

“DEATH IN THE POT?”
2 Kings 4:38-41; Romans 12:1,2

That was an interesting little story we read from *2 Kings* this morning. It’s one of those odd episodes that are dotted around the Bible that seem very bizarre and you wonder what on earth they’re there for. We read it this morning for two reasons, really. Firstly, it’s good to hear all sorts of Scripture read in church so that we get to hear even the bits that don’t initially appear to have a lot to say to us. Secondly, some of you may know that Ian Bunce, who was due to take part in Liz’s induction service, was intending to preach on that passage. I have no idea what on earth he was going to say about it – especially in the context of an induction service – but I thought it was worth hearing the story anyway.

I did hear it preached on once, though, in a brilliant and dramatic way. I was at a conference on preaching up in Edinburgh back in 2002. We were there from Monday evening to Thursday evening and basically all we did was listen to some of the world’s great preachers and attend a few workshops and seminars about preaching. (“A pity you didn’t listen, then,” I hear you saying.) Now the final session on the Thursday evening began at 7.30pm. By that stage we had listened to twenty four sermons over the course of the conference and we had three to listen to in this final session. The very last sermon of the conference was to be preached by the Revd Dr William Augustus Jones Jr, Pastor for over forty years of Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn. He stood up to speak at 9pm and announced his text as *2 Kings 4* (he had changed it from earlier in the week).

Now the good Reverend was a venerable black preacher who had brought with him to Edinburgh his “Amen Corner” – a couple of dozen members of his congregation who would encourage him by shouting “Amen! Hallelujah! Preach, brother, preach! You tell ‘em, Bill!” and so on as he spoke. He had a voice that made Barry White sound like a soprano and a delivery that would have graced the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. He began slowly and lugubriously, with the kind of almost musical cadences in his voice that characterise black preaching: plenty of rhetorical flourishes (he kept repeating “*Death in the pot*” in his amazing gravelly voice) and over half a century’s worth of pulpit experience behind him. As he spoke he became more animated and his delivery increased in terms of volume and speed. He preached for the best part of an hour and we were spellbound. It was absolutely brilliant! There was enthusiastic applause at the end and people realised they’d missed their supper and their trains, so enthralled had they been. I thought it was the best sermon I’d ever heard.

But do you know what? Apart from the four words, “*Death in the pot*”, I can’t remember a single thing he said or a single point he made. I’ve no idea what he was on about nor how he applied that story to living as a Christian in the twenty-first century. I loved the performance, but it made no difference to me

whatsoever. And that's not particularly the fault of Revd Dr William Augustus Jones Jr. It's so easy to listen to stuff – to read stuff – and to revel in the expression, the style, the illustrations, even the *soundness* of the preaching, that you completely miss the point of what's being said. I always remember an old lady at the church where I was brought up – where the preaching was nothing if not sound (and often very long!) – commenting after a sermon by a visiting preacher who had expounded long and hard on some obscure point of doctrine which it was vital we clung to (or we weren't proper Christians). “Ooh, that was good,” she said. “Very deep, very deep! It must have been good. I didn't understand a word of it, but what a good preacher!” I was a young person then, but with hindsight I think he must have been a rubbish preacher if he couldn't make himself understood. (I think I may just have sounded my own death-knell there!)

God's word – read or preached – has to make a difference. It's powerful stuff. And if we read it or listen to it without it having a transforming effect on our lives, then something is very wrong indeed. That's what Paul is getting at in the verses we read from his *Letter to The Christians in Rome*. Chapter 12 begins with the words, “*Therefore, I urge you ...*” Paul has just given them eleven chapters of good, solid teaching on what lies at the heart of Christian belief – and you can't get much more sound than Paul, can you? There's stuff there about sin and salvation that is as good as you'll ever get. (Well, of course it is – it's the Bible!) He talks about the mess the world's in and about how God has provided a way out of it. He answers questions about the nation of Israel and its role in God's plan of redemption for all people of all races. He links the stories of the great Hebrew patriarchs with the amazing new story of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. It's a manifesto for Christian belief down through the centuries.

And then he writes that great “*Therefore*”. And in a couple of short phrases he says, effectively, “Right, now that's got to make a difference. It's not just words: it's a call to action. You've got to let it change you.” The gospel as we know it has to have an effect on us. It's not just an excuse to come together and sing nice songs. It's not just a pretext to form another social club. It's life-changing, mind-blowing, world-shattering truth – and you've got to live your lives by it. Some of you were here last weekend and heard some truly magnificent preaching from Steve Brady. Many of you have sat in this and other churches and heard sermon after sermon proclaiming God's word. You go to house groups, Beta groups, Bible study weekends and conventions and conferences – all kinds of opportunities for listening to and talking about what God is saying. One question to you all: Is it making any difference to you?

Paul writes here that we need to be “*transformed by the renewing of our minds.*” Is that happening? Are we really getting to grips with what this amazing gospel is all about – in terms of our daily lives? This is all about attitudes, folks. It's to do with the way you think, with what goes on in your minds, with where

your focus is. This isn't just about behaviour. Because, if your attitudes aren't transformed, if your mind is not touched, we're just talking about behaviour modification.

You may have heard of Pavlov's Dogs. Ivan Pavlov was a Russian behavioural psychologist who worked in the early twentieth century. His most famous experiment was with some dogs. When they saw food coming they started to salivate. Every time he gave them some food he rang a bell. After some time, he just rang the bell – and although there was no food, the dogs salivated when they heard it. B F Skinner, an American, did things the other way round with his rats. When they did something he didn't want them to do, they got a hefty jolt of electricity and soon learned not to touch certain things. Now, we could try and do that with Christians – just scare them (or reward them) into certain ways of behaving. But that's no good. It doesn't then link with any kind of reasoned idea of why to do it. Those dogs and rats behaved in the way Skinner and Pavlov wanted them to – but, in fact, they had no idea why or what the point was, no conception of any purpose to it all. The eminent scientist Lewis Wolpert has recently written a book entitled *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief*. He's a kind of nice Richard Dawkins – an atheist, but interested in **why** humans believe things – and his book examines the idea that animals have no beliefs at all, even at the most basic level. Their lives are governed by instinct and the desperate need for survival.

We are not animals. So we don't simply modify our behaviour. There's no real depth, no real awareness of what we're doing and why, if that's all we're about. We are human beings – and, what's more, we're disciples of Jesus. We're going to be thinking very carefully next year about what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus, but let's start with one suggestion. Disciples of Jesus are those people who have allowed their minds to be renewed. That's where it's got to start. Forgive a short detour into Greek, the language in which Paul originally wrote this letter. In this verse (*Romans 12:2*), Paul writes “*be transformed*”. That is what the linguists call a “passive imperative”. An “imperative” is a command. If something is “passive”, it means it is done **to** you. In other words, what lies behind Paul's phrase here (actually in Greek it's just one word) is that transformation is something that is done to us: in this case by the Holy Spirit. He transforms us. But the imperative means that we are commanded to let him do that. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us by changing our attitudes. We have to ensure that our focus is shifted from the things that usually occupy our minds to Jesus – the subject of the last eleven chapters of Paul's letter.

Otherwise, Paul says, you'll end up being “*conformed ... to the pattern of this world.*” What's that all about, then? Well, let me read you two other translations of this verse. Firstly, from J B Phillips' translation of Paul's Letters entitled *Letters To Young Churches*: “*Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within.*” And then from Eugene

Peterson's translation *The Message*: "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit in without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out." Both of those translations capture the idea that this has to start inside. We need to be aware of what it is we are conformed to. The words we read say "the pattern of this world". The phrase that is probably closest to the Greek words is "the spirit of the age". Don't unthinkingly get carried away with the set of values and patterns of behaviour that characterise the wider world.

And those characteristics have pretty well been the same down through the centuries since Paul wrote this letter – and, indeed, since the beginning of time. Steve Brady used the phrase last week and it's the title of a fine book by Richard Foster – money, sex and power. People have always been driven by these things. Material things, short-term physical indulgence and a feeling of superiority – isn't that lurking around somewhere in so much of what we do, and so much of what is held up before us as stuff to aspire to. Flick through any glossy magazine, sit in front of the day-time chat-shows on television, read your newspaper supplements (especially the broadsheets – although they try hard to disguise it), and you'll see that today's role models are the rich, the physically (and therefore sexually) attractive and those who hold the reins of power in sport, politics, art, whatever.

And what do we – even as Christian disciples – aspire to? Financial security. Fashionable clothes. Smart cars. Big houses. Further and higher education. Now those things are not necessarily in themselves wrong. After all, there are places in the Old Testament particularly where such things are taken to be signs of blessing from God. But that's only when God has first been the focus of his people's worship and faith. We are so easily seduced by these things, by these values, by these aspirations. And then we end up no different from anyone else in our world. We have nothing distinctive about our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, other than a bit of behaviour modification on Sunday, when we've trained ourselves to go to church because we get a warm buzz from it.

That's not what it's about, writes Paul. Don't be squeezed into that mould. Don't become so adjusted to the prevailing culture that you are unthinkingly a part of it. Don't be seduced by the spirit of the age. Allow that transformation to take place. Shift your focus back onto Jesus. Let the Holy Spirit work in your lives to enable you to **think** about what you're doing. And that's nothing to do with intellectual ability, with some deep philosophy. It's to do with asking such questions as: Why am I really doing this? Who is this really for? Where is God in this? That's what Paul means by "the renewing of your mind." [If you really want to grapple with this there's a great book by Harry Blamires called *The Christian Mind* which explores all this, but it's a bit heavy going and rather dated. He's written a much more recent and equally thought provoking book called *The Post-Christian Mind*, which is also well worth checking out.]

It's all to do with changing attitudes, with thinking differently. And once you start to do that, your behaviour will begin to change. Jesus told the Pharisees on one occasion that what makes a difference is not what goes into our hearts, but what comes out – in other words, it's our attitudes that prompt our actions and words. In *Matthew 15:18,19* he says, "*The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*" Sort out your attitudes, have your minds transformed, think about it all.

To go back to where we started this morning, there's no point sitting here week by week if it doesn't make any difference, if you don't allow God's word to affect your thinking. If you don't respond, then the people who stand up here week by week are wasting their time. The Revd Dr William Augustus Jones Jr gave a bravura performance in that pulpit in Edinburgh five years ago, but as far as I was concerned, it was waste of time in every way other than great entertainment. In his letter towards the end of the New Testament, James writes, "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*" Don't just listen. Think – and then you might find yourself acting like a true disciple.

Discussion notes in next page

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I once heard the Old Testament reading preached on. I thought it was the best sermon I'd ever heard. But I can't remember a single thing about it. It's so easy to listen to and read the Bible, and to revel in the expression, the style, the illustrations, even the *soundness* of the preaching, that we completely miss the point of what's being said. God's word – read or preached – has to make a difference and have a transforming effect on our lives. That's what Paul is getting at in the verses we read from his *Letter to The Christians in Rome*. Chapter 12 begins with the words, "*Therefore, I urge you ...*" Paul has just given them eleven chapters of good, solid teaching on what lies at the heart of Christian belief and then he writes that great "*Therefore*". He says, effectively, "Right, now that's got to make a difference. It's not just words: it's a call to action. You've got to let it change you." The gospel as we know it has to have an effect on us.

Paul writes here that we need to be "*transformed by the renewing of our minds.*" Is that happening? Are we really getting to grips with what this amazing gospel is all about – in terms of our daily lives? This is all about attitudes. It's to do with the way we think, with what goes on in our minds, with where our focus is. This isn't just about behaviour. Because, if our attitudes aren't transformed, if our mind is not touched, we're just talking about behaviour modification, where's no real depth, no real awareness of what we're doing and why.

In this verse (*Romans 12:2*), Paul writes "*be transformed*". That is what the linguists call a "passive imperative". An "imperative" is a command. If something is "passive", it means it is done **to** you. In other words, what lies behind Paul's phrase here (actually in Greek it's just one word) is that transformation is something that is done to us: in this case by the Holy Spirit. He transforms us. But the imperative means that we are commanded to let him do that. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us by changing our attitudes. We have to ensure that our focus is shifted from the things that usually occupy our minds to Jesus – the subject of the last eleven chapters of Paul's letter.

Otherwise, Paul says, you'll end up being "*conformed ... to the pattern of this world.*" "*Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within.*" (J B Phillips). "*Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit in without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.*" (Eugene Peterson) The phrase that is probably closest to the Greek words is "*the spirit of the age*". Don't unthinkingly get carried away with the set of values and patterns of behaviour that characterise the wider world – money, sex and power. We are so easily seduced by these things, by these values, by these aspirations. And then we end up no different from anyone else in our world. We have nothing distinctive about our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, other than a bit of behaviour modification on Sunday, when we've trained ourselves to go to church because we get a warm buzz from it. Let the Holy Spirit work in your lives to enable you to **think** about what you're doing. And that's nothing to do with intellectual ability, with some deep philosophy. It's to do with asking such questions as: Why am I really doing this? Who is this really for? Where is God in this?

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you understand by being "*conformed to this world*"? In what ways does that show itself? In what ways are Christians conformed to this world?
2. What does Paul mean by "*the renewing of your mind*"? How does that happen?
3. Why is the mind so important? Why has Christianity often tried to discourage thinking about faith?
4. In what ways can Christians show that they have different attitudes from those around them who are not Christians?
5. Read *Matthew 15:1-20*. What is Jesus saying here?
6. Has anything stuck in your mind about this study/sermon? What? Why? What are you going to do about it?