

Mission
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Reverend Rebecca Newland
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Romans 12

The second of two talks first given to the Synod of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn in September 2011 and represented to the congregation of St Philip's.

In my last talk I said that the first and most important task of the church is to tell the story of our Risen Lord for it is a story that changes minds and hearts. It is a story that transforms relationships and communities. In this talk I want to concentrate on who is telling the story – that would be you and I. We are all witnesses to this story - in our life, in our words and deeds. We are the 67th book of the Bible. It is said we are a walking theological statement before we even open our mouths. That should give us all food for thought. Unfortunately image does matter. People read our lives, our actions and our words and believe they know what being a Christian means. This is why Philippe was such an inspiration. In life, word and deed he proclaimed Christ as Lord and truly made a difference in the place he lived.

If we are the 67th book of the bible and people read us to know what being a follower of Christ is all about then friends the biggest transformation that needs to happen is in here, not out there. By in here I mean in our individual hearts and minds and thereby our actions and by in here I mean in our church communities, agencies and councils. Sometimes I think we are so focussed on changing the world around us, making sure people think like us or adopt our values, or turning other people into card carrying Christians that we forget to deal with the elephant in the room, our own lack of transformation.

Paul never made such a mistake. In chapter 12 he turns his focus from the gentiles and Jews, particularly those who have not heard the Gospel message or accepted it, to the Christian community itself. His words in this chapter act as a wake up call to those who have been nodding off during his long passages about sin and judgement, Jewish law and history. His language is strong and personal. He beseeches his listeners to surrender their bodies, that is their whole being, body, mind, heart and soul, as a gift to God. In response to God's grace and mercy in Christ we are to belong solely and only to God. This is in fact the only response to make.

In light of what he has previously taught we cannot present our achievements, our good works, our morals or our upright lives. We can't present our 2.2 children or our successful marriage. We cannot present our brilliant sermons, our carefully worded reports. We can't even present our reformed characters. All God wants is us, each one of us, complete and broken, to do with as God wills. This living sacrifice is the surrender of our wills to God where we renounce all claims to ourselves in favour of God's claim on us.

However, neither conversion nor surrender, although absolutely essential, is the end of the story. Once we become card-carrying members of the church we don't sign off on the dotted line and all that is left to do is to keep the church running smoothly so it can fulfil its mission, its purpose. It is true – we are redeemed, justified, by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is true that we are called to play our part in the life of the Christian community. But Paul

asks for something else. He is looking for transformation. He writes, “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*”.

The Greek word that Paul uses to describe this process is metamorphosis. It is the same word used to describe the transfiguration of Jesus in Luke and Matthew’s Gospels and it is the word Paul uses in 2 Corinthians when he writes, “*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*”. Metamorphosis is not only about appearances. It means a change in form. It is like our cells get mixed up in a different configuration and we come out seeing and acting differently. The orthodox believe it is so different we end up reclaiming our heritage as sons of God, beings made in his image. As St. Athanasius wrote “God became man so that men might become gods.” (And please excuse the gender specific language). For the orthodox this is the end of Christian living, not moral perfection and purity. Along the way our goal is to discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. But to get to this end our minds need to be renewed, that is converted and changed.

By this Paul did not mean a change in our intellectual understanding or abilities. He meant a change in our attitudes, our perception and our worldview. One way to think of our worldview or perception is to use a computer analogy. Just like a computer has an operating system that works away in the background so do we – a way of seeing the world and interpreting it. You cannot see the operating system but it affects everything your computer can do. Our worldview is just as hidden and just as powerful. To stretch this analogy further, Paul is not asking us to rearrange our desktop icons and choose a different screen saver. He is asking us to change the operating system so that who we **are** is transformed. A change that will not only transform the way we perceive and interpret reality but one that will transform what we do and how we do it.

The word used in the Greek gives the meaning that this is an ongoing and continual process. We don’t just do it once. It is a life-long process of de-enculturation and reorientation. In light of this it is worth pointing out that it is not we doing the work of transformation – it is the Spirit of Christ working in our lives. This is vital to keep in mind, for we can turn the renewing of our minds into another self-improvement quest, another ‘works’. Such a process of change, though laudable and at times useful, should not be confused with transformation. From the perspective of the mission of the church transformation is primarily God’s work in the midst of creation. Our job is to cooperate with this process. So perhaps at the least perhaps that means that everyday we have to start afresh, forget how we think the world works and reboot the system. At the very least we need to hold our perceptions and attitudes very, very lightly. I wonder how many of us are willing to let go of our world-views to that radical extent?

Some of our world-views are downright destructive of health and sanity. I think one worldview that is causing immense grief in the church is the one about business and success. Society is completely entrapped in the merry-go-round of endless programs and initiatives that people believe will somehow make a difference.

It goes at a relentless speed partly driven by technology that makes us think we have to do everything immediately. Instant messaging translated as the expectation of instant results in the workplace. I think we, the church, have mindlessly conformed our worldview to this one. I don’t know about you but there is such a packed calendar at our church – there are the big festivals or course but then there is Back to Church Sunday, Creation Sunday, the NCLS, Disability Sunday, Patronal festivals, special services and the rest. Then there are all the diocesan events, mission programs and a thousand emails a day (well that’s what it seems

like!). I know the lives of my parishioners are just as full and busy with their work and family requirements.

Friends, I think we have lost the plot and need a radical transformation of our minds. How on earth can we even begin to discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect, when we are too busy to shut up and listen?

Now this issue of business and frenetic activity is one of my pet issues. I have a few. It sounds like I might be on the right track. I can probably back it up with scripture but I could probably find other verses that back up an opposite perspective. Which leads me to the conclusion that even how I read and interpret the bible will be determined by some worldview to which I am conforming. It will be culturally and personally determined. Karl Barth was probably not the first to do so but he clearly pointed out that whatever way you go, whichever way you think, whichever way you cut it, you are still conforming to the world around you. He wrote, *"Our whole behaviour, always and to the worlds end, bears upon it the form of this world. We must not delude ourselves. There are no moral actions, such as love, or honesty, or purity, or courage, which have rid themselves of the form of this world".*

Pick any issue that we face in the church and as individual Christians. On any side of the issue we will find, if we dig deep enough, that our thinking is conforming to some cultural attitude or norm. Not only that, we will unfailingly decide who is right or wrong, who is one of us or not and who needs to be set right. We will find that our attitudes and consequent actions are nothing more than copies of those of the people we admire or respect, or worse are afraid of offending.

Just because we are Christians does not mean we are no longer influenced by the dominant stories around us. All of us are in this predicament – from the Bishop down to the 5 year old in Sunday school, from Anglo-catholic liberals to conservative evangelicals. And we cannot get out of this dilemma by thinking our way out of the old worldview and thinking our way into a new one because our thinking is always culturally determined.

So what is the answer?

There is only one way out of this dilemma. We look to the one person, the one being, who can unfailingly point us in the right direction. That person is Jesus Christ. Instead of copying others, the cultural values and desires around us we copy what he desires. We conform our lives to him. We reframe our worldview to be determined by his story. As Paul puts it later in chapter 13, *"put on the Lord Jesus Christ"*.

But this reframing, if it is to be truly transformative, does not come about through more thinking. Instead the renewing of our minds comes through the practice of loving devotion to God and others. I am going to say that again because I have made a quantum leap that you may not have noticed - the renewing of our minds comes through the practice of loving devotion to God and others. This was Jesus default position and he lived it with every step and breath of his being. It was also what he said was the first and most important commandment, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Paul knew too that the process of transformation and the practise of love were inextricably linked. When Paul outlines the attitudes and actions he would like to see prevail in a Christian community, attitudes like humility, sober judgment, unity, love, steadfastness, mutual affection and honour, hopefulness, perseverance, patience and peace, he wasn't just being descriptive. He was naming actions and attitudes that were all focussed on love for the other, actions and attitudes that would transform not just the lives of others but the one who loves in that way. Friends, transformation is in the practise of love. Our minds are renewed as we love and adore

God in prayer, meditation, contemplation and the careful reading of his Word. Our actions are changed as we are empowered with Christ's spirit to love as he loved.

To paraphrase the great Christian classic the Cloud of Unknowing, we can never know God by thinking about God. We can only know God by loving him. As we come to know God through love, we become more like his Son Jesus Christ who is his image. This is so simple it seems silly on one level. It is also completely mysterious and miraculous and made possible by the Spirit.

When I became a committed Christian I didn't know any of this stuff. At some point the story of Jesus that had been planted in my life began to come alive. I responded because I was desperate. I believed because I had nowhere else to go. The love of Jesus awakened my heart to possibilities beyond my imagining. But I thought it was all about doing and succeeding, of being moral, about being strong and capable. And that got me into a few more deep holes. My world-views have been particularly tenacious and difficult to move. Things began to truly change when I responded with love to the love of Jesus. As I have slowly and imperfectly practiced loving God and loving others as Christ loves me, my life, my relationships and consequently the lives others around me has been transformed. I am deeply grateful to God for this life-giving change in my life, this salvation of my being and how it makes it possible for me to serve God whom I now adore before all else.

The story of Jesus is a simple one but one that brings hope and new possibilities –to Philippe and Marcos, to you and me, to all nations. May we tell the story in whatever way we can and be living witnesses to Jesus' transforming love.