

Epiphany 1, 2023

“Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” (Romans 12.1)

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

This past Friday the Church marked the visit of the Wisemen to the Christ Child at Bethlehem. We read in the Gospel appointed for that day that “When they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh”.

This year, the word ‘treasures’ stood out for me. They opened their treasures and presented unto JESUS gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. “They offered the very best that they had or could get: the rarest and choicest treasures of their own land, brought all the way for that purpose and no other. And, just as they knew that they could not appear before the Lord empty, so may think the same. If we truly love Him, we should bring an offering of our very best. (John Keble)

In this morning’s Epistle, St. Paul raises this subject. Writing to the Church in Rome, he said, “I beseech you...by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” What did he mean by “present your bodies”? How can our body become a sacrifice? St. John Chrysostom asked that question too, and his answer had two parts: on the one hand, we must keep our eyes and our tongue and our hands from looking at, speaking of and doing unholy things. And, we use these body parts to do good works. That’s how we can present our bodies as a living and acceptable sacrifice to God.

Perhaps we could pause here for a minute to consider the first-century worship practices of the Roman Empire. As with us, there was private and public worship. According to one historian, “Families would honor their household spirits, while Rome had colleges of official priests to ensure that its actions met with divine approval. Approval from the gods did not depend on a person’s behaviour, but on accurate observance of religious rituals.” Let me repeat that last sentence: “Approval from the gods did not depend on a person’s behaviour, but on accurate observance of religious rituals.” “Requests and prayers were presented to the gods as a trade: if the god did what was requested, then the worshipper promised to do a particular thing. To persuade the gods to favor a request, a worshipper might make offerings of food or wine, or even an animal.” This idea of a trade is what we call ‘quid pro quo’ – ‘something for something’.

‘Quid pro quo’ is an interesting idea, but from a Christian perspective, it lets everybody off the hook. What I mean is, God does not have to give Himself completely and neither does the individual. If that was the case, we would not celebrate Christmas or Easter because God would not have sent His Son to be born as one of us; nor would the Son have offered Himself as our Sin-bearer on the Cross. Thankfully, God the Holy Trinity does not operate according to ‘quid pro quo’. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

With that in mind, the Lord Jesus tells us to love God with our all: all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength; and St. Paul says, “Present your bodies a living sacrifice”. Don’t try to make a deal with God. He has given His all for you, so with thanksgiving, offer Him your body – your whole life. This is a

timely message as we begin another year: 'Lord, help me to love you with all my heart, mind, soul and strength, presenting my body as a living sacrifice to you. And may that include me joining in the life of daily prayer and reading of your holy Word, as well as partaking regularly of your Body and Blood in the Holy Communion. Help me also to offer you the sufferings and hardships of every kind whenever they come in this new year.'

In his sermon on today's Epistle, St. John Chrysostom makes another key point. He asks this question: "What is the way?" That is, how can we do this? How can we come to believe that this complete giving of ourselves and our bodies is the right thing to do?

Then he goes back to St. Paul's letter to the Romans for the answer: "Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God". This is a daily thing – a daily renewing that involves admitting and repenting and confessing and receiving God's forgiveness, and then starting over. But it is not burdensome; in fact, it is life-giving because I know that God's love for me is solid. I am not perfect, and He understands that I am not perfect. Still, He loves me and wants to lift me up. He has adopted me as His own child, and I belong to Him. And, He is at work in me by His Spirit, helping me to love the things that He loves, and to do the things that He would have me do.

This is where today's Gospel comes in: we meet the twelve-year-old JESUS in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors – the old men who had studied the Jewish Law all of their lives. He was listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers. Jesus was opening their minds to the wisdom and eternal purposes of God. He was lifting their minds up to show them the heavenly way of Christ.

All that we have considered this morning makes no sense whatsoever according to the world's way of thinking. And yet all we need to do, is look around and see the limitations and the greed and the illogical principals in which the world's systems try to operate. These are dependent on money and constantly susceptible to power struggles on every level. The Way of Christ is different. It is a Way of Truth and Grace, forgiveness and healing and eternal life. And so, St. Paul urges us: "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind; and present your bodies a living sacrifice unto God."

It must not have been an easy decision for the Wisemen to follow that star. I mean, really? Pack up everything in the winter season, hire the necessary men and head off in the middle of winter – somewhere – any where the star may lead you. But that's the point: they left off thinking according to the world's way, and stepped out in faith. By setting out on this journey, they literally decided to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

The new year is now upon us. It is an opportunity to think and act differently – so that we may walk more closely with the Lord and experience His new life of joy and Hope. Let us seek the help of the Holy Spirit and present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...