



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2005  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Romans chapter 12:1-8

**Body builders**

**The question: How important am I?**

(vv 1-3)

The question: How important am I? is a question we all ask ourselves at some point. What's my value? How do I assess my own significance? How do I rate myself in relation to other people? And, particularly, in relation to God, if there is a God? The trouble with verses like Romans 12:1-2—*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*—is that they raise the issue that, if I do as they tell me to (offer my body as a living sacrifice), won't I be crushed? If I let God take over my life, won't I lose my individuality? Is not God like



Cartoon 1

these cartoons [Cartoon 1]...overwhelming? So won't God crush my individuality [Cartoon 2], deny my independence, and suppress my freedom? But I am me; and I want to be me. And I want to stay free to be me.



Cartoon 2

Well, that is one side of our human predicament, the longing to assert my own worth, to stand by my individuality, to be me. But there is also another, look at verse 3: *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.* We know there is a great danger of thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. I so easily get bigheaded, swollen up like a balloon that needs to be popped. "I, I, I is the constant refrain of my life. You can hear it in everything that I say". Is your conversation sometimes like that? Always coming back to you, and to your own concerns and interests.

The only way of viewing the world that is available to me is one that puts me at the centre, looking out on everything and everyone else. So it is very easy to develop a perspective that exalts myself too much. Kaiser Wilhelm's valet used to say, "I cannot deny that my master is vain. He always wants to be the centre of attention. So when he goes to a christening, he wants to be the baby; when he goes to a wedding, he wants to be the bride; when he goes to a funeral, he wants to be the corpse". Now we are all aware of that tendency in ourselves. And we are caught—I want to be me (my own individual self), but I don't want to be like the Kaiser.

**The Answer: To understand my own value, I need . . .**

**1)...to focus on God**

(v 3)

Well, this passage of Paul's letter to the Romans provides the Christian answer: If I am to understand my own

value, I need first to focus on God: *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you* (v 3). The Christian is to resist the temptation to have an inflated opinion of him or herself, but rather to think of him or herself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given him or her. That does not mean ‘according to how much faith you have’. It is not the quantity of faith that is the issue, but the nature of faith. We must assess ourselves, Paul says, on the basis of faith.

Faith is the trust, which receives from God. If I offer the OHP operator a sweet, and she takes it, that’s all faith is—reaching out a hand and receiving a gift. Faith is not a religious technique; you would not say of what that person has just done in taking a sweet, “I wish I had their faith” (i.e. their special way of relating to God). Faith is not a religious technique: faith is the acknowledgement that there are no religious techniques. There is no way we can relate to God from our side. (Some of us are still trying to do that, which is why we do not yet know God for ourselves). We can only have a relationship with God, if He gives it to us from His side. Like the sweet, she was not expecting it. She did not deserve it. She’s just like everyone else here. I happened to give it to her and she took it.

And that, as we were seeing last week, is just exactly what God has done. That’s what Paul meant in verse 1: *...in view of God’s mercy...* Paul has spent 11 chapters explaining how in His mercy God has removed the barrier between Himself and us, spanned the gulf by the death of Jesus on the cross. And I am now to take salvation from God, as she took that sweet from me, as a gift. Faith is the great leveller, because it is all about people, who deserve nothing from God but hell (as just punishment for their sins), receiving instead the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus.

The human spirit does not like that amount of equality, and humility; particularly in an academic setting like Cambridge. The academic mind has been described as ‘cautious, tightly-organised, fault-finding, competitive, and above all inordinately aware of other academic minds’ (John Gross). Pretty good description, I suspect the guy who wrote that knew what it was to visit a Senior Common Room. Faith does not flourish in such an environment, where we are desperate for hierarchies, to know who is cleverer than whom, or who is senior to whom, because faith is the great leveller.

To think of ourselves with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given us, is to know we deserve nothing from God, but have received everything as a free gift. And so we all come to God on exactly the same basis, deserving nothing; and that unites us, because none of the things that we use to distinguish ourselves from one another as human beings are relevant—not our ability, nor our appearance, nor our intellect, nor our class, nor our wealth, nor our race, nor our age, nor our experience, nor even our goodness. None of them count with God. And that will humble us. It will stop us thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. But, if our faith in God unites us with other believers, strangely enough our service of others differentiates us.

## **2)...to focus on others**

(vv 4-8)

And to understand my own value, I also need to focus on others, and here is where I find my individuality is actually guarded. *Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us* (vv 4-6). The human body is often used in the New Testament as a picture for the church. There are other passages in his letters, where Paul develops this idea of how church members, like different body parts, all perform different functions for the good of the whole body. One preacher got rather carried away as he likened some church members to the hands, who did the practical work, and others to the lips who did the teaching, and so on; and “Others of you,” he continued, “are like the false teeth, now in the body and now out of the body. And some of you are like the tonsils—we’d be better off without you. And others of you are the appendix—we never even knew we had you, until you gave us trouble!”

Here it is unity in diversity that Paul emphasises: *Just as each of us has one body with many members, and*

*these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others* (vv 4-5). God must love variety and diversity, mustn't He? It's been said that when God freezes water, he makes snowflakes, every single one of them different from every other single one. But when man freezes water, we make ice cubes—all identical to one another.

And the diversity in the natural world is staggering, isn't it? Even things that look the same to us (like sheep, or ants) are quite distinct from one another. My brother-in-law says that every dog is born with the wrong bottom, and goes through its life looking for the right one (which is why they always examine that bit of each other's anatomy). But I'm not sure if that is an illustration of the same point.

But our differences with one another as human beings give us problems. It is why we find it so hard to get along. We are all so different from one another (you may be just discovering that at the moment if you have recently started to live with a group of new people, and you are struggling to adjust to one another. Perhaps you have even taken to writing your name on the eggs in the fridge, or marking the level on the milk bottles). And it can certainly make the fellowship of a church problematic:

To dwell above, with saints in love—that will indeed be glory.

To dwell below, with saints we know—that's quite another story.

And Paul's solution is surprising. God has made us different from one another, and He gives us different gifts: *We have different gifts, according to the grace given us* (v 6). And we are to cope with those differences by maximising them, not by hiding them, or minimising them, or pretending that we are not different from one another. We are to cope with our differences by exploiting them: *If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith* (v 6). (the margin note at the bottom of the page is more helpful: Paul not thinking in terms of varying quantities of faith here, but rather of the content of faith:—The gospel—just as we saw in verse 3). *If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in agreement with the gospel. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully* (vv 7-8). We are to make the most of the things that distinguish us from one another.

Surely that is a strange way to unity? But it is the thrust of the passage. Paul has deliberately jumbled up the gifts here, so as to turn the focus away from the specific characteristics of each gift. He doesn't encourage us to categorise or analyse them. And so we won't, Prophesy, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, leading, mercy: we'll miss the point if we spend our time trying to define each precisely. Every church member has one or more gifts. None of us can pretend we don't, until we have worked hard at all the gifts that are within the natural capacity of all of us, like serving, encouraging, giving and showing mercy. We are to find what we are good at, and then do it for all we are worth.

If a runner is going to run as fast as he can, then each separate part of his body must do its bit: The lungs must breathe, the heart must pump, the legs must stride. They stick to their specialities. So must we in the Body of Christ. We are to find what we can do, and then do it for all we are worth for others. Note those last two words that I have just added, because they are key...for others...and with their agreement, I might add. The gifts that God gives believers for the church are to be wholly focussed on building others up. They are for other people's sake. They are not to be used for our benefit not to meet some need in my own personality—you may remember C S Lewis' remark, "She's the sort of woman who lives for others. You can tell the 'others' by their hunted expression". I always liked the story of the scoutmaster who asked three of his scouts if they had done their good deed for the day. They said they certainly had. So he asked what it was. They said they'd taken an old lady across the road. The scoutmaster said, "Well done; but why did it need three of you?" And they said, "Because she did not want to go". All service must primarily benefit the one served!

But if we celebrate our differences in sacrificial service to one another in the fellowship of the church, we won't get jealous, and we won't get proud. You know the people who really enjoy a church service? They're the ones who've discovered that they don't come to church to enjoy it, for their own benefit: They come to serve others. It's quite a paradox, isn't it? You know who are the happiest most contented people here? I'll hazard a wild guess—the welcome team, OHP operators, musicians, sound-desk, staff, trekker/pathfinder

leaders, crèche helpers, info desk/bookstall, people who've brought family/friends with them, who are looking out for others, planning how they can build someone else up over coffee. They're the happy ones, the ones not looking for their own happiness.

Moreover, I think such people know what they're worth. They do not think too highly of themselves; but equally they know that their individuality has not been crushed by God. In not being conformed by the pressures towards selfishness that this world brings to bear on us, but being transformed by the renewal of the mind, they have found their true selves, their real value, in the real worship of God. If you are not yet a Christian, this may still be puzzling but please ponder the idea that we find ourselves in the service of others.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*