

2026 August 23 sermon – A call to Holiness

Readings: Isaiah 51: 1-6; Romans 12: 1-8; Matthew 16: 13-20

A common refrain within Christian circles is that we are called to be 'in the world but not of it'. What does that actually mean, and how seriously do we take it as an idea or basis for Christian living in our modern western secular society context? I raise this, as I see it as a recurring theme throughout Scripture and the history of the Church. In particular, it leapt out at me as I read our epistle reading from Romans, but it is also an underlying current to much of the writings of the prophets with Vangemeren noting, in his book *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, that "The life of faith continually responds to the prophetic call not to become entangled in the structures of this world but to cling to the Lord our Redeemer". I frame this a 'call to Holiness' in my title to this sermon, as I believe that a desire for holy living is the driving force behind most of the attempts throughout history to live separately to the world, even if some of these did not always achieve this objective. It can also be seen as a response to a desire to live in obedience to the overarching call of scripture to place God first and foremost in all we say and do.

As a starting point to considering some of the examples from Biblical history, as well as wider historical and more modern accounts of where this separateness from the world has been attempted and practised, let us begin with the Bible Hub's working definition that "*A Call to Holiness* refers to the divine invitation and command for believers to live a life set apart for God, characterized by moral purity, spiritual integrity, and dedication to God's purposes." So where do we see this call or invitation to alternative living? A key verse in this regard is 1 Peter 1: 14-16 "So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."" This last reference goes back to the law of Moses (see Lev 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:7) as well as as the likes of Ezek 20:12, Eph 1:4, 1 Thess 4:3, or Rev 22:11.

In early Old Testament times, this was worked out via commands for the people of Israel to not intermarry with those of the surrounding nations or tribal groups, and the various ceremonial and sacrificial laws that set them apart from those around them. They were also called to live collectively as a theocracy, directly under the guidance of the priests and prophets, as led by God; something that only lasted until they desired to be like all the other nations and have a King over them 'like all the other nations'. Moving forward to the inter-testamental period and through to the time of Jesus we have the establishment of groups such as the Essenes (second century BC – first century AD). Of the three main religious groups mentioned by Josephus (a well-known first century Jewish historian), they are the only ones not found directly in Scripture. Although the Essenes lived in various cities, they congregated to live a communal monastic lifestyle that had strict membership requirements, rules, and rituals. They dedicated themselves to living an ascetic life that included voluntary poverty and abstaining from worldly pleasures. They were also known for many of their number being celibate, a likely reason for them only lasting around 300 years! Although smaller in number than the Pharisees or Sadducees, it is believed that as many as 4,000 men embraced their lifestyle. This approach to Christian living was a precursor to the early Church asceticism movement, with individuals practising self-discipline and renunciation of worldly pleasures to pursue spiritual goals. This lifestyle was notably exemplified by figures like Saint Anthony, who lived in solitude and sought communion with God, and eventually laying the groundwork for Christian monasticism, with aspects of some of these Monastic orders, still existing today.

More modern times have seen the rise of Christian groups such as the Amish in America and Churches like the Exclusive Brethren. Dare I even suggest that the Gloriavale community, having been exposed in more recent times for some questionable practices, in its beginnings was a local NZ attempt at a Christian response to the Biblical call for separateness from the ways of the world? But as Gloriavale in particular, and other groups also show, the best human intentions and endeavours, do not always turn out as

expected, as they can become subverted over time into something different to what was originally planned. This is not to say that the original intent was wrong, but more that any structure developed by flawed human beings has the potential to become less than perfect over time. All the more reason to touch base periodically with what the original plan and intent was, so that adjustments to how we do things can be made where necessary.

What better way to do this, in this context, but to have a brief deeper dive into the apostle Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, which is where my reflection on this subject began. In doing so, I will be drawing particularly on the work of Barrett in his Commentary on Romans, which is part of the broader Harper New Testament Commentary series. Barrett begins his discussion on Romans chapter 12, by noting that many commentators and writers see a major break in Paul's letter between the first 11 chapters and the remaining four. This is because the first part of the letter seems to focus on dogma and dealing with practical issues, whereas chapters 12 – 15 have a more ethical flavour, and indeed can be seen as providing a foundation for Christian ethics. While recognising this change in focus, Barrett's view is that "it is a serious mistake to treat the two parts of the epistle as distinct from each other. Paul's dogmatic teaching is misunderstood if it is not seen to require ethical action, and his ethical teaching cannot be grasped if it is not recognised that it rests at every point upon the dogmatics. Rather than being a contradiction of the doctrine of justification by faith, it is best understood as an exposition of the obedience which is an essential element of faith and of the gratitude which redeemed and justified individuals are bound to feel towards a merciful God."

This focus on obedience is strengthened when considering that the language used throughout verse 1 has a sacrificial feel – *by God's mercies; offer your bodies as a living sacrifice; holy and well pleasing to God*. In particular, the words 'offer', 'holy', and 'well-pleasing' are technical terms within a sacrificial context. In 'offering our bodies' Paul is meaning all we are as human beings, including how we express ourselves in our common life together. In offering all that we are to God, we are in effect offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving, while at the same time recognising that it is only through God's mercies and not because of any merits of our own that we are able to do so at all. The Greek words translated as 'spiritual worship' also require unpacking, as etymologically their meaning is 'pertaining to the logos or reason' and was applied by the likes of the Stoics to that which related man to God. Paul is seen as using it in terms of a worship "consisting not in outward rites but in the movement of man's inward being." These 'mercies of God', while providing the basis for our sacrifice and *not conforming to this age but being transformed by the renewal of our minds*, also "record the way (traced out in chapters 1-11) in which God has brought his eternal purposes to their fulfilment in Christ." With the death and resurrection of Christ, the 'Age to Come' has begun, meaning that "men have now received the first-fruits of the Spirit, and so are under obligation not to the flesh (or the old human order) but to the Spirit," In line with the underlying meaning of the Greek wording, Paul is suggesting that "being conformed to this age results in an 'unfit mind'" so to recognise and share the act of redemption accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus means the renewing of the mind. In this world, renewal is most clearly shown in moral life. Its aim is *that you may try and approve what is the will of God and what is hold acceptable and perfect.*" (12:2). Thus for Paul, the Christian finds out the will of God, not to contemplate it, but to do it.

So, as we seek to follow in the footsteps of those original disciples of Jesus, who recognised Jesus as the true Messiah, God incarnate in their midst, so Paul's challenge to the members of the early church in Rome comes as clearly to us as it did to them. How we live in response to what is revealed to us of God through the Scriptures is as important as what we profess to believe in our hearts. The challenge to not become conformed to this age, to not be entangled in the structures of the world, is one we still need to grapple with and work through today. May God give us the wisdom and insight to determine how best we do this, not only as individuals, but also as the parish and community of St Paul's. Amen.