

Epiphany 1, 2021

And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Romans 12. 2)

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

The Gospel today presents the Lord Jesus at twelve years of age in the Temple with the doctors of the Jewish Law. Mary and Joseph had been looking frantically for him for days, and when they finally found him he seemed perplexed at their worry. He simply asked, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

This morning's Epistle raises something similar. It speaks about "proving" or "knowing" the will of God. To be exact, St. Paul says, "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." So, our renewal spiritually, intellectually, morally, and mentally is in discovering and following the will of God, not by adopting a secular or worldly mindset. And this is emphasized and illustrated for us very plainly in the Gospel with Jesus in the Temple, concerned with his Father's business.

What does it mean to have my mind renewed? I have been thinking about that this week in preparation for today. Paul says it has to do with proving the will of God as opposed to seeking approval from our culture. To be transformed by the renewing of my mind requires me to think differently. In what way? In the way we see ourselves.

To be more specific, St. Paul goes on to say, "I say, through the grace of God given to me, to every one among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, each according to the measure of faith that God has dealt." This sober thinking is necessary if we are to truly be one body in Christ, and members one of another, as He intends for His Church.

The context of these points is important: St. Paul was writing to the Christians in the city of Rome who were non-Jews (Gentiles). In the paragraph immediately previous to this morning's Epistle, he speaks to them about what has happened to the Jews. A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the

Gentiles have come in. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy.” The key point is that our justification before God – our salvation – is completely dependent on God’s mercy through Christ, rather than on the Law of Moses. Therefore, as Paul says, do not think too highly of yourself; and, remember although we are individuals, we are individual members. We are parts of a whole. There is one body in Christ and every one members one of another.

The temptation Paul was illuminating for the Church in Rome was pride and entitlement. He was saying, “Don’t think that you deserve God’s mercy; and don’t think that you are better than the Jews. They remain His chosen people and He is working our His plan to bring them to salvation through you.”

In his last book entitled The Radical Disciple, published in the year before his 90th birthday, Church of England priest and author, John Stott urged Christians to think differently in all aspects of life. In particular, he listed these eight: non-conformity, Christlikeness, maturity, creation care, simplicity, balance, dependence and death. As part of these, for example, he insists that we need to think differently in matters concerning material things, service to the community, suffering, as well as personal relationships and need for giving and receiving forgiveness. His main point is the Lordship of Christ and our submission to His will in all aspects of our life. That’s where what Stott calls ‘creation care’ comes into the discussion.

In a publication entitled, Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today, which preceded The Radical Disciple, Stott discusses the basic ideas behind creation care. He carefully examines the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, specifically verses 27 and 28 which read:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

From these verses, John Stott noted that God created us in His image. We have a soul. We can think rationally and act morally, and we have a spiritual capacity for

faith. Altogether, these enable us to know God and to have a unique relationship with Him.

Stott also noted that the dominion or rule which God gave human beings over every living thing is “a co-operative dominion”. In other words, “we must humble ourselves to acknowledge that our dominion over nature would be entirely fruitless if God had not made the earth fruitful, and if He did not continue to ‘give the increase’”. He goes on to point out that our dominion is a “delegated dominion, and therefore a responsible one”. “The dominion we exercise over the earth does not belong to us by right, but only by favour. The earth belongs to us not because we made it or own it, but because its Maker has entrusted its care to us”.

Understanding this piece properly has everything to do with being about our Father’s business, thinking soberly and proving His will. It is absolutely key to the renewal of our minds. Why? Because in it we are reminded of our identity. We are God’s creatures; we are made in His image; He has entrusted us with the dominion of His creation; and we are responsible to Him for our use of all that He has made.

For decades our stewardship of God’s creation has been anything but responsible. In fact, as we all know, the planet is in an environmental crisis, which Stott says is due to human greed – “economic gain by environmental loss”. This admission is important for the sake of the environment; but it is also important if we are to understand our place and be transformed. St. Paul goes so far as to say that we should present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God as our reasonable service. The point is, as followers of Christ, our whole life – every aspect of it, body and soul – needs to become submissive to God’s will.

I am intrigued by Stott’s point about creation care and our role in it. In fact, I don’t know why I have not allowed this point to touch me before. Stott is right: the way we view our dominion over creation will impact the way we understand our relationship with God, and consequently the way we choose to live with one another on this planet. And, frankly, it will determine how we view our Father’s business and prove His will. If we think that it is our right to dominate and destroy, we will ignore Paul’s call to be transformed by the renewal of our mind.

Wendell Berry, a Kentucky poet and farmer, has some helpful things to say about all of this. In fact, what he has written on the topic is refreshing; and, in my opinion, bang-on! He writes:

“For most of this history of this country (the USA), our motto, implied or spoken, has been Think Big. I have come to believe that a better motto, and an essential one now, is Think Little. That implies the necessary change of thinking and feeling, and suggests the necessary work. ...We need better government, no doubt about it. But we also need better minds, better friendships, better marriages, better communities. We need persons and households that do not have to wait upon organizations, but can make necessary changes in themselves, on their own....

(For example, as) odd as I am sure that it will appear to some, I can think of no better form of personal involvement in the cure of the environment than that of gardening....If we apply our minds directly and competently to the needs of the earth, then we will have begun to make fundamental and necessary changes in our minds. ...The change of mind I am talking about involves not just a change of knowledge, but also a change of attitude toward our essential ignorance. The principle of ecology, if we take it to heart, should keep us aware that our lives depend upon other lives and upon processes and energies in an interlocking system that, though we can destroy it, we can neither fully understand nor fully control. And our great dangerousness is that, locked in our selfish and myopic economics, we have been willing to change or destroy far beyond our power to understand. We are not humble enough or reverent enough.”

Think little – how refreshing! And, it fits with what Paul is talking about in the Epistle in terms of being transformed by the renewal of our mind. How? To ‘think little’ is rooted in a humble, reverent heart. It is to take personal responsibility rather than to sit back and blame the problem on someone else. Thinking little encourages simplicity and integrity – it is a mindset that supports the sober judgement which St. Paul describes, rather than the worldly attitudes of pride and entitlement.

What we are considering in all of this today are the ways we regard, and the ways we use people and things. We can exercise dominion as a right of entitlement and do whatever we please; or we can think soberly and live mercifully, knowing that we are saved only by the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

In order to be transformed, we must allow this abundant, saving Mercy into our minds. We must open our hearts to God's goodness. The Sacrifice of Jesus must become personal. I must believe that He came and was humiliated and suffered and shed His precious Blood for me. I must truly believe that it was not the nails that kept Him on the Cross, but His love for each and every person on this planet.

This is, after all, what Jesus said about His Father's will: "I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of Him that sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have everlasting life, and I will raise Him up on the last day." (St. John 6. 38-42)

The Epiphany Season presents over and over the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The wise men come from the East – they are Gentiles. God leads them by a star to worship His Son Who is their Saviour as well as the Saviour of the Jews. But the appearance of the star was not because God owed them. It was simply because He is merciful and He wants no one to be lost.

As we continue with the ups and downs of this pandemic, there is an opportunity for us to approach our Heavenly Father's business differently and to have our mind renewed. Acceptance of this Word is key: "do not think too highly of yourself; think soberly; we are one body in Christ and members one of another". Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven".

Wendell Berry's motto is, 'Think little!' and I think it fits. We are made in God's image not to live with entitlement but rather with mercy. This is how the Almighty Lord has treated us, and this is how He calls us to treat one another. It is possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is the way of HOPE and eternal JOY, but it requires a radical discipleship and transformation in every aspect of our life.

And now unto God the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit be ascribed all praise, majesty, dominion, honour and glory as is most justly due henceforth and forevermore. AMEN.