

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

In the passage from Romans Paul very clearly sets out that the desire for change is something that we have to take personal responsibility for.

Of course, the good news is that we are not shouldering this responsibility alone; the Holy Spirit allows us to be a co-worker in this endeavour. We pray, change our hearts Lord, make them new, but unless we are prepared to be involved in the venture, it's not going to succeed.

We are told that when we accept Jesus, as Lord of our life, he will change us and, hopefully, this *is* the result of coming to faith, however the change of body and mind very rarely comes overnight.....unless, of course, you are Saul of Tarsus!

In fact, in my experience, it has been and continues to be an extremely gradual change over many years; maybe we ourselves don't notice it. I can remember my son turning to me many years ago, and saying, well, becoming a Christian has certainly made you a nicer person. I can't imagine what he meant, had I been a horrid person? Obviously!!

It's only when we think back over the years and wonder, did I really, think, say or do those things and believe they were ok? that we begin to understand that there *has* been a work of God in us.

We are made in the image of God, but unless we have been nurtured in a glass case with no contact with the outside world from birth, that image gets blurred and even buried.

When we pray, Holy Spirit make me new, we are praying Holy Spirit wash away, burn away, blow away the things that mar the image of God in me; and to be fair there are some spots that have particularly stubborn stains.

So how *do* we take personal responsibility in this work of the Spirit to renew our minds? We pray, change the way I think, and our contribution to that transformation could be to discern carefully what books to read, what films to watch, what company to keep.

Have you ever had the experience of reading a series of books and the characters and storyline taking over your thinking?

I used to read a lot of Catherine Cookson novels, and I guess the themes were all pretty similar but the way she wrote, from personal experience, of the times they were set in, and the poverty and deprivation and cruelty that was part of those times, really made me begin to compare my lifestyle to the lifestyles portrayed in the stories, and to be aware of how different my life was, to feel guilty about waste and to be thankful for the things I had previously taken for granted.

In comparison, although I enjoyed watching Downton Abbey, I got swept on thinking so much privilege was ok and it left me feeling quite comfortable with a sense that the servants were actually very well looked after and fed and housed, and privilege was a good thing.

And then there are the films and television series that are full of gratuitous violence and sexual encounters, and if we watch them long enough the line between fantasy and life can become blurred, and actual violent incidents stop shocking us and almost become an accepted part of life. We move on, as it were, to the next episode.

So, Paul encourages us to take practical steps to make way for the Holy Spirit to change our way of thinking.

Eph. 5:19

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. This may sound a bit super righteous but what I take from it is, always speak to one another with encouragement and love.

Looking, always, for the positive and helping to lift people's spirits. And, of course, make daily Bible Reading a firm discipline. I mean, if you are looking for violence I can recommend quite a few Old Testament books, and then we get the opportunity to see the difference the teachings of Jesus made in the New Testament.

He also encourages us to offer our bodies in sacrifice; and the exciting thing about that is the body we are offering can be young and lithe and fit, or older and less supple and less fit.

Offering our bodies means being willing to allow God to use us in service to him. Of course, the body is not separate to the spirit or the mind, so how healthy our spirit and mind are, determines how useful our bodies can be.

This process does consist quite a lot of being willing to be humbled, as we have to be able to evaluate our capabilities honestly. Sometimes we mistakenly think we are more gifted in an area than we are, in my case this was highlighted by hearing a recording of myself singing enthusiastically and out of tune! This doesn't stop me enjoying singing but I would never offer to sing solo out of respect for those who can sing in tune. And I always pray for the person next to me.

Sometimes, we don't realise the gift is waiting to be discovered and it might take someone else to encourage us to try something we think is out of our gifting.

I can't imagine that when Jesus, said to Peter,"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

I can't think that Peter said "bring it on I'm so ready." Can you?

Renewing of the body means asking the Holy Spirit to show us clearly how God wants to use us; not by undervaluing or overvaluing our capabilities. There are so many ways of serving God and sometimes we have to fail in order to discern where we can be used.

In my early years of church life I was convinced (and still am convinced) of the importance of teaching the children the basics of Christianity and how to live a Christian lifestyle. I eagerly joined the Sunday School team as a helper soon to be made aware of how little gifting I have in teaching children, fortunately for the children involved I was made aware.

Children are extremely insightful in their innocence, aren't they? I began to feel afraid that they would find out just how little I knew. In fact I think some of them did!

I did learn a lot though, through ministering to the elderly and discovered that by visiting and chatting with them I found a great deal of fulfilment and gained a lot of understanding of the human condition.

My head told me that children were the most important people to encourage and teach but my heart soon showed me that actually God had given me more to offer to those who were closer, in time, to meeting with God.

Both of these areas are, of course, equally as important in church life.

Romans 12:5f-6a

We are all parts of his one body, and each of us has different work to do, and since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs the others.

God has given each of us the ability to do *certain* things well.

And this is something we need to keep in mind when we are thinking of a new vicar for our church. He/she might excel in some areas and perhaps need our help in others, unless of course we get to appoint the angel Gabriel. This, I feel, is doubtful on a part-time stipend!

No-one is perfect here on earth – one day perfection will be ours, because we will spend eternity praising and worshipping the God who lives within us now, and who longs to use us, in his name, to heal the hurting world that he created in love to love.

Amen.