

Psalm 72 Romans 12:1-5 St. Luke 2:41-52

Looking Up To Get Out

I received an email the other day...one of those forwards of forwards of forwards...this one came from my cousin in Saskatchewan. She often sends me little religious messages and more often than not, I must confess, I delete them. But for some or other reason I did not delete this one...I read it...and I want to read it to you this morning. Now, before I read it, a little disclaimer. I have no idea if the content of this email is scientifically correct...I checked it out on Snopes.com and the search engine couldn't find what I was looking for...so, who knows...it may be true or it may be false...but it is a neat illustration for what I want to say in the sermon this morning, so here it is...it is called the buzzard, the bat and the bumblebee.

First, the Buzzard. The email says that if you put a buzzard in a pen that is 6 feet by 8 feet and is entirely open at the top, the bird, in spite of its ability to fly, will be an absolute prisoner. The reason is that a buzzard always begins a flight from the ground with a run of 10 to 12 feet. Without space to run, as is its habit, it will not even attempt to fly, but will remain a prisoner for life in a small jail with no top.

Then there is the bat. The ordinary bat that flies around at night, a remarkable nimble creature in the air, cannot take off from a level place. If it is placed on the floor or flat ground, all it can do is shuffle about helplessly and, no doubt, painfully. Unless there is some slight elevation from which it can throw itself into the air, it will be landlocked.

And finally, we have the Bumblebee. A bumblebee, if dropped into an open tumbler, will be there until it dies, unless it is taken out. It never sees the means of escape at the

top, but persists in trying to find some way out through the sides near the bottom. It will seek a way where none exists, until it completely destroys itself.

Now, of course, the email uses the behavior of these three creatures to illustrate the behavior of people. In many ways, it says, we are like the buzzard, the bat, and the bumblebee. We are boxed in and imprisoned by all our problems and frustrations, never realizing that all we have to do is look up! Sorrow looks back, worry looks around, but faith looks up! It then ends with a final admonition: Live simply, love generously, care deeply, speak kindly.

The only problem with this application is that it really doesn't work, does it? I mean, as far as the buzzard, the bat and the bumblebee are concerned more is needed than just looking up, right? If they are not assisted from an outside source, looking up is not going to help them at all...and that's where my application comes in.

You see, when we read our Epistle lesson for today from Romans 12, it all sounds so wonderful, doesn't it? "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." The authors of the Prayer Book thought this was so great that they put it in our prayer at the Eucharist...remember? "And here (meaning at the Holy Altar Table) we offer and present unto Thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto Thee." But have you ever stopped to think what this means in practical terms? How do we actually do what St. Paul is asking us to do? How do we present our bodies as living sacrifices?

Well, perhaps we need to begin by defining the word ‘sacrifice’ and move on from there. The English word ‘sacrifice’ is taken from a Middle English verb which meant ‘to make sacred’...this was originally taken from the Latin word *sacrificium* which was a combination of two words, *sacre* (sacred) and *facere* (to make). Thus the ritual involved in making something sacred in this sense was usually some form of elaborate gift presented to a deity or spiritual authority. But the gift itself was dear to the person offering it. In other words, it cost them something...it wasn’t easy. In the Old Testament, a sacrifice involved the slaughter and the burning of the choicest and ceremonially clean animals on an altar dedicated specifically for that purpose. Now, there were all sorts of rules and regulations surrounding the offering of such sacrifices, but the point I want to make this morning is that the sacrifice was costly and it was permanent.

So, If we apply this sense to Romans 12:1, we could conclude that we are to give up ourselves (that which is very dear to us, right?) in a very physical and literal sense to God in such a way that we would be rendered sacred through this action. This act would be both costly (or difficult and certainly not easy) and it would be permanent. And somehow this act would involve giving up our natural or worldly behavior in favor of a behavior in sync with what it means biblically to be sacred...in other words, we are to give up our desire to do as we please or as the world pleases, so that might tune in to the ways of the One Whose will is always good, acceptable and perfect.

So, what St. Paul was probably saying at this point in his Epistle was that his readers needed to apply everything he had just taught in the first 11 chapters of the letter. You need to remember, dearest brethren, that biblical doctrines are never taught simply that

they may be known or studied...no, biblical doctrines are taught in order that they may be translated into practice. If we say we believe something we ought to live in a way that is in keeping with that belief, right? St. Paul said something similar to this in the third chapter of his Epistle to the Colossians. He wrote: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." In other words if you claim to follow Jesus you ought to walk just like He walked...as St. John said in his 1st Epistle.

But unfortunately, if you at the lives of those warm the pews in the modern church, this is not always the case, is it? All too often people say they are Christians, but their behavior shows that they are not. They behave like the world because they are conditioned by the world. Many non-Christians will tell you that they see very little difference between them and those who claim Jesus as their Savior and Lord...and then they will add the well-known bit of us being hypocrites. And perhaps they are right because here in Romans 12 St. Paul said we ought not to be conformed to this world, but we ought to be transformed so that we might live according to the will of God. In other words, our lives must reflect something different from that of non-believers if we are to be free of the charge of hypocrisy, don't you think?

But how? How? That's the Million Dollar question isn't it? How many Christians get to this point in the Epistle to the Roman church and fling their hands up in despair? You can almost hear them say, "Well fine. So I am to be a sacrifice. But what does that mean? And how on earth am I to be transformed? How does one renew your mind? I have tried so hard in the past to live a good life, but my life still doesn't look much different from that of my non-Christian neighbor. So, how, St. Paul? How?" Now, of

course, you've never asked such questions, I know, but I have, so please bear with me for a moment as I try to come up with a few suggestions to answer this question of 'how'.

Well first of all, I want to go back to that email...remember how it ended? It said, and I quote: "In many ways, we are like the buzzard, the bat, and the bumblebee. We are boxed in and imprisoned by all our problems and frustrations, never realizing that all we have to do is look up! Sorrow looks back, worry looks around, but faith looks up!"

Now, as cheesy as that sounds, it is partially true...at least if correctly applied...remember we are not fatalists, but active believers. But listen...St. Paul begins with these words, "I beseech you therefore brethren, *by the mercies of God...*" That, to me anyway, is the key...the *mercies* of God. But what mercy is he talking about? Well, the mercy of God towards lost and fallen mankind in the sending of His only Son into the muddle and mess of our world to do what we couldn't do...to pay for our sins by dying in our place...so that we might be reconciled to Him and to our fellow human beings. The Gospel screams out to us that God knows our weakness...God knows our frailty...God knows that without His help, we cannot be delivered from our slavery to sin, satan and death. However (and this is important) all too often we will acknowledge that we need the mercy of God to be "saved", and then (once we are "saved") we begin to live as if we can make it without His mercy...as if we can do it on our own. Now, dearest brethren, if we try to lived like that we are bound to fail. So, yes, we need to look up...constantly...we should not be looking at ourselves as if we could fix ourselves...ever...the Gospel tells us we could not and we cannot fix ourselves...we need the mercies of God day by day by day...

And, I believe, that for this reason, the Gospel also demonstrates to us the behavior of true humanity, in that Jesus...the Son of God, Light from Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father...Jesus willingly presented Himself as a sacrifice in more ways than one...He willingly made Himself of no reputation and came down from heaven, took on the form of a bondservant through becoming incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and came in the likeness of humankind (His own creation), all because of us and for us and for our salvation...and His entire life was one of total dependence on the Father through complete and absolute obedience. Our Gospel lesson hints at this side of Jesus...look at verses 51-52...look at what St. Luke wrote about Jesus. “Then He (that’s Jesus) went down with them and came to Nazareth, ***and was subject (or obedient) to them***...And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with both God and men.” Therein lies two parts of the example provided for us that may serve to help us understand what it means to present ourselves as living sacrifices and what it means to be transformed through the renewal of our minds...obedience and the methodical acquisition of wisdom. We know from other verses that Jesus constantly sought direction from the Father...He always spoke to Him and always listened to Him so that He might do, not His own will, but the will of Him Who sent Him – the will of His Father. Apparently, even as a young child He learned the Scriptures and learned to obey/apply them...His biblical knowledge at age twelve astounded the teachers of Israel! Now, that’s what we need to do. Be constantly connected with our Father...learn His Word and learn to do it...learn to apply it to our every day lives. That’s what renewing our minds is all about...rewiring our heads...reprogramming our thought patterns...to think in line with what God has

revealed to be His will and constantly look up to Him for help to what we learn. This is why St. Paul said that we should never think too highly of ourselves...as if we don't need God...as if we are better than others...sober thinking helps us to be mature in the way we see ourselves and in the way we behave towards others. It is very hard to be critical of others when you know yourself to be a mess too.

However, the sad truth is, very few Christians really know the Scriptures today. And one may well ask how then do they think their minds will be renewed so that they might do the will of God? How can they be obedient when they don't know what they ought to be obeying? "But reading the Bible is so difficult, Father...it always puts me to sleep." Well, perhaps that's got something to do with when and where you read it. Think on this: we read to our children when they are in bed because we want them to stay awake, right? No, we read to them so that they might fall asleep! So, why do we think we will stay awake if we study the Scriptures in bed? Priorities. That's what it is. And that's where the element of sacrifice comes in. If we actually are serious about following Jesus (which I guess is really the first thing we have to settle in our minds), we will set aside the many other so-called important things in our lives so that we may get to know Him and His will.

But we cannot do this in our own strength – that will only lead to legalism...or pure frustration. So, to get back to the email...if we think we can get out of whatever we are in by repeatedly trying harder we will fail in life...they say the first sign of insanity is doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. If we seek after happiness by following the ways of this world, we will never find it. We will be like the buzzard, the bat and the bumblebee...we will die...slowly but surely. Ah yes, we

may think we have found a way out from time to time, but sooner or later we will realize (once the element of self deception has worn off) that we are still as sad as ever and still trapped in our own sad little bubble.

And this is why the Eucharist is so important to me. Here at our Lord's Table I stand exposed...naked...with my frailty laid bare for all to see. Here I acknowledge that I have sinned and fall far short of the glory of God. But here I also acknowledge that my loving heavenly Father knows that...I don't have to attempt to kid Him...my heart is an open book before Him...He knows my desires...He knows all my secrets. And He knows that I cannot do this on my own...the broken Body and shed Blood of Jesus yells that at me every Eucharist. It is because I am a buzzard, a bat and a bumblebee that Jesus gave Himself for me. The Eucharist forces me to look up and to see His loving hand reaching down to pick me up out of the cesspool I am in, to bring me up into His heavenly throne room, so that I might be seated there with Him. Here all pretence is stripped away...and here His love is portrayed in the brightest, most vivid and clear manner possible...

So, dearest brethren, as you come to partake of His love thus illustrated, ask Him to help you to look up...ask Him to help you to stop trying to get out of your confinement using the world's ways...ask Him to help you respond to His loving hand reaching down through His sacrifice of Himself for you...and to let Him lift you up to be a living sacrifice for Him, so that by His side and through His helping power, you might be transformed as your mind becomes His mind and your will become His will.