

Introduction

One of the things our society is obsessed by is transformation. Makeover programmes on television are very popular whether it be your garden, your home, what you wear or your body size and shape. The problem with these makeovers is that they project an idea of instant transformation. In my opinion the worst was the sixty minute makeover that was popular a few years ago; where two rooms in a house were transformed in one hour by large teams of people. I always wondered at the quality of the workmanship that went into them. And of course what they didn't show was all the preparation, the clearing out of the rooms and the preparing of the surfaces for decoration.

Transformation is wonderful and most of us long for transformation in various aspects of our lives but it is rarely instant and often not painless. In this morning's passage from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome he is encouraging them to be transformed and this transformation will come about by the renewing of their minds, their thinking, their understanding and their motivations.

I think that sometimes when we read Paul's letters we can be put off and overwhelmed by the complexity and density of his teaching, the passion with which he addresses complex truths and the fact that he almost never takes a breath. His sentences are often complex and extraordinarily long.

This is the writing of a man who is absolutely passionate about his subject. He is committed to enthusing his hearers and teaching the truths of the Christian faith. And this is seen nowhere so much as in his letter to the Roman Christians where he undertakes a complex explanation of the nature of sin and judgement and salvation which culminates in a song of praise and leads on to a plea to his hearers to offer themselves completely to God.

He says, "*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*"² Do not

conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." This transformation is not something that we can do alone; our minds are transformed as we allow ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit and let him to do the 'makeover' in our lives. It is God's presence in us through his holy spirit that transforms our thinking, our understanding and our living.

Paul goes on to encourage his listeners to think of themselves, not as individual units but as part of a body, each contributing to and enabling the life of the body but none more important than the others. He reminds them that their gifts are given to them by God as he chooses and they come from him alone.

I'd like to say a bit more about the gifts of the spirit because we don't often talk about them but they are essential to the life and health of individual Christians and of the church they belong to.

1. How the gifts are given

Paul tells the Christians at Ephesus: " But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it" and then goes on to say, " So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelist, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service."

And to the Christians at Corinth he says, "⁴ *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.* ⁵ *There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.* ⁶ *There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.* ⁷ *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.*

He goes on to list various gifts of the spirit and ends by saying:

"¹¹ *All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines*"

And here in his letter to the Roman Christians he says

"We have different gifts according to the grace given to us."

What we so often forget is that the gifts of the spirit are God's free gift to every Christian in order to strengthen the whole body of Christ and to enable us to bring people to know Jesus as Lord and saviour. They aren't a badge of merit or a reward for being special. They are part of God's "Mission Action Plan"; tools he gives his people so they can function to the best they can.

Someone made an acronym which describes grace: God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

It applies to salvation but it also applies here. It is interesting that whenever Paul speaks about the gifts of the Spirit being given to God's people he uses the word grace. They are freely given not earned or deserved.

Secondly

There is no hierarchy of gifts. There are some that are more flamboyant and noticeable but they are all given for the same purpose

"For the common Good " 1 Cor 12:7

And in this passage Paul makes no distinction between the gifts. He says:

"⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."

In one breath Paul puts together the more "obvious " gifts of the spirit such as prophesy, teaching and leadership, with the less obvious ones such as service, encouraging others,

generosity and showing mercy. In fact most generous people I know, or those with a servant heart or the gift of hospitality would probably not consider that this was a special gift of the spirit – but just an attribute they were born with. It isn't. It is something God has given to you and specially created in you.

One of the most interesting episodes of the life of the early church is in Acts chapter six where squabbling and jealousy had broken out between the believers. It was felt that not all the needy people among them were being treated equally and that something had to be done about it.

The disciples responded as most ministers would, we are told they said this:

'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.'

They knew the importance of their ministry in growing the church and knew they had to appoint someone else to make sure that fair provision was made for everyone. So they decided:

"³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

Now if I was looking for someone to administer the giving of aid, of organising the soup kitchen and serving food I suspect I may have put other qualities at the top of my list but the disciples were clear that what was needed for the task were men who were **full of the Spirit and wisdom**; men who were filled with the spirit and had gifts of wisdom and service.

What is being made clear here is that as Christians every part of our daily life and our life together is spiritual. We cannot divide the practical from the spiritual and those in our churches with the most practical gifts have been given that gifting by the

spirit as clearly as those who prophesy or preach and teach have been gifted by the Holy Spirit.

Paul had to make it clear to the Corinthian Christians that speaking in tongues and prophesying were completely meaningless if they were not done with love. Flashy gifts were worthless if exercised in the wrong spirit. These were things that were given for the building up of the body of Christ, for encouraging and strengthening believers and if they were done with pride and jealousy they were useless.

He also had to make it clear to the church in Rome that as members of the one body we all had different roles and functions – according to the gifts that God had given us and that although different, all were equal in God’s eyes. And, most importantly, these gifts have to be exercised in the framework of love and humility. He goes on to say:

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position, Do not be conceited.

This is next week’s passage and we will look at in more detail then but just to comment now: He has just listed some of the gifts of the Spirit and encouraged the Christians to exercise them properly and then he goes on to describe the spirit with which they should be used; that of love and humility.

All of us have been given gifts by God to use to build our churches up.

I am planning this autumn to preach a series of sermons about the fruits and the gifts of the Spirit. The past months have tried

Readings **The gifts of the Spirit for acts of service** **Shepreth/online**
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

all of us severely in our own lives and homes and as individual churches and benefice. We have missed worshipping together and have felt fragmented and distanced. I want us to focus on God's power within us to build us up, to transform us and to make us stronger individually and as Christ's body here in our villages.