

By ceasing to question the sun, I have become light

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on 11th Sunday after Trinity, 27 August 2017.

Refs: Isaiah 51.1-6; Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..." Words in our second reading today, echoed in our post-Communion prayer: *"Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice."*

We often say these words but I wonder how easy we find them to speak, or are they quite challenging. Looking at that second reading from St Paul's letter to the Romans, you get a sense they open a new section in his letter. The context is very clear. In the first eight chapters, St Paul has been telling us that we can never earn God's love, however hard we may try. Of course we don't need to try because God's love is freely given to us. All we have to do is trust and receive. In that great passage from Romans Chapter 8, St Paul becomes quite expansive and poetic as he describes how God's love brings us hope – hope in suffering, hope for the whole world, hope that is eternal. In today's passage, he calls on us to respond with gratitude to this great love that God has freely given us. *"Therefore"* he says *"because of this, I appeal to you to offer yourselves to God as a living sacrifice"*. And so he goes on through chapters 12 and 13 to talk about how we can respond to the great love that God has given us.

I remember my Old Testament tutor at college reminding us this isn't something new. Throughout the Bible, it is always God's love that is given first, and we are called to respond with gratitude – not to earn God's love, but to respond with gratitude because God first loved us.

To offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, to God as a living sacrifice is a very challenging call. I'm sure I'm not the only one who finds myself at times reluctant, hesitant, a little slow to make that commitment. It's a bit like going into a cold sea. You hesitate for a moment before taking the plunge and throwing yourself in. Or when you're learning to swim, taking your foot off the floor for the first time and trusting the water will hold you.

That first step is vital. It could be very easy to spend our whole lives looking at Christian faith from the outside – questioning, analysing, exploring, but never actually coming in.

There is a teasing line in a poem by Thomas Merton, the spiritual writer, where he says: *"By ceasing to question the sun, I have become light"*. Only recently I realised what he meant. Clearly the sun represents God. While we are busy looking at the idea of God, questioning what we might believe about God, we remain outside. When we stop questioning and finally dive in, we become, as it were, part of God, personally linked with God – not just analysing and questioning, but actually experiencing God in our lives.

Sometimes Merton says it's good when we realise we don't understand God, because then we realise God is not an object to be analysed and understood but a Person to be experienced and loved. It's a bit like looking at a stained glass window from outside a church on a sunny day. It looks dark, difficult to make out and understand. But when you go inside the church, the window becomes bright and colourful and full of meaning.

I'm not saying we should stop questioning. I think we should continue to search and explore, but we can do so, as it were, from within, accepting that we don't know all the answers, that there's

always more to learn and understand, but that we are willing to love and trust and place our lives in God's hands.

It's a little bit like a couple getting married. It's the moment when they stop questioning, stop wondering yes or no, and make their vows, and surrender their lives to each other, putting their lives in each other's hands. It's that kind of decision – offering our lives to God – our gifts and talents, our minds, our emotions, our relationships, placing our whole selves in God's hands.

And St Paul talks about all those things in our reading today. He talks of offering our gifts and talents generously and wholeheartedly, but also with humility and self-awareness. Regard ourselves and our gifts with sober judgement, he says!

He talks of offering our minds – that our minds may be renewed and transformed by the wisdom and the compassion of God. What a difference that will make to the way we think about life and think about other people.

He talks of offering our bodies – meaning our whole selves – minds, bodies and emotions – that the whole way we feel – our attitudes, our instincts, our prejudices, our feelings – may all come under the transforming touch of God's Spirit.

And he reminds us that we are members one of another – so surely it's important to offer our relationships too into God's hands. And that includes our closest relationships. We should never feel our close relationships are in some way in competition with our relationship with God. I believe the opposite. It's when I am closest to God that I am also closest to those who are nearest to me.

But it also includes those who are far away from us. One of the consequences of being in a relationship with God is that we are therefore connected to every other human being. If you are an atheist, then you can be an isolationist if you choose. But if you are in a relationship with God, then you are therefore connected with every other human being, because every other human being is loved by God. And that's not easy. It can make following the news deeply distressing when we are reminded what other human beings are going through. When, for example, you see what is happening to the people of Yemen, it makes you upset, despairing and deeply angry at our leaders' and governments' failures to address it or even speak of it.

So offering ourselves and our attitudes to others and to God is not going to be easy. It's not a way to a comfortable life as indeed it wasn't for Jesus. Next Sunday, as we think of Jeremiah the prophet, we're going to think more about the times when it's difficult.

In the end it's all about trust. How much do we trust God in reality? That itself is a challenging question. One of things I like about Thomas Merton is his honesty. Although he was a full time member of a religious community, he confesses that he still found it hard to trust in God. In one of my favourite passages, he writes: *“Lord I have not lived like a contemplative. The first requirement is missing. I only say I trust you. My actions prove that the one I trust is myself – and that I am still afraid of you. Take my life into your hands at last and do whatever you want with it. I give myself to your love, and mean to keep on giving myself to your love – rejecting neither the hard things nor the pleasant things you have arranged for me.*

I identify very much with how Merton feels here: *“I only say I trust you. My actions prove that the one I trust is myself – and that I am still afraid of you.”* Do you feel like that? I know I often do. I remember once going on retreat, and my retreat guide asking me, “When did you lose your trust in God?” A challenging question. The rest of the retreat was about my recovering trust in God.

And this is where it’s so important for us to grasp the depth of God’s love for each one of us, so that we can respond, not only in gratitude, but also in trust, knowing that God does actually want the best for us. As St Paul himself says, God’s will for us, which we are seeking to discern, is good, acceptable and perfect – not scary, dangerous and damaging.

St Paul says earlier in his letter – *“In all things God works for good, for those who love him”*. We can entrust our lives into God’s hands because God is good, and although God may lead us through hard times, He always wants the best for us. Merton also reminds us that we don’t just offer our lives to God once and that’s it. We need to keep on doing so. As he says: *“I mean to keep on giving myself to your love”*. That’s realistic. This is not just one lifetime decision. Any time of change in our lives, a new year or a new season, or even a new morning, is a good time to offer ourselves afresh to God, and to place our lives in his hands.

If you’re like me, you may well find all this quite difficult and challenging! But the key is to grasp how deep and how great is God’s individual love for each one of us. That is what makes us able to know that we really can trust God, and that to place our lives in his hands is actually the best way to live.

Amen