

“Therefore, I urge you in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Romans 12:1-8)

For a minute please share with the person next to you about your “favourite Olympic moment” and “what would be the biggest sacrifice needed to become an Olympic champion?”

It is amazing what we human beings will do, sacrifice, and endure for the sake of something we really want – a gold medal, fame and adulation, being the best, to prove ourselves, or to prove a point. It is also amazing what some parents will sacrifice so that their children can have a shot at being the best. After winning a medal one of our swimmers told us how “all that throwing up on her front lawn after early morning training was worth it!”. The world really needed to hear that and you probably didn't need to hear about it this morning! Think about what cyclist Anna Meares put her body through to get silver, literally breaking her neck earlier this year to get to Beijing! Then there was the Japanese team that ate Chinese food for a month just to get themselves right for the games! Sacrifices.....

In today's text from Romans 12 we Christians are called to make an incredible sacrifice of our own, only we do it not to deserve something, but because of something we have already been given.

“I urge you in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship”. God's mercy. Paul has just spent 11 chapters in his letter to the Romans outlining God's mercy. The free gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ, the power of the Gospel to save, no condemnation for those in Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God – they're all there in Romans 1-11. In baptism God's mercy, his great love and forgiveness has been placed over our heads. Because of God's mercy our bodies are holy and pleasing to God and now God wants us to live that way as our offering of thanks.

Christ put his body on the line, or rather on the cross, and not just for his country but for the whole world. Romans 6 says in baptism he took us with him through his sacrifice on the cross and lifted us up again into a new life. Now God calls us to make a sacrifice of our own. A sacrifice of our very own bodies.

We don't worship our bodies, we worship God with our bodies.

We don't sacrifice for gold but for God.

We worship God and thank him and honour him by the way we use our bodies in life.

That's the Christian calling, it's the worship you give when you are not here at worship! What you do in your body this week is your worship, your offering, your response to the mercy you received here today when your sins were forgiven because of Christ. Not just getting out of bed and dragging your body here to sing hymns and say prayers but what you do tomorrow with your body is your worship too, and it is just as spiritual. We have this funny idea hymn singing and sermons and Bible study is spiritual stuff but getting the kids off to school and going to work and cleaning house is not. Luther said your workbench or desk or sink or the nappy change table is your altar tomorrow. Offer yourself to God there just as you do here.

I guess that transforms the way we normally think. And that's just what Paul says is meant to happen. The more God's mercy takes hold of us the more our minds begin to be transformed. The way we see our life in the body needs to be transformed by God, not conformed to what people and the media around thinks. **“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your**

mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Knowing God's mercy in Jesus and the great sacrifice he made with his body on the cross for us gradually changes the way we see the things that affect our bodies differently – money and sex, work and leisure, family, sickness and health, and death itself. No wonder Jesus had so much to say about bodily functions - what we do with our bodies! He didn't separate the body from the spiritual.

Sometimes being a living sacrifice will feel like just that, a sacrifice – forgoing the right to say and do what you like. Giving up some income for the sake of the poor and to ensure Good News of Jesus goes out. Sacrifices of time for others. Sacrifices of a Sunday morning to come together before God. Living our lives for God Monday to Saturday in our jobs or study or homes.

Living for God not for gold 24/7 can be tough, hard going. It can be painful, it can cost us everything to live as a Christian. It takes training, and many failures and mistakes and physical and mental discipline. To be an Olympic athlete means having some natural giftedness but it's also between the ears. Football is a bit like that these days too. It's in the head as much as it is in the body. St Paul says living as a Christian, living as an ongoing sacrifice of thanks to God for everything Jesus Christ means to you starts in the head where our minds need transforming when they are prone to conforming to the thinking around us.

One example of where our minds need transforming is how we think about and see ourselves. Imagine being a Michael Phelps or a Usain Bolt. It would be hard not to walk around with a big head, feeling superior. It is great to see humble champion. God wants to see humility in Christians and in how they relate to each other. Paul says: **“by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you”**. Remember we are who we are because of God's mercy because of Christ's sacrifice on cross not our own. In the church Paul says don't compare, don't think of yourself more highly than others. Don't think because you are a Christian you are better than other people who aren't. We are what we are by grace, mercy, gift, not achievement. So live with a sober judgement about yourself not a big head or an inflated spiritual ego.

We also need to have our thinking about each other in the church transformed, the church which is called the “body of Christ”. Athletes are always comparing and competing, we don't. St Paul goes on to say that in the body called the church we see each other not as competitors and threats but as team mates with complementary gifts and abilities. St Paul says **“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully”**.

Just as there is no point to the argument comparing Phelps and Bolt, a swimmer and a runner in terms of who is the best – they are both gifted but differently gifted, so St Paul goes on to remind us we each have different spiritual gifts - something God can use as a witness to Christ in a special way and that gift may be different in each of us, so there is no point comparing yourself to others. The only comparing is for our own benefit - “am I using the gifts God has given me to the max? Or am I coasting, running well within myself, or putting my feet up and living as a spiritual couch potato!?”.

We are all gifted athletes in the church. Gifted but not elite and not aloof, gifted but different. We have been gifted to serve and to use our spiritual giftedness for God for the sake of the Gospel. It's a team thing, like a medley relay, and we each have our part to play. And we work together with the cross of Christ around our necks, which reminds us how we got where we are and guarantees our place with him at the finish.

Living as a Christian starts with God's mercy, it goes to our heads and changes our thinking, the way we look at everyone and everything, and it ends up changing what we do with our bodies and in the body of Christ, the Church. It's a huge sacrifice, a “living sacrifice” but as one athlete said “we're only doing what we love” - it's a sacrifice we're happy to make for Christ. His love makes it all worthwhile.

