

**Sermon for the Pandemic**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020**  
**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

[Exodus 1:8 – 2:10]; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Thank you for taking part in this service. Where-ever you are, anywhere in the world, you are most welcome. It's a strictly socially-distanced service with only members of my household taking part, but let us give thanks to God for the technology which has even in these strange times, allowed us to come together so much.

'Do not be conformed', says S Paul, in our reading from his letter to the Christians of Rome, 'Do not be confirmed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds'. These are some of my all-time favourite words in the New Testament. They are so easy to read - and yet they demand such great courage and offer such a prospect of changes to be almost terrifying.

But why courage for Romans? Well, first, because of what we are asked to set aside. Don't be conformed to the world, don't think like those around you, don't just passively accept what society presents you with, or what's on Twitter or TikTok or Instagram. Question your influencers. See things differently. Then, second, 'Be transformed by the renewing of your minds' – and the very submission which Paul resists in relation to the world, he requires of us in relation to God. We can't transform ourselves; we must 'be transformed'. It is God who renews our minds, God alone who can reshape our ways of thinking so that we – and Paul goes on to describe it: 'so that we discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect'.

Does that sound hard? Does that require courage? Oh yes. As Christians, I think we do try and often think we succeed in discerning the will of God. We think we know what is good and right and, in many ways, I am sure we do. But I believe that we touch only the surface. We are – and remember, every preacher preaches to herself – we are too busy in our

thoughts, too full of ourselves, to embattled very often, especially just now in the hardships of the pandemic, to allow ourselves to BE transformed. We try to do it ourselves. We might pray harder – but how often do we simply sit in silence before God? We like ourselves the way we are; of course, we do – and God knows, God loves the people we are. But do we really submit to God, allow God to transform us? Do we not act out of the identities we have, defend, and seek to increase? Are we prepared to allow our ways of being and thinking to be stripped away, like scales falling from our eyes? It is the saints of God who can do thus. Most of us simply end up with a better opinion of ourselves. And that isn't what S Paul had in mind at all. To be transformed by God requires courage indeed, nothing less than the courage to risk a change almost as great as that wrought by death.

Is change, then, always deathly? No, not at all. Change, true change, change brought about by being transformed by God is change which leads to life, new life, always. Just think about the world since Ash Wednesday – half a year away, and more than half a lifetime. First, coronavirus. I am not a medic or a politician, but it does seem to me that even a little more humility could have led to more information shared more quickly, resulting in more action and, perhaps, more containment of the virus. We never know what would have happened so we cannot be sure. Yet, as we look around us now, you can't help feeling that we might have managed better. But such humility would have required precisely the sort of transformation of which Paul speaks. Self is set aside: not, what will people think? but, how do I best help others? Not, we must hush this up; but, we must tell people now to protect them. Deep change, requiring great courage.

And then there's Black Lives Matter. How much transformation will that lead to and require? Is there something in Black Lives Matter about payback, about it being time for whites to endure oppression, cultural obliteration and discrimination? Is Black Lives Matter a movement to allow blacks to behave better than whites – a real movement of all sides being transformed? Will it lead to a new culture as regardless of skin colour as of hair colour – and would everyone want that? It's too early to say – but it is my prayer that every single one of us, whether we identify as mixed race, black, white, brown or otherwise, that every single one of us can seek to be transformed by God so that, as our reading goes on to say, we come to our true identity as the Body of Christ, each of us equally important and

equally valued in a divine society in which all are recognised as belonging and harm to you is harm to me.

It is a fearful thing to hope to be transformed – but this is the Christian hope. It is a hope we see realised in that brief moment of blessedness by S Peter in today's gospel. You remember, how Jesus asks the disciples who they say that he is? And suddenly, Peter knows the transformation of which S Paul speaks, just does discern the will of God, good, acceptable and perfect, before him in Jesus. Only he sees and only to him does Jesus say, Blessed are you. Peter never lost that moment. Of course, it didn't suddenly make him faultless; his transformation wasn't final because nothing is in this life. Always, always, God calls us, on and on, endlessly perfecting us, and, if we will but allow it, reshaping us into his likeness.

This summer, this half year, has been more challenging than any of us would have imagined in those short days before Lent. But now, let us only ask the Lord for grace to receive the challenge aright, to be willing to set ourselves aside and to be transformed by our Lord's most divine renewal of our minds, our hearts, our lives, that God's Kingdom may come.

May it be so...