

LENT

(Season of Lent: February 6–March 22, 2008)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 10, 2008

John E. Guns, Guest Lectionary Commentator

St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church, Jacksonville, FL

Lecture Scripture – Romans 12:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (v. 2) Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

As our culture and the church become more secular and driven by the seductive spirit of distorted materialism, the need for a healthy observance of Lent increases. Lent, which began in the fourth century, has endured several stages of development. In its origination, Lent served as a forty-day period of study and concentrated prayer in preparation for baptism, which would be held during the Easter season. Throughout the course of time, Lent has evolved to serve as a season of self-denial and intense consecration.

While those are worthy pursuits, the notion of redemptive service tied to self-denial has not been sufficiently presented from the modern pulpit nor embraced in Christian culture. I believe it is important that Lent becomes a season, particularly in the African American church, of sacrifice and self-denial tied to the purpose of redemptive societal engagement.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter: Romans 12:1-2

One of the weightier challenges for the African American preacher is to convince the average worshipper to embrace a life of meaningful sacrifice coupled with authentic redemptive service to others. This mandate for sacrifice has become challenging because much of the preaching today focuses on the individual and the pursuit for more. Modesty and simplicity have been replaced with extravagance. For many, the word sacrifice is an unwelcome intruder, demanding more than we have a desire to give. Yet throughout our history, sacrifice has been a staple of our struggles against oppression and the dehumanizing treatment of our oppressors. The Lenten season within the African American church context should not only be a time of self-denial but also a season of

sacrifice where one is inspired to embrace the spirit of modesty and service. In my own context, self-denial, modesty and service to others are themes that I have preached and I have endeavored to model each. I believe strongly that to turn around a generation that so readily embraces unhealthy materialism, the church must preach and model an unmistakable image of Christ as a savior who denied himself and sacrificed for us, lived modestly, and served others. This is the profound lesson embedded in Romans 12:1-3.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Paul in Romans 12:1-3 provides a great challenge to those who have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. He calls upon those who have embraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ, experienced justification (5:1-11) and now live under the authority of the Holy Spirit (8:1-17) to offer themselves as sacrifices unto God.

This idea of offering or sacrifice is grounded in the system of offerings found in the Pentateuch. There were three main types or groups of sacrifices in ancient Israel's worship: those that made atonement; those that were for celebration (peace offerings, as well as other variations, such as Passover); and those that were for dedication (meal offerings, as well offering the first fruit, first born, paying vows, and making other types of dedicatory rituals). Essentially, there was the forgiveness and acceptance by God through atoning sacrifices, the celebration of being at peace with God in the fellowship or peace offering, and the dedication to worship and serve God through the dedication or meal offering. Paul is clearly aware of these sacrificial customs discussed in the Pentateuch. In fact, throughout Romans (fifty-seven times in total) he quotes from the Pentateuch and other Old Testament books as he provides a linkage between the old and the new for his readers.

Paul declares that as a result of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ those who confess him are now called to submit themselves as instruments of God's will through consecration. This consecration involves the intentional yielding of oneself to the desires of Jesus Christ. This offering or intentional yielding of one's self now takes on the character of the offerings/sacrifices in the Old Testament. Because of Jesus Christ, the offering of one now is "holy" and "acceptable" as was the requirement of the lamb used in the Old Testament sacrifice system.

What is important to note is that through the offering of one's self to God, authentic and God acceptable worship can occur. In this instance the word worship, which is derived from the Greek word latreia, means the performance of sacred services as required by the Levitical law. The nature of this consecration then forms and shapes itself around the performance of acts that speak of the mercy of God through Jesus Christ. This mercy, expressed through the justifying work of Jesus Christ, now motivates the believer to yield himself or herself in a substantive way to the will of God. The consecration of the believer now satisfies the requirement of the law found in the Old Testament, not as an extension of a legal system of religion, but rather in and through the life changing sacrifice of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice persuades those who call him Lord to live a life of

ultimate commitment. This ultimate commitment pleases God and is expressed through a life of service, which then becomes a marvelous statement of worship.

As persons who lead others in worship, it is important that worship is holistically defined. Paul allows us to see worship as service. I suggest that if we follow the model of our Christ, this can aid greatly in inspiring congregations to embrace worship as acts of service for others done in the name of Christ. Worship is now enfleshed and it moves beyond the sanctuary into the streets. Worship is now the kindness I extend to those in need. Worship is now the time I invest in assisting those who are attempting to rise above the obvious barriers of our educational system. Worship is now the resources I give to causes that improve and enhance the quality of life for fellow travelers. Worship is now my life of service and sacrifice because I have a holistic understanding of worship.

What is the key to one's willingness to make such a sacrifice? What aids greatly in one's ability to embrace sacrifice and service as a lifestyle? The key is found in Romans 12:2. In v. 2, it is shown that the worshipper who serves and sacrifices must have a transformed mind. The idea of transformation is twofold. First, it is grounded in a full embrace of the process of inner change, and second it rejects the world system, which contradicts the will of God. This means that doing the will of God is inexplicably linked to one's willingness to endure the process of change, which results in the offering or sacrifice of oneself.

The Lenten Season is powerful because it provides the individual an opportunity to begin transformation with the support of a communal setting, the church. During this period and beyond, the idea of sacrifice and service are important concepts that we can make plans to pursue. During this season of repentance, self-denial, and prayer, we should strive to find meaningful ways to live out our faith. The Lenten Season allows us to seek out ways to redemptively involve ourselves in our community and the world through the local church. Thus, in a world that can be ruggedly individualistic, we now find communal participation through the Lenten Season.

The transformation of our minds from a self-directed orientation to one that seeks service and sacrifice will lead us to engage in acts of compassion and mercy. The rejection of a societal pathos of selfishness and over indulgence will lead to a new understanding of worship. In the end, the authentic spirit of sacrifice birthed from a transformed mind leads to a fresh and exciting life of service, which is true worship.

Challenge

This text calls us to yield ourselves completely to God through Jesus Christ, living a life of meaningful service. As Jesus Christ offered himself so are we to do the same. As he became our redeemer, so are we to become redemptive tools in the hands of a merciful God.

Descriptive Details

Sounds: our cries as we endure the process of being transformed by Christ; words of appreciation from those whom we serve; and

Sights: cleaner communities; the smiling faces of children; the appreciative faces of those who are lonely as they receive visits of comfort.