

Sermon for Proper 16 – 12th Sunday after Trinity, 23.8.26 V3 - Final

Romans 12.1-8, Matthew 16.13-20

Disturbed and Transformed..

The great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, calls Christian ethics the “Great Disturbance”. In his commentary on Romans, Barth says that all human systems must inevitably be **disturbed by the thought of God.**

1. Do not be conformed to this world.

In this extract of Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians of his day, he urges them, “Do not be conformed to this world.” The Greek word for world – could also be translated “world order” or “present life” or “age”. Paul’s world consisted of clear categories of insiders and outsiders.

At the top were Roman citizens, as was Paul, who had rights and privileges and securities because of their citizenship. For example, when Paul was arrested and awaiting a flogging – he asked the centurion standing by if it was legal to whip a Roman citizen who hadn’t been properly tried. The captain in charge soon set him free! **Meanwhile, at the lowest levels of the social strata – were slaves** – who were literally the property of others – with no rights of their own. There were many, often called “pilgrims” who were somewhere in between.

Paul was also a Jew, who appreciated his belonging to God’s people because of his birth and then his strict observance of Jewish laws making him acceptable to God.

However, the thought of God, revealed in Jesus, was disturbing all these entitlements and privileges in his world. Paul had come to discover that his belonging to God and God’s people, was based on mercy – unconditional love – GRACE – that upset the clear categories of insiders and outsiders and the sense of entitlement by dint of birth or citizenship or status.

I wonder what is the equivalent Spirit of this Age and the norms to which we conform today, that need to be disturbed by the thought of God? While Paul and his contemporaries found security in their citizenship, where do we look for safety today?

At one level, We value our residence permits, work permits and passports which give us rights as citizens. In addition, we shore up our security in our wealth, with a niggling feeling that we could always do with just a little bit more?

The Spirit of this age encourages anxious consumerism – the need for more – be it property, possessions, the newest products – more achievements, more recognition, more experiences, more status... all of which point to a deeper mood of anxiety, restlessness and uncertainty about life today.

Within the early church, as today, there was a sense that salvation needed to be earned, by good behaviour, keeping to the laws, for Roman citizens, appeasing the gods and their all-powerful leaders. In the church, you could equally appease God, earning divine approval and acceptance, through your own good works or through your birth-right as a Jew.

Yet – the thought of God disturbs these securities – and shifts the focus of salvation and acceptance onto God’s mercy. Paul writes: **I appeal to you “by the mercies of God”**. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection have brought us peace with God and with one another, so we can stand shoulder to shoulder with all sorts of people as members of the one body. Our response, Paul states, is to offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice which is our spiritual worship.

2. But Be transformed.

This week I came across a talk given by Brother Matthew of Taizé, focussed on the Transfiguration (which is the same Greek word as Transformation). He recalls the voice from the cloud, telling the disciples: “This is my beloved Son – listen to him.” Brother Matthew notes that maybe it was the disciples who were eventually transfigured or transformed, as they learnt to listen to Jesus.

When Paul instructs the early Roman Christians **to be transformed** – they are not being nuked by God, or cast with a spell to change them into someone else, Harry Potter style. This transformation comes about in daily listening with our hearts and minds – open to discern God disturbing and leading us.

Brother Matthew invites us to “listen to Christ through his Word, to the people and events of each day, and listen in prayer to what dwells deepest within us, where the Holy Spirit lives.”

“It is this daily faithfulness in listening that, little by little, (transfigures) transforms us.”

Be transformed, writes Paul, by the renewing of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God... daily faithfulness in listening that will renew the way we see things and the way we will act.

This transformation will play out in our daily lives and in our life together as Church.

3. Be Church – we who are many are one Body in Christ.

Being transformed, will shape the way we view ourselves and one another in the Church, with a healthy dose of humility. Do not to think of ourselves more highly than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. All that we have and are, is GIFT – so we look to the Giver – to inspire us to offer our lives (with thanksgiving) for God’s good purposes – to help us together be signs of hope and ferment of peace for our world.

Over the past six weeks or so, in view of the change in leadership at La Côte, I have seen this church living out Paul’s ethics, being one body in Christ, individually members one of another. Together, in many ways, you are exploring what it means to be church as you head into an interregnum. You are thinking together how you can offer the gifts that God has entrusted to you, for the good of the whole. I have had inspiring conversations and planning with different members, opening up how to sustain the rich fellowship and mission of La Côte, in areas of worship and ministry with small children and their families, with youth, with our communications and with our finances, with our pastoral care and outreach.

As Peter drew close to Jesus, he was disturbed and unsettled by him – in a good way, and was bit by bit being transformed, so that he began to grasp who Jesus was and is. On him Jesus declared that he would build his church.

I have a deep sense of God’s grace at work among you – and want to encourage you to continue to listen with your heart together and in your daily lives. Stay open to the Spirit’s work of transformation so that you may discern God’s will and offer your gifts to build up the church in this season.

Today – we pray, with Karl Barth, to be disturbed and transformed, so that the living Christ will continue to build his Church on us, (as well as on Peter!) – calling us into this local body of Christ – to be signs of hope, welcome and reconciliation - a ferment of peace for our world.

Amen.