
The Renewing of Your Minds

Romans 12:1-2

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 24, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I once took part in an 8-day conference on group dynamics. The conference had no agenda, other than to study what was going on in the room at the time. Just imagine it. You couldn't say, "I remember something like this happened to me before," or, "This reminds me of a story a friend of mine likes to tell." You couldn't say to a colleague, "What are you planning to do after supper?" or "Are you going home for Thanksgiving?" These were all forms of avoiding the task at hand. For the first day or two it was terrifying, because all the ways we'd each learned to manipulate interactions and take conversations onto our safe territory were stripped away, and we had to be honest and truthful not about our past but about what was going on right this minute, right now, not just in our own minds, but in the room. Eventually we got more attuned to naming jealousies, and anxieties, and griefs, and subtle gangings-up on one another, and conspiracy theories, and almost warfare, and all the things that go on in human group behaviour, even when we're among virtual strangers.

After a couple of hours I thought, "We've got 80 hours of this to get through. I'm...going...to...implode." (I think the North Carolina expression is, "Yikes.") But as I got used to it, and the week went on, I came to realise that these 80 hours were like the 80-odd years of our lives. There were constraints and boundaries, but no rules. Like a human life, it would be easy to fill it with structured routine, fevered activity, chattering conversations, urgent radio, sprawling television, and little electric gadgets to fiddle with. But these would almost all be forms of avoidance. Our 80 years of life are like those 80 years of the conference. How we fill them is up to us. At the end if they've flown by in mindless distraction there's no one to blame but ourselves.

What a terrifying prospect. It's not surprising we cram our lives full of responsibility and activity and amusement, so as not to have to think about that 80 years of emptiness and what's really going on in the room. We work out what everyone seems to admire – whether it's a glittering career, a stylish home, or designer children – and we set about acquiring those things. The quest takes most or all of our energy. But this quest, successful or not, is in many cases a lifetime of distraction – a lifetime of avoiding naming the 80 years of emptiness by instead simply craving the attention and esteem of others.

But our culture has invented a remarkable thing. Just at the moment in life when a young person is emerging from their parents' shadow, just at the moment when their parents are neither the most embarrassing people on the planet nor the superstars they once thought them to be, and just before that young person is let loose on the world of responsibility, of mortgages and children and health insurance and overdrafts that no one is going to pay off for you, our culture has invented a wonderful thing called "college."

Now college isn't just 80 hours, or even 80 days; in fact, it's more like 800 days, with another few hundred days of recovery time built in for doing summer internships and taking laundry home to your parents. But those 800 days are just like the 80 hours I spent on that conference. There are constraints and boundaries; but really there aren't a whole lot of rules. It's pretty much up to you how you fill those 800 days. Sure, you can make yourself frantically busy, and sure, you can pursue the things that gain you the attention and esteem of others. But it may turn out such things are distractions born out of anxiety about facing up to the emptiness of those 800 days.

I want you to think of four years at college as a time when you withdraw from other responsibilities and reflect honestly and truthfully on what's really going on in the room. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus withdrew into the desert to spend 40 days on what it meant to be human, what it meant to be God, and what it meant to be both. Students at Duke have it a little easier; it's not a desert, they're not alone, and they have a lot more than 40 days to play with. It's a lot easier than a generation ago, when college was a game of musical chairs and the two people who found themselves dating when the music stopped come graduation day knew they had to marry each other. But the questions are still big ones, and the principle is the same: you've got an extended period of time to work out what's going on and where you fit in. *What's going on and where you fit in.*

St Paul has some pretty extensive ideas about what's going on and where you fit in. The first 11 chapters of his Letter to the Romans are all about what's going on. This is what Paul says. God made the world as a playground for humanity's delight. But humanity rebelled. Paul's word for that rebellion is "Adam." But God created a new reality beyond rebellion. That new reality is called "Christ." Christ undoes the damage of the *past*. The Holy Spirit makes a new reality in the *present*. And God is making a new *future* that includes the whole creation, uniting Jews and Gentiles. In the story of Adam all die, but in the story of Christ God makes all alive, giving them a forgiven past, an enspirited present, and a redeemed future. That's what the Letter to the Romans says is going on. And Paul has a word for that whole story: he calls it "*the mercies of God*." God has transformed history in the person of Jesus Christ, and that's called "the mercies of God."

And that brings us to the beginning of chapter 12, our reading today. Paul pleads with his brothers and sisters in Rome "by the mercies of God." In other words, if you believe this story is true, this is what I want you to do. Or, to use the language of our 800 day retreat, if this is what is going on, this now is where *you* fit in. Paul asks two things. "Present your *bodies* as a living sacrifice;" and "Be transformed by the renewing of your *minds*." So this is the agenda for your 800 days at Duke. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice;" and "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Let's start with the second one.

"Don't be conformed to this world," says Paul, "but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." You've come to a university. Universities exist for the renewing of minds. It's easy to forget that. At different times a stranger could be forgiven for assuming we were here for a massive careers fair, or to try on athletics merchandise, or to display an assortment of camping gear and sleeping bags, or to construct ungainly wooden benches and then burn them without torching the whole of West Campus at the same time. But if St Paul got to choose the motto of the university, this would be it: "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Minds and transformation are the reason universities exist.

Why do our minds need to be transformed? Because Adam's story is so mesmerizing. Adam's story dominates what's going on in our heads, in our colleges, in our world. Adam's story says life is a fundamental struggle of everyone against everyone else, so all that matters is to get to the top or come out first in the class. Adam's story says we're no more than material beings, so we have to cram our rooms, our bodies and our resumés with more and more stuff. Adam's story says we're constantly about to be condemned, so we become terrified that anyone might ever find out who we really are. Adam's story says life's too short and you only get one go, so we keep frantically busy out of anxiety that we'll miss out and regret it. Adam's story is all around us. We're drowning in it.

But Adam's story is not the real story. The real story is a very different story. The real story is that however much we churn out hate, God responds with love. The more we deal out death, God responds with resurrection. The more we cause hurt and pain and cruelty, God responds with forgiveness and reconciliation and healing. The more we despair and distrust and destroy, God brings us faith and hope and love. The more we sulk in the shadows and assume there's no place for us, the more God the shepherd comes and finds us and wraps us around his shoulders and brings us home. The more we feel lost and alone and forgotten, the more God the housekeeper finds us and shakes us together with the other nine coins in her bag. And lest we for a moment think this is a sentimental story of apple pie and cup cakes and crumbly candy bars, Paul reminds us that this is Christ's story, and this story cost God everything in watching his heart break on the cross to make it all possible and permanent.

But it's so hard, so hard to recall every morning, every moment, that we're living in Christ's story and not Adam's story. Paul knows it's hard. So he says "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Loss and struggle and guilt and anxiety are part of the story, they're *not* what the story is fundamentally about. You have 800 days at college to discover how to remain generous, to remain gentle, to remain joyful, to remain gracious, to remain hopeful, to remain patient, and so to embody Christ's story. You have 800 days in this fabulous setting to be transformed by the renewing of your minds. That's what you're here for.

And then, more briefly, let's look at Paul's first request. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." Paul says to sacrifice means to make *holy*. Think of what happens at an infant baptism. The parents hand the child over to be baptized. They *present* the child as a gift to God and the church. In the same way we allow our bodies every day

to be *handed over* as a gift to God and the church, and allow God and the church to give our lives as a present to others.

Why would you want to present your body as a daily gift to God and the church and allowing God and the church in turn to give your life as a present to others? Because this is how to make yourself available to bring life and joy and glory not principally to yourself but to the whole room, the whole institution, the whole world. It's called a sacrifice for two reasons – one, because this is literally how to become holy, to hand your life over to God and the church, and two, because getting as close as that to God's heart and the world's needs takes you to the limit of your own survival as a human being. Paul is saying, don't try to make yourself perfect by your own or the world's definition, but allow God to make you beautiful by *his* definition.

And Paul points us to Jesus, because Jesus' body is the living sacrifice that is our present to God, and God's to us, and because Jesus' mind is the transformed mind that always responds with grace. Jesus is the embodiment of the mercies of God. He wants your body to be an embodiment of the mercies of God, a body whose every movement is a hymn of praise to God's grace. A body whose skin and muscles and smile and laughter give God pleasure. A body whose yawn shows God works even while we sleep. A body whose touch says God never leaves us alone.

So that's how to spend 800 days in the four-year retreat our culture calls college. It's a concentrated period set aside to find out what's going on and where you fit in. What's going on is that, in spite of clamoring stories to the contrary, God is opening out glorious, gracious, generous life at infinite cost to himself and no cost to you. That's Christ's story, and it's not just a tale of wandering dreamer in a faraway country many centuries ago – it's a *daily* intellectual discovery, a *daily* practical challenge, and a *daily* social revolution – every single day. Boy, is it difficult – or, as I've learnt to say, Ma-y-an is it difficult – but girl, is it exciting and wonderful. God is opening out glorious, gracious, generous life at infinite cost to himself and no cost to you. That's what's going on. And where you fit in is about your mind and your body. First, allow your imagination to be stretched and exercised and transformed so you can take in this amazing reality in all its subtlety and complexity and mystery; and second, allow your body to be handed over every day as a gift to and from God and the church, to be a present that may bring hope and consolation and blessing to others. Being made holy and being transformed. That's what you're here for.