

Epiphany 1, 2016

“...that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service”. (Romans 12.1)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

When the three kings packed their saddle bags to follow the star to Bethlehem, we can imagine the decisions they had to make regarding clothing, food and water, and other necessary supplies. However, the thing we need to remember is that each of those Wisemen had an item to take that was a non-negotiable. Melchior of Arabia, the oldest of the three, took gold; Balthazar of Ethiopia, took frankincense; and Gaspar of Tarsus, just in his twenties, took myrrh. These three items had to go on the trip because they were to be presented to the new born King of the Jews.

And so it was that, after a very long and dangerous trip, these three kings arrived at Bethlehem; and, as the Gospel tells us, “When they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh”. How incredible that visit must have been! Three kings, grown men who were recognized for their wisdom and status, fell down on their knees and worshipped the Child Jesus!

With that in mind, let’s listen again to the first sentence in this morning’s Epistle of St. Paul to the Church in Rome: “I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” He goes on to include our minds in this presentation: “And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” So we, like the Wisemen, are to bring God an offering – a living, holy sacrifice. But it must include our bodies – not just a token of our possessions, but our whole lives – from head to toe. According to the first and great commandment, God calls us to love Him “with *all* thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength”.

This sacrificial offering of our love and all our energies, to Christ Jesus the LORD, is central to the Epiphany Season. As we reflect on how God used a star to summon three Kings to worship His Son, the Gospel call us to include ourselves in that picture. “Come and worship Him Who is the LORD of all creation, the One with all authority and power. Come and present your body and your mind as a living sacrifice to Jesus your King.”

But how, that’s the question? The Rev. John Keble helps us with the answer. In a sermon for this Sunday, he highlighted three aspects of our daily living which must characterize our worship. First, he said that our daily lives need to be punctuated or marked with the regular offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies at the LORD’S Altar. The one Service which Jesus gave His disciples and us is the Holy Communion of His Body and Blood: “Do this,” He said “in remembrance of Me”.... “What an honour and blessing,” wrote Keble “that our LORD should call us, even the least of us, to be partakers of His Altar, and of the holy service performed there....As often as we say ‘Amen’, at the giving of thanks and blessing where with the Priest consecrates the Body and Blood of Christ, we join in the offering; we have part in the spiritual sacrifice.”

But, says Keble, it is not enough for us to show up. He reminds us of the words of today's Epistle: "present your bodies a living sacrifice; holy, acceptable unto God". This is to say "that all God's mysterious mercy and love which He had been setting forth to them; His sending His Son, the Son's dying on the Cross, the Holy Spirit entering into us to join us to Christ and to bring us to heaven; all this great love would be thrown away; it would be their ruin, if they failed in offering to God the sacrifice of chaste and pure bodies".

This is a difficult word for us as modern people. We are bombarded with so many advertisements and foods and entertainments and temptations that the devil wants to use to keep us from presenting our bodies and our minds as a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable unto God. And yet we see the effects of giving in to these temptations all around us. It happens so quickly: someone experiments or tries or tastes, and before they know it Satan has a foot-hold. St. Paul urges us to be careful so that we may present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God.

As we turn our hearts to offering our bodies and minds as a living sacrifice to God, other aspects of our lives are illuminated. For example, we will want to include our time and our treasure. As the Scripture says, "To do good and to distribute forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased". (Hebrews 13.16) It is important for us to remember that the three kings did not simply go to see the Christ Child. Upon seeing Him, they fell down and worshipped Him; and then they presented Him with treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It was a costly journey for these kings, but let us think of the eternal cost to them if they had not gone. They would not have encountered Him through Whom all things were made, and through Whose precious Blood all things are redeemed. The cost was great but their gain was eternal for they met Him Who is everlasting life.

As we consider the call to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, many of us will wonder if He really wants these old decrepid parts with their scars and sufferings, and their pains. Does the LORD really want them? Yes! In fact, says Keble, He wants us to join our sufferings to the Sufferings of Jesus so that He might sanctify them and use them according to His purpose and plan. We are tempted to think that our sufferings come randomly upon us; but that is not so. If God is the Almighty LORD, He must see and know all these things – and He does. His plan is to use them to draw us and others nearer and nearer to Himself so that we may experience the unending joy His Presence and Peace. These afflictions are temporary. The LORD, by His Resurrection, has won the victory over them. And yet through these pains, we may learn to lean on His Strength rather than our own. So, this is all part of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God.

The Collect this morning, asks God to receive our prayers and to help us perceive and know the things we should do, and to give us the grace and power faithfully to do them. We want to do the right things, and we want to offer these spiritual sacrifices to God, but we cannot do it on our own. Let us ask the LORD to help us. May this new year see us enter into a deeper relationship with Christ in the life of prayer. Dear friends, let us not be conformed to this world, but instead, let us be transformed by the renewing of our mind, so that we may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...