using the gifts God has given us. Next month we will be thinking in our services a little more about this and helping us to see where there are opportunities to serve and what the different roles involve but today it is sufficient to point out the reality that through the mercy of God we belong to one body and the responsibility in the light of God's mercy to use the gifts he has given us for the benefit of that body.

In view of God's mercies - the Christian life is to be a grateful response to God's mercy show us in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is to be a eucharist - a thanksgiving for what God has done for us. A thanksgiving in which we daily offer our bodies that they may serve and honour God. A thanksgiving where we daily allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds that we see and think with the mind of God and where daily we thank God for the gifts he has given us by using them for his glory and the building of his church.