

Crawling off the Altar? Romans 12:1-8

I hope you'll agree with me when I say that something exciting is happening at the moment in the life of this church. God has been speaking to a number of people.

I hope it isn't just me that feels this sense of excitement. I hope you share it too.

This series wasn't planned, God has led us each week to follow on....

1. Beginning a fortnight ago with Joshua and the people of God preparing to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. A call to 'move out from our positions'
2. Last week Ian spoke about consecrating ourselves (as Joshua and the people of Israel did) and how we will be utterly amazed at what God is going to do.
3. And today, following on again from that call last week to recommit our lives, we find in Paul's letter to the Romans that we're urged to 'offer our bodies as living sacrifices'

Romans 12 v1 begins 'therefore'. I was taught whenever we see therefore, we look back to see what it's there fore. A whole load of stuff has come before in the previous eleven chapters of Romans, and this is a pivotal point in the letter.

It's easy to forget that Romans is a letter (albeit a very long one). It's probably the one thing written by Paul that we treat least like a letter. Often seen as a textbook of theology. It contains some wonderful theology, but it was written by a real person, to real people, in a real place, to address real issues.

All that Paul has dealt with previously is considerable – no wonder we think of it more as a text book. Imagine receiving the first 11 chapters of Romans when you open up your emails tomorrow morning, or sit down with the post over a cup of tea. It's all in there: the human condition, sin, judgement and punishment; salvation and assurance. Not a quick or light read.

But let's not get bogged down in Romans 1-11 this morning. (We can tackle that another time when we've got a year or so spare!!) But just listen to the last few verses of chapter 11:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.
How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out.
Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?
Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory for ever! Amen.*

Paul basically bursts into song -as he writes- at the wonder of what God has done. As he writes to these Roman Christians about their salvation he's overwhelmed by it.

And that's what the therefore is there fore....

Because of all that God has done, because of his mercy (12v1) because of all that has happened, we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices...

And I feel that we have reached a therefore point in the life of the church.

God has done all kinds of wonderful things in our lives- both individually and corporately. Many of us could write way more than eleven chapters of how he's worked in our lives. (probably not couched in the sort of theological language that Paul uses, but none the less real) We could write more than eleven chapters of all that God has done in and through Wade Street Church. Sure, there's more to come, as we heard last week. But now we need to see what the implications are. We need to read on past the therefore....

Because of all that God has done for us in this place we should offer ourselves as living sacrifices...

What does it mean to be a 'living sacrifice'?

Let me reassure you that I'm not about to lay a whole load of guilt on us. I'm sure many of us do that to ourselves pretty effectively without needing more encouragement to do it from the front! I'm not urging us to get busier, in fact it might be that we actually need to give some things up.

I watched a rerun of one of Michael Palin's travel programmes not long ago. I can't remember which one, it wasn't around the world in 80 days. Anyway, whichever one it was he found himself in a desert area. A goat was to be sacrificed. In the interests of taste and decency the killing of the goat and the subsequent sacrifice were not actually shown as part of the programme. In an age that freely shows sex, violence, horror, sacrifice was seen as a step too far, as inappropriate viewing.

Sacrifice is an alien concept to us. Guess we get nervous around anything that's calling us to 'sacrifice' or even be 'sacrificial' we're not very comfortable around the notion.

But Paul was writing to a group of people who knew all about sacrifice. Any law observant Jew would bring along his dove or his grain or his bullock or whatever was required to the temple, and the priest would burn it on the altar, and that would be job done. It was a regular and accepted part of life.

But the shocking thing about Paul's image here is that it's a 'living sacrifice', and anything living has the potential to crawl off the altar. A dead pigeon isn't going anywhere, it had no choice in the matter. But something living is free to get up and walk away.

If you remember back to Abraham and Isaac, where God called Abraham to offer his precious son as a sacrifice (before actually providing a ram so Abraham didn't have to go through with it) - Isaac was bound - understandably, before he was placed on the altar. Abraham might have been willing to go through with it, but it's a fair bet that given the chance Isaac would have struggled free and legged it. After all, he wasn't the one willing to make the sacrifice.

But here there's no mention of being tied up against our will. Paul is talking about us knowingly and willingly climbing onto the altar, and staying there! We are not just making a sacrifice. We ARE the sacrifice.

Offer your bodies he says. When Paul talks about 'bodies' he means not just our physical body, but every part of our being. EVERY part....One's whole self. Not just the bits we want God to see, not just the bits we like, but every part to be offered to him. So it's not just skin, bone and muscle that climbs onto the altar, but our mind, attitude, intellect.... all is required to be sacrificed.

Sometimes we're more willing to sacrifice one bit than another aren't we. And I'm not talking about our spare tyre or the nose we've never liked. Some Christians are willing to give all that they have physically, but not to offer God their intellect. They work 'til they're ready to drop but don't necessarily want to think things through. Others are all discussion and debate but unwilling to get their hands dirty.

God, however, requires the whole lot.

This, Paul says, is your spiritual act of worship. Peter, writing his first letter, chapter 2 v5 says 'you also, like living stones are being built up into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' Again this spiritual thing. In both these cases the word 'spiritual' means 'reasonable'. This is your reasonable act of worship. Your carefully considered and deliberate act of worship. This is not just a spur of the moment emotional response, deciding to throw yourself on the altar. It is carefully and deliberately considered.

If you find all this sacrifice imagery is too difficult/distasteful listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase:

Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.

'Our everyday walking around life' Now I don't know about you, but sometimes I don't want God even to see my every day walking around life, let alone place it before Him as an offering, because I know it just doesn't measure up.

Take your routine life, your getting up, getting ready, rushing out to school, being mums taxi, cooking the tea, clearing up the mess, life and place it before God as an offering...

God wants every part of our being.

Joshua 3 v5 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you'

Many of us responded last week to renew our commitment – the next step on from that is to climb willingly onto the altar so to speak in a way that is considered and willing to include every part of our being, every part of our lives.

What does that involve for you?

As we've recommitted ourselves I believe God wants all that we are.

The wonderful thing is that normally the sacrifice is already dead, or about to be killed. Here as we offer ourselves, we actually come alive in Christ.

V 3 - Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...

Paul issues a warning to individuals not to get puffed up. After all its about what God has given you.

Although the warning here is to individuals, as a church we need to take note – we could easily fall into the trap of getting puffed up. People are talking about Wade Street Church. There's lots going on. You only had to be at the church meeting last week to be reminded of that. We could begin to

think of ourselves more highly than we ought. But that would be a big mistake. It's all from God – and he could take it away at any time if that's what he chooses.

So let's be very clear: We're not deciding to climb onto the altar so that we can go about building an empire that is Wade Street Church. Absolutely not. We're climbing onto the altar so that God can use us to reveal His love in this city.

A couple of weeks ago there was a meeting of Christians interested in 'ministering to the night time economy' in Lichfield. By which they mean having a Christian presence on the streets on Friday and Saturday nights to offer a listening ear, help and support for those who need it, a drink of water, flip flops to walk home in....

A police officer from Melton Mowbray, talking about a scheme being operated in her town, said I'm not a Christian, but when the street pastors (as they're called) go out on a Friday and Saturday night they are being Jesus to the people they meet. WOW! I don't think it'll be long before she is a Christian if she could recognise they were being Jesus.. She spoke about the integrity and love she saw in these Christians. She's got the message of the gospel, hasn't she??

As we think carefully and reasonably about offering our whole lives to God, as we willingly climb onto the altar and stay there, let's be sure that we're climbing on not to strengthen WSC, but so that we can reach out to the people we meet with the love of Jesus.

Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God –this is your spiritual act of worship.

Romans Chapter 12 forms a pivotal point in Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. As a result of all the doctrine that Paul has dealt with in the previous eleven chapters, he urges that the Christian's response is to offer oneself as a sacrifice.

'...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.' (12:1)

Sacrifice was part of the fabric of Jewish living, but here Paul is calling his readers to offer themselves willingly, in a considered fashion. The difference is that they are the sacrifice, they have the choice, they are alive, they are able to get up and walk away.

For Discussion

What has happened previously in your life/the life of the church that encourages you to offer your self to God in response?

What does being a living sacrifice mean ?

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase says *'take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering'*. (The Message).

Think about the everyday bits you would prefer God not to have. How can they be included? What might need to change?

How do we get a balance between worshipping God and working for God? What should the balance be?

In both Romans 12v1 & 1 Peter 2v5 the word 'spiritual' means 'reasonable', that is considered, carefully thought out. Does that mean it is wrong to make an emotional response to the gospel? Does everything have to be thought out? Why/why not?

How can we make sure we do not 'think of yourself more highly than you ought'? (v3)