

The Humility of God

Philippians 2:1-11

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Our text is the NT lesson from Philippians. It is, historically, a companion reading to the well-known gospel text about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The main point of the standard Palm Sunday gospel lesson is quite clear, and I'm sure most of you have heard it many times. It is that Jesus comes as a lowly king. He comes on a donkey, not a war horse. He comes in weakness, to suffer and die, not, as many of his contemporaries wanted, to conquer and militarily overthrow the Romans. A triumphal entry it is, but one of a deeply ironic and upside down quality.

What this text from Philippians does is root the actions of our Lord on Palm Sunday in the eternal being of God. Which is why this passage can be considered a continuation of our series on God, where here's we are focusing on what I am calling the humility of God. In addition, it drives home the example of Jesus on Palm Sunday, and through his passion, as the pattern of life to which we are called.

We will look at this passage under two headings. The plea in verses 1 through 4, and the pattern in vv. 5 through 11.

I. The Plea

First, then, the plea: v.1 If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit. These are gifts of the Triune God to the church. These things exist, in some measure, in any Christian community, and here Paul seeks to see them extended and deepened. He continues: If there is any affection (tenderness) and sympathy (compassion). These are probably to be thought of as root and fruit. Affection, inward warmth, tenderness, is the root, and it is to manifest itself in acts of sympathy, suffering with, the other.

Unity involves, then, not only confession of the same faith, uniform worship and government, a united vision, it involves your emotional life. It must reach down to the roots of your affections. Unity depends, critically, on your capacity to enter into the life of other people, to be fully present with them, to see the world from

INSIDE their plight, to make room for them. Unity is visceral. If these things exist among you, then Paul says in v.2: make my joy complete by being of the same mind.

Here we have another wonderful glimpse into the heart of the apostle. He is chained and imprisoned for the gospel. The threat of execution hangs over his head, and his full, complete joy can be secured by ONE of his churches standing in unity & brotherly affection. Same mind, means, literally, to think the same thing. Paul does not mean, of course, that everyone thinks exactly the same way, or that they all have the same set of convictions, though a basic unity in the gospel is surely included. His point is that they have the same FRAME of mind. The same mindset. This comes out in the other two phrases of v.2: they are to have the same love.

The same love of God, and the same impartial love of all the brethren. And they are to be in full accord. One in spirit and purpose. In v.3 we see how this unity is to be achieved and maintained. Do nothing from selfish ambition or (vain) conceit. Put simply, selfishness and vanity destroy unity.

In our circles we tend to think, wrongly, that all/most disunity is caused by doctrinal error. But if you actually look at real church divisions: rivalry, factions, selfishness and conceit; a profound lack of charity, always loom large. We are to do nothing from selfishness, but rather, Paul continues, we are to act in (out of) humility. John Chrysostom said there is nothing so foreign to a Christian as arrogance. Humility is simply sanity. It is not feigned or groveling, it's not sanctimonious, it's not a pathetic lack of dignity, it is a mark of moral clarity and integrity. It is simply a sober acknowledgment of one's weaknesses. Pascal said that "what amazes me the most, is to see that everyone is not amazed at his weakness."

So, humility is a true assessment of oneself, and it results in a charitable assessment of others: in humility, consider (count) others better than yourselves. Of course, we are all equally significant, but in actual situations, in encounters with others, we have to decide whose concerns and interests are to be given priority. Treat the other person as more important than yourself. There's an old rhyme which goes: It takes more grace than I can tell, to play the second fiddle well. Put your concerns last.

This doesn't mean, as verse 4 indicates, that we don't have legitimate concerns that we have to look after, but we must also look after the interests of others – and where there is a conflict, our first instinct should be to let the other win. There can be no deep, lasting unity without this other-oriented humility. And unity in the church, Calvin said, is the chief indicator of its prosperous condition. That is Paul's passionate plea to the church.

II. The Pattern

Our second point is the pattern. V.5 have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus. Your attitude, your disposition, should be the same as Christ Jesus. What is on display on Palm Sunday, in the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, is just this attitude, this mindset. He is entering into the last phase of his self-emptying. He rejects the way of the Zealots. He will not call for, or lead, a movement to overthrow the Roman yoke by force. Yet, he is no Roman collaborator. He is, in the end, more subversive than all the zealots and agitators combined. His is a new form of kingship, a revolutionary way of being revolutionary. And here, Paul traces it back for us all the way into his eternal, pre-incarnate existence with the Father.

And this text, which has been down in the dirt, the gritty stuff of living together in unity, ascends and roots that exhortation in the very life God. Highly theology is highly practical. Verse 6 tells us this is the One who, being in very nature (though he was in the form of) God. This language is a bit unusual, but it is clear that what is being asserted is that Jesus was fully God-- he was equal with God.

But we need to ask WHO – was in the form of God? And to say Jesus here is NOT quite right – or at least it needs clarifying. Since Jesus is his human name, given upon becoming flesh, and here we have receded back into the eternal being of God, prior to the incarnation. The “who” of verse 6 is the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who is of the same essence or substance with the Father – that divine person... That’s the one WHO, though he was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God (an equality which he possesses) a thing to be grasped. The pre-existent Christ, the eternal Son, did not consider his deity something to be employed or exploited for selfish ends. Any assertion of his rights --- notice his equal and due rights --- he refused to grasp. This laying down of one’s rights, the refusal to assert one’s dignity and equality, has its roots NOT first in the historical life of Jesus, not even in the act by which he descends into the womb of Mary.

Paul traces, what we have called the humility, the lowliness of God, back into the disposition, the attitude, the mind of the Son in eternity. When Christ in the gospels speaks of his heart, which he does but one time, he says: I am meek and lowly of heart. And that meekness, is not some foreign, alien element, some strange feature taken up in the incarnation – it is who he was, as God the Son, in the life of the Trinity. Before the worlds began.

Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. But verse 7 continues, he made himself nothing. This phrase is literally, he emptied himself, and there is a long and convoluted debate about what this means. We can safely say a few things.

First: it does not mean he emptied himself of his divinity, or of some divine attributes, though there is a sense in which his full divinity is veiled (not absent but not always on view) in the incarnation.

Second: the issue here is not what Christ emptied OUT of himself, but what he emptied himself INTO. And that is defined in the rest of v.7: He TOOK the form of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Third: this means the emptying is in fact a TAKING (by addition), a taking of the very nature of a servant. Literally, a slave.

Fourth: this means that Christ did not exchange one mode, the mode of God, for another, the mode of a servant. Rather, he manifested his deity AS a slave. He is *not* God in man, he is God AS man.

The form of God and the form of a slave were, apparently, perfectly compatible for our God --- because of this non-grasping, non-striving, humility. The wonder of this, must never be lost on us. This is the kind of God we serve, the lowly God, the meek and humble One, who takes the form of a slave. The fullness which can be manifested by making itself NOTHING. The God whose very God-ness can be expressed in stooping to become a slave. Lo, within a manger lies, He who built the starry skies.

To an observer, v.8 continues, he would be “found” appearing as any other man. Just a carpenter from Nazareth, the son of Mary. So, he traverses the distance between God and sinners. A thing we have no categories to capture. Even using the word “distance” shows the poverty of our concepts, for we can only measure distance as pertaining creatures.

If a man were to become say, a dog, or an insect, that would not even begin, in fact, it would fall infinitely short of describing this emptying. The all glorious God, transcendent over all time and space, incomparable and in need of nothing, and for whom the sprawling cosmos and all the nations are as less than nothing--- becomes man.

Martin Luther: He whom the worlds could not unwrap, yonder lies in Mary’s lap (German version). Or in the English version of Luther’s hymn #219 (All Praise to Thee, Eternal Lord): Once did the skies before Thee bow, a virgin’s arms contain thee now.

Having made THIS descent, he further humbles, or empties, himself - again, notice, this is a voluntary subjection.

Kierkegaard says: Christ humbled HIMSELF – not, he WAS humbled. K says this is infinitely sublime, for there were none in heaven or on earth or in the abyss that could humble him.

This One comes willingly. No one takes his life from him. He lays it down of his own accord. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, and though it has lost all shock value to us, Paul adds for effect -- EVEN death on a cross. Crucifixion is perhaps the most agonizing form of death ever invented. The Jewish historian Josephus said, "it is the most wretched of deaths." In the Roman Empire, it was reserved for the vilest of criminals, for slaves and insurrectionists. Polite Roman society would avoid speaking of it. "Even death on a cross" should provoke revulsion. And the result of this self-emptying unto execution, comes in verses 9 through 11.

Therefore, (meaning because of this self-emptying humility), therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

There will be universal confession, universal submission, universal ascription of glory to the exalted Christ. Even unbelievers will make this confession; no one will fail to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ.

The 6th c. pagan emperor, Julian, when he was dying, was alleged to say: "Thou hast conquered, O Galilean" — expressing his recognition that, with his (Julian's) death, Christianity would become the Empire's religion.

The whole host of all who have lived will make this confession, either in triumph and joy, or in despair as Julian. For the humility and lowliness of God, is a triumphant and victorious humility. It is a weakness that is stronger than men. It is a divine, exalted humility, destined to gather the creation back into communion with this generous, self-giving, gentle and humble God.

Now, because of the astonishing glimpse it gives us into the being of God, the mind of the Son, prior to the incarnation, this passage has been subject to a great deal of scrutiny and debate. But how it functions HERE, in Paul's argument, is simple. This emptying, this becoming nothing, this refusal to insist on one's rights, this is the pattern for all Christian living.

This is the indispensable prerequisite to deep unity in the church. And its absence, is why so many churches, and friendships, fractured during the pandemic. To reiterate, Jesus is functioning as the pattern here for the plea made in vv. 1-4. And if he is the pattern, that means Palm Sunday is not just for Jesus. It requires of us, an imitation of the incarnation. Of him who emptied himself, who made himself *nothing*, who did *nothing* from selfishness or conceit, who considered our needs above his own.

Who, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor, that we THROUGH HIS POVERTY, might become rich. The road to riches, for us, as it was for our Lord, is the road of self-emptying poverty.

Here is BB Warfield's beautiful description of this imitation of the humility of the eternal Son, to which we are called:

He was led by His love for others into the world, to forget Himself in the needs of others, to sacrifice self once for all upon the altar of sympathy. Self-sacrifice brought Christ into the world. And self-sacrifice will lead us, His followers, not away from but into the midst of men. Wherever men suffer, there will we be to comfort. Wherever men strive, there will we be to help. Wherever men fail, there will be we to uplift. Wherever men succeed, there will we be to rejoice. Self-sacrifice means not indifference to our times and our fellows: it means absorption in them. It means forgetfulness of self in others. It means entering into every man's hopes and fears, longings and despairs: it means many-sidedness of spirit, multiform activity, multiplicity of sympathies. Only, when, like Christ, and in loving obedience to His call and example, we take no account of ourselves, but freely give ourselves to others, we shall find, each in his measure, the saying true of himself also: "Wherefore also God hath highly exalted him."

The path of self-sacrifice, the Palm Sunday path, is the path to glory. Amen.

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