

## **Materials for Virtual Worship, Sunday 23 August Trinity 11**

### **Collect for 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Trinity**

O God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

### **Readings**

#### **Letter to the Romans 12:1-8**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. <sup>6</sup> We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; <sup>7</sup> ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; <sup>8</sup> the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

## **Matthew's Gospel 16:13-20**

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' <sup>14</sup> And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' <sup>15</sup> He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' <sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

## **Reflection**

**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.  
(Romans 12:2)**

How often have you heard people say?

'I have my ethics'. 'I've got ethics'. 'I only buy ethical coffee'. 'We all have our ethical differences.'

If you think about it, these are all very odd things to say, common place as they are. All these statements suggest that ethics or knowing what is right and wrong are sort of additional 'things' we

add to life and although we may not agree as to what is right or wrong, as individuals we think we know. We have our ethics.

There are several problems with this. Do you really know what your ethics are? Are these ethics Christian?

A few years' ago, my eldest electrical engineer daughter asked me to conduct a seminar on professional ethics for electrical engineers and technicians. I was to cover the ethics of dealing with clients, manager-employee ethical relationships, standards of installation, materials (when is a perk not a perk?) and so on. But before I focused on these so-called ethics, the question I posed the delegates was: what are your personal ethics? how do you know they are right? What are the principles which underpin them?

It was as if I had dropped a bomb of uncertainty into their otherwise ordered lives. What had seemed obvious and self-evident to them before, suddenly evaporated.

The truth is that for many people ethics are no more than the customs and general culture of the present time and these are seen to evolve perhaps even 'progress' over time. In our present culture the greatest development has been the formulation of human rights and these have transformed our daily life as they have been absorbed into law. Today, for instance, is International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, for in our present culture we regard slavery rightly as a heinous disregard of human rights and dignity.

But in fact, it is to several influential and committed Christians in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that we owe the abolition of slavery – amongst them William Wilberforce, Charles Spurgeon and John Wesley. Now what is special about these reformers is that they were prepared to sacrifice their reputation not because of their ethics, but because of their faith. Yes, they regarded slavery as unethical, but their primary

motivation was simply and fundamentally that slavery was against the will God and the order of creation.

Had they acted on the ethics of their time they would have done no more than conform to generally accepted views. This is why I think we can say, there is no such 'thing' as Christian ethics, as shocking as this may sound, but there are Christians who act ethically.

This is the message of St Paul in chapter 12 of his Letter to the Romans. This extraordinary thought should disturb us, it should force us to be much more conscious of how we think and behave. You might say, 'But don't we have the Ten Commandments and Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount as our Christian ethical principles'. That is so, but we must very careful not to treat them as simply things or rules we just do. That, says St Paul, is to be 'conformed to this world', that is being seen to be good in accordance with current ethical fashion of society or the Church, but that is not enough.

What makes St Paul's exhortation so explosive is that it turns everything we think about ethics upside down. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth, called this passage from Romans, 'The Great Disturbance'.

Let's ponder on three radical points St Paul makes here:

First, we are not to be conformed to the world but transformed by having a mindset that places the will of God first and society second. What does that *really* mean? Well of course as no one can ever fully claim to know the will of God, it means that our life is one of constant striving, reflecting, praying and questioning. It means no-one can claim to have absolute moral truth; we see the terrible consequences of this when a person, a church, a society claims to have this.

Secondly, the Christian life is to be a 'living sacrifice'. Now we must be careful here not to assume that this just means acting sacrificially for others, however noble this might be (e.g. joining the armed forces or as a charity volunteer). What Paul is suggesting is something much more radical and that is the transformation of oneself to be acceptable to God *first*, for then and only then can one begin to live the ethical life. The model we have, of course, is Christ in his pain and joy of carrying out God's will.

This is why Karl Barth said that God's grace is the 'enemy of everything'. Being a living sacrifice means having to transform ourselves, society and even church, and not to conform to the world.

Finally, therefore each of us must respond to God's grace according to our own personal gifts. What a leveller and liberation this is. We are not all the same, we are not seeking conformity – for it does not make you a better or more ethical Christian to work in an emergency service saving lives after an earthquake rather than being a constant friend or a generous donor.

This is what St Paul means when he says that we are members of the 'body *in* Christ' (12:5). For as soon as we start thinking that we are morally superior or even inferior to one another, then we are judging ourselves by the standards of the world.

St Paul's ethics of disruption must have emerged from his encounter with Peter and the early Christian community. We know Paul and Peter did not always see eye to eye, Peter was far from perfect. And yet he was the one whom Jesus chose to be the rock of the Christian community. Peter's gift was - despite his impetuous nature, his naivety, even his disloyalty – his steadfastness to know the will of his teacher and guide and to be transformed by him and not to conform to the fickleness of the world. He did not 'have' ethics, he had faith.

*Michael Wilcockson*

## Hymn (Gradual) King of Glory, King of Peace

- 1 King of glory, King of peace,  
I will love thee;  
and that love may never cease  
I will move thee.  
Thou hast granted my request,  
thou hast heard me;  
thou didst note my working breast,  
thou hast spared me.
  
- 2 Wherefore with my utmost art  
I will sing thee,  
and the cream of all my heart  
I will bring thee.  
Though my sins against me cried,  
thou didst clear me;  
and alone, when they replied,  
thou didst hear me.
  
- 3 Seven whole days, not one in seven,  
I will praise thee;  
in my heart, though not in heaven,  
I can raise thee.  
Small it is, in this poor sort  
to enrol thee:  
e'en eternity's too short  
to extol thee.

*George Herbert (1593-1633)*

## Hymn (at Offertory) Meekness and Majesty

Meekness and majesty,  
manhood and deity,  
in perfect harmony,  
the Man who is God.

Lord of eternity  
dwells in humanity,  
kneels in humility  
and washes our feet.

*Oh, what a mystery,  
meekness and majesty.  
Bow down and worship  
for this is your God,  
this is your God.*

- 2 Father's pure radiance,  
perfect in innocence,  
yet learns obedience  
to death on a cross.  
Suffering to give us life,  
conquering through sacrifice,  
and as they crucify  
prays: 'Father forgive.'  
*Refrain*

- 3 Wisdom unsearchable,  
God the invisible,  
love indestructible  
in frailty appears.  
Lord of infinity,  
stooping so tenderly,  
lifts our humanity  
to the heights of his throne.  
*Refrain*

*Graham Kendrick (b.1950)*

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### **Post Communion Prayer**

Lord of all mercy,  
we your faithful people have celebrated that one true sacrifice  
    which takes away our sins and brings pardon and peace:  
by our communion  
keep us firm on the foundation of the gospel  
and preserve us from all sin;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.