

'Living Sacrifice' and Its Result
(From the Epistle: *Romans xii.16b. ff.*)
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

(King James Version-KJV) **16b** *Be not wise in your own conceits. 17* *Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. 18* *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. 19* *Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20* *Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. 21* *Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.*

(New International Version-NIV) **16b** *Do not be conceited. 17* *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18* *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19* *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20* *On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21* *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

(Also refer to the Epistles of The First and Second Sundays after the Epiphany: Romans xii:1-16a)

I've always loved the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, as it contains some very practical instruction for Christian behavior. The appearance of this down-to-earth passage toward the end of an epistle that has been filled with very high doctrinal instruction should tell us something about the ultimate purpose of all Bible learning: it is to bring about transformation and conversion. Its result in us should be visibly evident to all, or we have studied and learned in vain.

The last two Sundays --the First and Second after Epiphany-- contained the earlier portions of this same chapter. Verse one of Romans 12 set the tone for all three weeks: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.* Now it is the purpose of a sacrifice that it be complete and unconditional. If one imagines an Old Testament burnt offering, nothing whatsoever of the sacrificial animals was left after its immolation, except a pile of black, lifeless ashes. Sacrifices are non-refundable and non-returnable, because the item offered has been forever altered. There is no such a thing as a half-sacrifice, or partial sacrifice, just as there can't be any "half-death". It is all, or it is nothing. Having sacrificed, one loses all rights to the offering.

But the Christian's sacrifice of himself to God is *living*. His offering of his body does not require his physical death. He will indeed receive himself back from the altar of sacrifice, but it will also be in an altered state, a *new* self. Quoting 2 Corinthians 5:17: *...if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* Just as there is no resemblance between the animal sacrificed and the ashes that are the result, so the new man that emerges from his self-offering should be in a real sense unrecognizable.

St. Paul describes in this chapter the traits of the individual that has been thus transformed. We need to study them closely to see if we find them in ourselves. Once the roaring flames of the sacrificial altar have died down, and the victim has been completely consumed, what do we behold? All that is left is a set of lovely virtues --Christian virtues-- that if they are fully displayed and practiced are a description of the very best that men can ever be.

Before continuing, it is important to remember that there is one way in which the consequence of making of oneself a full offering to God differs from the results of a standard sacrifice: alas, the believer still retains a very potent measure of self which won't be fully destroyed until either physical death or the return of Christ: it is variously called the "old nature", or the "old man", or the "flesh". Since this principle remains active until the believer has surrendered this physical body, the earnest Christian is in constant warfare with it. Every day --yes, every moment-- he must re-offer himself, so that the power of Christ will once again reassert itself over this literally mortal enemy!

St. Paul eloquently describes a whole new set of character qualities that should identify the Christian. They include sincerity, purity, faith, empathy, and generosity. But I want to focus on one particular trait, only because the apostle repeats it, as if for emphasis:

-3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

-10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another (NIV: Honor one another above yourselves...)

-16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate (NIV: ...be willing to associate with people of low position). Be not wise in your own conceits.

It is, of course, the virtue of humility.

When I picture the exercise of Christian humility, I like to think of a Jack-in-the-Box toy. Perhaps they are no longer manufactured, but some of you will remember winding a little lever on the side of a colored box, to a musical accompaniment, until all of a sudden the box top opens and out pops...*Jack!*, a silly, wooden, rather impudent head on a long spring. It was sheer pleasure to stuff the little guy back in his box and close the lid over him. Let's liken "Jack" to "self": it is always popping up, unbidden, seeking attention, demanding a role, insisting on first place. The "flesh" and "Jack" are old friends. They are very much in love. But I find that I am constantly stuffing him back in his box. He pops up unbidden!

Furthermore, I must confess that I don't *like* doing what St. Paul is commanding: I am *not to think of myself more highly than I ought to think*. I am to set aside my insatiable hunger for personal honor and recognition in order to serve others. Even if I think I have some reason to hold myself in high regard, a reason that, after all, should only be shared by others, I am not permitted this luxury. I must stuff "Jack" back in the box repeatedly. But the Apostle makes the

matter even more acute: I must *honor others above myself*. If I can think of any honors to which I should be accorded, I should be prepared to bestow them upon others. The rich must regard the poor as if they were rich. The intelligent must treat the unintelligent with a dignity shorn of superiority and contempt. But even more than a matter of how one acts, it is one of attitude: I must honor them just as if they were more honorable than I: richer, higher, more esteemed, more privileged, more worthy. This is sore discipline, but it is the one commanded! If Christ so acted, why shouldn't we? Elsewhere, St. Paul puts it this way: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider (KJV: esteem) others better than yourselves* (Philippians 2:3).

Lastly, I must *be willing to associate with people of low position* (NIV). Now this gets nasty. The phrase in its original Greek form really means: "to suffer oneself to be carried away with lowly things; not to evade their power" (Thayer). To have to sit and politely, patiently listen to someone yammer away about something of no interest to me, some complaint which if the person would only use their common sense, they could have solved long ago? To be bothered trying to encourage and point to Christ foolish people who have ruined their lives and their families, who are dependent upon the state, substance abusers, who have made themselves thoroughly obnoxious in every way? To have to put up with the unpredictability and misbehavior of the mentally ill? And to really throw myself into all these, to be "carried away"?

"But Paul, I would much rather have the company of those that require no effort of me, whose company is pure pleasure. And you are asking me to actively seek the opposite: people who would be my last associates, with whom I have nothing in common, from whom I am likely to receive nothing in return." "Jack" --the self-- has, of course, reappeared, and he must be stuffed rudely back down where he came from!

Having examined humility, and taken note of all of the other virtues this wonderful chapter calls for, consider the very last sentence of the chapter: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good* (vs. 21). We are a small, lonely minority: God's people, trying to hold forth in very desperate times. There is a spirit of false fellowship abroad, which is the wicked world's way of salving its guilty conscience: "We are all modern, civilized people, members of the global village. You're cool. So am I. It's all good. Whatever your trip is, just do it, and have a good time, and be nice about it." It is a nauseating party of self-congratulation, fueled by a false peace, by prosperous times, by constant drug-like infusions from the media, a conspiracy to throw off God and all restraint, to pursue pleasure without bounds.

It is *evil*, and can only be *overcome with good*. The good of difficult and demanding Christian virtue, which can only be attained and practiced with the very power of God.

Lord, help us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.