

A Church for the Sake of the World

Romans 12:1–8 and Matthew 16:13–20

There is something rather significant about the question we are being asked to consider today.

Not, **"What would you like the church to do for you over the next ten years?"**

Not, **"What would make our church more comfortable, more successful, or more enjoyable?"**

Not even, **"How can we make sure that our church is still here in 2036?"**

The question is:

What voice do you want the Church to have in South Australia by the time we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the state in 2036?

That is a very different question.

Because it takes us beyond ourselves.

It asks us to imagine the Church not simply as a place to which we come, but as a people whom God sends.

And that is precisely where these two readings take us.

Paul says to the Christians in Rome:

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

Notice the word **"therefore."**

Paul has spent eleven chapters telling the story of God's extraordinary mercy. And now he says: **therefore**.

Because of what God has done, *this* is how you are to live.

Christianity is not fundamentally about getting something from God.

It begins with receiving something from God—and then asking what we will do with it.

We have received mercy.

We have received grace.

We have received Christ.

We have received the gift of the Spirit.

Therefore, offer yourselves.

And Paul uses the language of sacrifice.

Not a dead sacrifice placed on an altar, but a **living sacrifice**.

Our whole lives become an offering to God.

Our time.

Our abilities.

Our money.

Our homes.

Our relationships.

Our workplaces.

Our compassion.

Our imagination.

Our voices.

Our presence in the community.

All of it becomes part of our worship.

And that has something very important to say to us as we think about our Mission Action Plan.

Because mission is not another program that the church puts on.

Mission is what happens when the people of God offer themselves to God for the sake of the world.

Paul then says:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

In other words, don't simply allow the world around you to tell you what matters.

Don't simply inherit the assumptions of the culture around you.

Don't assume that the purpose of the Church is to preserve what we have always had.

Allow God to renew your imagination.

Allow God to make you think differently about what the Church is for.

And that is where our three pillars—**growing faith, building community and sharing faith**—become so important.

They aren't three separate projects.

They are three dimensions of what it means to be God's people.

We **grow faith** because disciples are people who are continually being transformed.

We **build community** because Paul says that we are one body, and individually we are members of one another.

And we **share faith** because gifts are not given to us for our own benefit. They are given so that the whole body—and ultimately the world—might be blessed.

Paul's image of the body is particularly important.

"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function."

There is no such thing as an unnecessary member of Christ's body.

Some teach.

Some encourage.

Some lead.

Some give.

Some show compassion.

Some organise.

Some welcome.

Some pray.

Some simply have a gift for noticing the person who is standing alone at the edge of the room.

And Paul says: **use it.**

The question is not, "What does the church have to offer me?"

The question becomes:

"What has God given me that might be offered for the sake of others?"

That is a significant change of perspective.

And I wonder whether it is one of the changes we need to make if we are going to imagine the Church's voice in South Australia in 2036.

Because the Church cannot discover its future simply by asking what will keep its current members happy.

We have to ask:

What does South Australia need from the Church?

Where is God already at work?

Where are people longing for hope?

Where are people lonely?

Where are families struggling?

Where are young people asking questions about identity, meaning and purpose?

Where are older people feeling invisible?

Where are people arriving in this state from somewhere else and wondering whether there is a place for them?

Where are communities fractured?

Where is forgiveness needed?

Where is justice needed?

Where is there grief?

Where is there joy?

And where might the Church have a distinctive voice—not simply because we have an opinion, but because we have **good news**?

Then Matthew takes us to Caesarea Philippi.

Jesus asks his disciples:

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

They give him the usual answers.

John the Baptist.

Elijah.

Jeremiah.

One of the prophets.

And then Jesus asks the question that really matters:

"But who do you say that I am?"

Peter answers:

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus says:

"On this rock I will build my church."

I love the fact that Jesus doesn't say:

"You will build my church."

He says:

"I will build my church."

That matters enormously when we begin thinking about mission.

The Church is not ultimately our project.

It is not ours to save.

It is not ours to protect at all costs.

It is not ours to make successful.

It belongs to Christ.

And if it belongs to Christ, then our task is not to ask, "How do we make the Church survive?"

Our task is to ask:

"What is Christ doing in the world, and how can we participate?"

That is a very different question.

And there is another striking thing in the Gospel.

Jesus asks his disciples who *he* is.

That means that the Church's voice in South Australia cannot simply be the voice of an institution.

It needs to be a voice that points beyond itself.

A voice that says:

Look at Jesus.

Look at the one who welcomes the outsider.

Look at the one who heals.

Look at the one who forgives.

Look at the one who stands with the poor and the forgotten.

Look at the one who tells us that love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbour.

Look at the one who enters into suffering rather than avoiding it.

Look at the one whom death could not defeat.

If, in 2036, someone asks, **"What does the Church have to say to South Australia?"**, I hope our answer is not simply a collection of institutional positions.

I hope it is a life.

A community.

A people whose way of living makes the character of Christ visible.

So perhaps our three pillars give us a beautiful way of imagining that future.

Growing faith

What if, by 2036, the Church were known as a place where people could ask the deepest questions of life?

Where faith wasn't something assumed or inherited, but something that could be explored, wrestled with, deepened and lived?

A Church where children and young people discover that Christianity is not simply a set of rules, but a relationship with the living Christ.

A Church where adults continue to grow.

Where doubt can be spoken.

Where prayer is learned.

Where Scripture is opened.

Where disciples are formed.

Building community

What if the Church were known as a place where people genuinely belong?

Not because they are the right sort of person.

Not because they have been here for twenty years.

Not because they know how everything works.

But because Christ has made room for them.

A community where the lonely are noticed.

Where generations mix.

Where newcomers are welcomed.

Where differences don't have to become divisions.

Where people discover that, as Paul says, **"we are members one of another."**

Sharing faith

And what if, by 2036, the Church were known as a people who don't keep the good news to ourselves?

Not by becoming pushy or argumentative.

Not by trying to win debates.

But by being willing to say:

This is why we have hope.

This is why we forgive.

This is why we serve.

This is why we care about our neighbours.

This is why we believe every human being bears the dignity of God's image.

This is why we follow Jesus.

There is a danger, of course, when we begin talking about mission.

We can become overwhelmed by the size of the task.

South Australia is a large and changing place.

2036 seems both a long way away and remarkably close.

What difference could we possibly make?

Paul gives us the answer.

You don't have to be everything.

You simply have to offer what God has given you.

"We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us."

The Church doesn't need everyone doing the same thing.

It needs ordinary people offering their particular gifts.

And that means that our Mission Action Plan isn't simply something for the clergy or the parish council or a small group of particularly energetic people.

It belongs to all of us.

Because the question isn't simply:

"What should the Church do?"

It is:

"What is God calling us to offer?"

So as we move into our consultation today, perhaps we could hold three questions in our minds.

First: What is God already doing in South Australia that we want to join?

Second: What gifts has God already placed among us that we have not yet fully offered?

And third:

If we really believed that Jesus is building his Church, what would we dare to imagine for 2036?

Because I don't think God is asking us merely to preserve what we have.

I think God is asking us to **offer what we have**.

Our faith.

Our buildings.

Our relationships.

Our resources.

Our wisdom.

Our experience.

Our young people.

Our older people.

Our stories.

Our failures.

Our hopes.

Our gifts.

Our whole selves.

A living sacrifice.

And perhaps, when we stand in 2036 and look back, the question will not be whether our church managed to survive for another ten years.

Perhaps the better question will be:

Did we make a difference?

Did people encounter Christ because we were here?

Did people find faith?

Did people find belonging?

Did people find hope?

Did people experience the mercy of God through us?

Did we have something life-giving to say to South Australia?

And when the answer is yes—not because we were brilliant, but because we offered ourselves to the God who is still building his Church—then perhaps we will have discovered what mission really is.

Not **"What's in it for us?"**

But:

"Lord, what have you given us—and how can we offer it for the sake of your world?"

Amen.