

1. Worshipping engages our whole lives

Sometimes, Paul doesn't say what we might have expected. In fact, sometimes he says the totally unexpected. For the first 11 chapters of the book of Romans, he has explored all that God has done to rescue a world that rebelled against his designs and desires. He knows that this is the Good News; the Gospel. And that once we embrace the gospel, we will want to worship. So far, so expected.

But for a group of people who think they know what worship looks like, Paul's words are surprising. The Jews in the church in Rome had their own history of worshipping: with temples, offerings and sacrifices. Gentiles – non-Jews – had *their* own temples, their own offerings, their own sacrifice. And Paul's message to both groups is that worship is so much more: it involves our *living bodies*.

That's the bit that would have shocked. Because, if you recall the last time you caught a glimpse of yourself getting out of the bath or shower, most living bodies are not that perfect. As we grow older, what used to point north has now gone south, and our bodies tend to be misshapen, badly used, and worn out. They are, not to put too fine a point on it, too ordinary! But that's what Paul thinks worship is all about. So what exactly is he getting at?

The clue may be in the little word '*therefore*' which began our reading from Romans 12. Every time you see the word '*therefore*' in Paul's writings – and you see it a lot – you need to go back and see what immediately comes before. And it's this – the last four verses of chapter 11:

*O, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?
Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?
For from him, and through him, and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

And then comes our passage:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, 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.

What he's saying is, now that we've got a breath-taking glimpse of the amazing, explosive, overwhelming mercy of God, I want you to join me in worship ... not by offering a sheep or a bull as a sacrifice as in the old temple system, and not even by going to church and singing, clapping, kneeling or dancing for hours on end (did you know that the reason the Victorians introduced pews was to stop the dancing?). What Paul says is 'I want you to worship God by offering your whole lives, all you have and all you are, as an offering of worship to God'.

This is better expressed, I think, in the Message translation:

So, here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.

For Paul then, worship translates naturally and immediately into a way of life. Life lived not for self-interest (which Paul calls the '*old self*') but for the common good, or in Paul's words from his letter to the Galatians – '*faith working through love*' and '*servicing one another in love*', not the self-seeking that Jesus rebukes the disciples for in our gospel passage, where they'd been arguing over who, among them, was the greatest.

Paul's words are quite remarkable really: we might be less surprised if he'd said, '*In view of God's mercies, I demand that you spend at least one hour a day in church services, or one hour a day on your knees, reciting prayers to God.*' But no, the tsunami of God's grace inspires us to express our worship not simply in religious activities, but in *real* life, through love for one another. And that can take any form. The possibilities are endless.

Our hour (or two) on a Sunday morning is the tip of an iceberg that is made up of 168 hours a week. So, how can we infuse our daily lives – our everyday, ordinary lives - with worship and praise? Here are a few suggestions. Don't feel you have to remember them all. I've popped them onto a little card that you can take as you leave:

1. How about giving God the first greeting every morning. As you emerge from sleep, in those moments when you don't want to look at the clock, even before your eyes are open, try to turn your attention to God. A simple prayer could be thanks for the new morning, the new day. Thanks that God will be with you, whatever the day brings. And thanks for a God who is

gracious, compassionate, just and good, holy and forgiving, almighty and gentle.

2. You could give God the first thanks at every meal. Saying grace before meals has become an outdated practice in many households, including my own. But it's a good practice reminding us of our dependence on God for our daily sustenance as well as connecting us at least three times a day with the Creator who supplies soil and sunlight and rain to maintain the miraculous web of life, of which we're part.
3. Give God the first response to every pleasure. When something good happens, or you experience something truly wonderful, such as a sunrise, an act of kindness, a rainbow, the stars in the sky at night, *share* that joy with God. The living God is the Creator of spinning galaxies and fluttering butterflies, and towering mountain ranges and leaping whales, the intricacy of a spider web in the autumn dew and the innocence of a child's smile, of birds whistling outside the window and the way the sunlight shines on the east window of this church. Even when we're feeling dull or down, there are times in the day when we can turn to the goodness, wonder and beauty of God.
4. We can give God the first call on our busy diaries by not just beginning each day with personal prayer, but planning our week around gathering together on a Sunday morning wherever possible, where we help one another to taste and see the goodness of God through song, prayer, sermon, and sharing communion together.
5. We can make God the recipient of all our work. Jesus said, *'Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.'* And Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, was getting at the same thing when he wrote, *'Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'* So, the chef whose life has been offered to God as a living sacrifice of worship seeks to prepare each meal as if God were the customer, and the teacher as if the students were God. Similarly, the gardener, the computer programmer, the project manager, the admin assistant, the politician, the salesperson and the banker seek to serve God as they water, programme, manage, assist, govern, sell and invest.

6. We can give God the first part of every pay cheque, by not seeing our giving simply as an act of duty, but more as an act of worshipping God.
7. And we can give God the joy of our creativity. Since we are all made in the image of God, there *will* be some way in which each of us can be creative. In this church, we're gifted with excellent musicians and singers, with needle workers, with people who cook fabulous cakes, and with those who arrange flowers and design furniture such as the cabinet that will house the sound system. (No pressure Boyd!). Maybe you're someone who writes poetry or drama, or paints, takes photographs or does collage. Maybe you dance or act or climb mountains or build miniature ships. Probably, in whatever you do, you apologise. *'It's not very good. I'm just an amateur. I never took any lessons. I just do it for myself.'* But you do it because you love doing it, and you pre-empt anyone's criticism of what you've produced with your own disparagement. A suggestion ... apologise less, and create more. Let's think of creating less for the approval of others, and for the pleasure of God more. We were blessed with our first crayon drawing from our little granddaughter this week, or rather Martyn was. It's just lots of coloured lines, scribble really, but *she* thought she was drawing herself and her grandad. Do we criticise it? Of course not! It has pride of place on the fridge. What could give our Creator God more pleasure than our creative offerings?

But, we don't ignore reality. Yes, there *are* problems to be faced in our lives, and many of us have them. There is a time to cry and groan in rage as well as a time to laugh and dance in joy. But let's not lose sight of the God who is here, near, with us, the one in whose presence we live and in whose attention and care we are held. Let's take those moments, in the busyness of our lives and in the midst of whatever is going on for us, to allow our minds to ponder good and great and wonderful things, things we love, as ordinary as they might be. And then to take that wonder and love for that thing, and expand it out to God, the giver, the designer of all goodness, all greatness. Let's give God the worship that he deserves.

Amen/Let us pray:

Father God, we reflect on your mercy. We consider the forgiveness you have granted us through your Son, Jesus Christ. In view of God's mercy, we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to you.

This is our true and proper worship.

We pray for the grace and strength to offer our all: the tasks we complete, the relationships we value, the activities we enjoy, and the possessions we own. Help us to glorify you with all these things. In view of God's mercy, we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is our true and proper worship.

We pray that you would renew our minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. Help us to be wary of conforming to the patterns of this world, make us watchful to see what is shaping our view of the world. In view of God's mercy, we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is our true and proper worship.

Finally, we pray for help to know your will. Give us a discerning spirit to know – whether at home, at work or wherever we are – what your good, pleasing and perfect will might be. We offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is our true and proper worship.

We pray all these things in the name of Christ.

Amen.