

**Trinity XI, August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020****Romans 12:1-8**

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*

This sermon starts in a sad place.

Imagine a new-born baby with a serious medical condition. Nothing fatal, but still something very serious. Something they're not going to get better from, and which is going to seriously impair their lives as they grow. They might need constant medical attention. They might know much more pain than we think is bearable. They may never lead a fully independent life.

We learned this week that in Belgium, today, nearly 90% of doctors think it could be right, in such circumstances, to gently end the life of the child. 90%. And remember, this is not abortion. We're talking about babies who have already been born. In strict terminology, we're talking infanticide. And we're talking about *Belgium*: a modern, sophisticated, rich European country.

I wonder what you think of infanticide. Probably, you share my instinctive horror, the conviction that it just cannot be right. *Probably*. Forty years ago, almost all Christians would have done. Now though, who knows? Morals change over time. To take a *very* different example, back in the eighties, who would have imagined that same-sex marriage would be here within thirty years, and that those who were opposed would be condemned, bullied, ostracised? Well, maybe in another thirty years time, most of us will think of infanticide as –sometimes– the right thing to do. After all, those Belgian doctors are not monsters. They're guided above all by compassion, by the desire not to see children suffer. Maybe those who insist on saying 'never', who refuse to allow babies release from terrible pain, maybe they will be seen as old-fashioned, cold-hearted, dogmatic monsters.

Morals change. Which is tricky for everyone, but especially for Christians, because we like to think that right and wrong is not just a matter of majority opinion. We don't figure out moral truth by asking YouGov. *Do not be conformed to this world*, says Paul in Romans 12, and in many other places. *Rather be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.* Don't just drift along with the culture. Figure out the will of God, not just the mood of the moment.

Well, how on earth are we meant to do that? There's a style of Christianity that says God has left us clear instructions in the Bible. Admittedly it can be hard to work them out, but once you have – and it can be done – then it's just a matter of deciding to obey. That's the really hard bit. Being obedient. Faithful, however unpopular it makes you. And there is something admirable in that. 'I don't care, world, if you think I'm old-fashioned, out-of-touch, uneducated, bigoted: my loyalty is to God, not you.' Our moral debates in church could do with a bit more of that spirit.

However, it is only admirable up to a point. Because if you take the Bible alone as your supreme moral compass then, to take just one problem – and an ironic one in view of where this sermon started - you would have to say that on certain occasions infanticide isn't always wrong. In fact God quite often commands it: he tells his people to wipe out their enemies men, women children and babies – and He rebukes them when the killing is insufficiently comprehensive. Refusing to kill babies is the sinful thing, at least according to some texts. Scripture isn't the reliable moral guide many think: at least not in any straightforward sense.

So thankfully Paul does *not* say in Romans 12: 'Be not conformed to this world. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, and do this by sticking above all else to the Bible.' He doesn't say it.

He doesn't *even* say 'do it by sticking above all to the example of Jesus Christ.' That, incidentally, would be thoroughly good advice. What would Jesus do is *not at all* a bad question to ask. What course of action has got everything to do with what's good for my neighbour, and least to do with my ego and needs and comfort? What is going to help set others free from whatever crushes them down? If you seriously and prayerfully follow that principle, you will probably not go *far* wrong in your ethics. Jesus and infanticide don't go very easily together. Stay focused on Jesus would be excellent spiritual advice – but again, Paul doesn't give it. He says two things in Romans 12 about how not to be conformed to this world, how to be transformed by the renewal of your minds. And neither of them is Jesus, or the Bible. So what are they?

Number one: *I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought, but to think with sober judgement.* Not to think of yourself more highly than you ought. The first sign of the really faithful mind is that it is humble. Why? Because only the humble person can really say, deep inside themselves, that they know they don't know everything. That they are weak and flawed and morally confused, and in deep need of rescue, teaching, guidance. They know that by themselves, they are utterly unqualified to run their lives. Wisdom starts with really knowing how foolish you are, and that your moral compass has to be found somewhere other than your own head, your own heart. So that's the first thing: stay humble.

And the second is, be part of the church. That's why Paul suddenly starts talking about being one body, and everyone having different gifts. The humble person knows that we can't do this on our own. We will only stay rooted in God, and know how to live, as part of a community that all together is trying to work it out. And note, Paul absolutely does not mean that you must come to church and listen and be told what to do. It's not passive like that: 'turn up and shut up'. No, Paul says: each of us has a gift for the community, something that helps everyone else, and it's up to us to actually give it. Ask not what the church can do for you; ask what you can do for the church. And by the church, don't think primarily of the parish or the institution: think of each other. Of Stephen, of Sally, of Thomas, of Imogen. What can I do to help that person flourish? Who does God want them to be? How can I help?

Maybe, incidentally, that's another reason why humility was the first thing. It's the humble person who realises that actually, faith isn't all about you. And coming to church is not about meeting your spiritual needs. 'I come to church when I feel the need', somebody said to me recently. *No*, says Paul. It's not *about* your needs. It's about being committed to other people, serving other people. Remember who we're becoming one with: the one who came not to be served, but to serve. That's the first reason you should be here.

And this is not all building to an appeal for people to come on PCC, or join the welcoming team, or give more to the church. All those things and more might follow, yes, but let's start more basically. Look around in church today, and choose one other person. Choose someone you don't know that well. And now think of *being* that person. What it was like for them this morning coming in? Did they know they were going to meet people who really cared about them? Who wanted to know what was going on for them, who would take the time to talk and listen? Maybe someone could even help practically, but that wasn't the key thing, it was more that someone would be there, and be interested, whether they were old or young, single or married, clever or dim, smart or sad? Did your person know they were walking into a family that loved them?

Well, that's what Paul meant by one body. That's what he meant by a church. It was by being part of *that*, Paul thought, that people would grow. That's how they'd be steady, deep Christians. That's how they'd know what was right, and be strong enough to do it. You can't do it on your own; you do it as part of the body. It's about sharing our lives, week after week after week. You don't have to be a vicar or a churchwarden or a PCC member, or in the choir or a welcomer to do that. *You* have the power, whoever you are, to make this church like that. You have the power, and you have the responsibility. You have the gift we need, even though you think you don't, because it's *you*. Your love, your time, your attention are this church needs. What your brothers and sister in Christ need. So give *yourself*.

And in so doing, you will be transformed, and do the will of God. To him who came not to be served to serve be glory for ever and ever. Amen.