

## Above Every Name

### Philippians 2:5-11

In this celebrated Christ hymn highlighting both the humility and exaltation of Jesus, Paul encouraged his readers in Philippi to let the "mind" of Christ (v. 5) be operative in them. In the chapter's first four verses, the ones just before our text, Paul highlighted character traits that would emanate from a Christ like mind: selflessness and humble regard for others and their interests. Paul goes further in impressing the nature of a Christ like mind on his readers, citing how Jesus, in the very form of God or equal with God, did not exploit such status but emptied himself in the manner in which Paul sought to persuade the Philippians to live.

Paul placed emphasis on our state of the mind as central to faithfulness, not just in the Philippians' correspondence, but in many of his writings. In Philippians Paul's appeal was "*both* to the attitude shown by Christ Jesus and to the attitude that is therefore appropriate to those who are 'in him.'" Paul argued that such an attitude leads to action reflective of the reality of a renewed mind (Rom. 12:2). Verse 5 could read, "Show among yourselves the attitude that arises from the fact that you are in Christ."

Today, matters of debate and contention among Christians in congregations can try our capacity to demonstrate such an attitude. Church members fight over the interpretation of doctrine; the effort to inject into the veins of ancient church traditions the life-renewing fluids of innovation; and the attempt to create greater inclusion. For these reasons Paul placed great emphasis on the mind in his writings in general and the mind of Christ in particular in this text. The relevant question for us twenty-first-century Christians, as was the case in the first century, is how we

exemplify selflessness and humble regard for others, particularly in times of contention and controversy.

In this Christ hymn Paul's emphasis is that the Philippians *show* among themselves the *attitude* of those who are in Christ. The late Dr. R. Maurice Boyd once said, "We can think ourselves into a new way of acting, or we can act ourselves into a new way of thinking." To be in Christ is to know that the effort to link thought and action is not generated solely by our own power. It is also to know that the mind of Christ cannot be operational in our personal lives or in the body of the church apart from our faithful response to God's initiating work, the work of God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself (2 Cor. 5:19).

Our faithful response to God's divine invitation and initiative and God's ongoing work in our lives helps in the cultivation of habits, what Boyd called "Habits of Being." Habits, he said, gain depth and power through their repetition, expressing who we are. The habit of being is more than rote repetition, more than the technique employed by an artist. The great artists—whether in the graphic, performing, or visual categories, or writers convey, says Boyd, their own distinctive style symbolic of their being: "the quality of their person." Who we are—our being—infuses what we do.

Since the life of faith is about a habit of being, our text highlights the state of mind central to what it means to be in Christ. The connection between the habit of being and the mind of Christ in us shows the priorities of our lives. If the mind of Christ is in us, it should be reflected in our character. If the mind of Christ is in us, it should be reflected in our grappling with the internal conflicts and contradictions in our lives. If the mind of Christ is in us, it should be reflected in our receptivity to the new thing God may be attempting to evoke in our lives. If the mind of Christ is in us, it should be reflected in our approach to conflict. If the mind of

Christ is in us, it should be reflected in our capacity to sacrifice on behalf of others and to forgive.

The Gospels and the Epistles testify to the manner in which Jesus addressed most of these in his own life. Our text grasps how Christ's self-emptying humility in particular led to his exaltation: the universal recognition of Jesus as Lord. To write this to first-century Philippians in the heart of the Roman Empire, where emperor worship was prevalent, was no small matter. Today it is easy for us to get caught up in worshipping youth, athletes, money, and power. The "pattern of behavior Paul had placed before the Corinthians would have been as much of a challenge to the whole Roman social ethos." To let the mind of Christ be operative in their lives is countercultural. At the end of the text, Paul declared that the whole creation will acknowledge the lordship of Christ, when the dominant contemporary cultural ethos of Philippi tended toward the cult of the emperor. Paul exhorted us, as individuals and as a congregation, to have the mind of Christ, and acknowledge him as the Lord of all creation. This calls us to be different from the world, to be holy, to have a habit of being that is faithful to God, others and to the whole creation. **Kenneth I. Clarke Sr.**

This scripture also reminds us that this is Palm Sunday. Triumphant processions are familiar to us. There are motorcades for Super Bowl champions, parades for returning war heroes, the inaugural walk down Pennsylvania Avenue for new presidents. Processions are how we honor human victory and achievement. Palm Sunday may look and feel like more of the same—the church's annual pomp and circumstance to honor Jesus. This passage from Philippians upends our customary notion of a triumphant procession, reminding us that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is part of his passion.

The church at Philippi was not exempt from the chronic human vices of rivalry and envy, selfish ambition and conceit (Phil. 1:15; 2:3). Following his usual pattern, Paul takes the story of the cross and resurrection and transforms it into an exhortation to Christian discipleship: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (v. 5). From his prison cell, Paul urges them to let Christ's way of thinking and acting serve as the template for their own lives. Then Paul led the Philippians into a poetic reflection on Christ's humiliation and exaltation, a reflection that challenges conventional understandings of both divine and human power.

To human beings caught up in envy and selfish ambition, equality with God (v. 6) seems like a great prize, something that could be brought to us honor and recognition and used for our own purposes. But this attitude shows a misunderstanding of God's power. God's power in the creaturely world is found in self-giving to what God made. God is not in a rivalry with humans for glory or majesty. God, the creator of all, is not in competition with creatures for power or resources. Unlike us, God has no position to defend, no personal interests to protect. There is no envy or selfish ambition in the God. Therefore, to be in the form of God was not to exploit by Jesus showing off his superior power but Jesus manifested God's power through acts of free, self-sacrificing love.

This is of course exactly what we see in Jesus Christ, whose life is the perfect incarnation of God's love and power. Rather than considering equality with God something to be exploited, Jesus Christ mirrored divine reality by emptying himself, taking on the form of the slave, following a way of life that led finally to death on a cross (vv. 6-8). In the incarnation Christ did not give up the perquisites of deity, but displayed God's own power and wisdom in what looked to the world like weakness and foolishness (1 Cor. 1:24-25). As Gregory of Nyssa noted, God's

transcendent power is more conspicuously displayed in the lowliness of Christ's incarnation than in all the natural wonders of the universe.

In the resurrection, God vindicates Jesus' self-giving life and death, honoring him above every human authority (vv. 9-11). The self-serving, violent forces that did their worst toward Jesus were emptied of their power and declared null and void. Paying highest homage to the risen Christ calls forth our allegiance to the generous, just, and peaceful order of God's realm. We have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus when we resist ambitious, self-seeking models of power, when we renounce exploitation and loveless indifference. Jesus' resurrection and exaltation have nullified this way of life. In confessing Jesus Christ as Lord (v. 11), we challenge the authority of the lords of privilege and violence.

Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem pointed to his death, when the character of his kingship was revealed. The crowd's joyful cries of "Hosanna!" soon turn to angry shouts of "Crucify him!" The procession of Palm Sunday also pointed to that ultimate, triumphant, heavenly procession, in which every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess Jesus Christ as Lord (vv. 10-11). This procession will not be like the clamor of the crowd at Jerusalem; nor will it be an exclusive, winners-only celebration like the Super Bowl motorcade. It will not be like the Memorial Day, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Labor Day or Veterans Day parades of which we are so familiar.

Flannery O'Connor imaginatively portrays it at the end of her short story "Revelation," when the protagonist Mrs. Turpin sees an enormous procession of "souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah." Her wonder turns to shock as Mrs. Turpin discovers that all the people she considered inferior to herself are leading the procession, and that reputable people like her are pulling up the rear. The respectable types "were marching behind the others with great

dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away." Joining the triumphant procession to honor the crucified and risen Christ requires the humility to join the back of the line, to give up our conceited and envious ways.

As we wait for that ultimate triumphant procession, we honor Jesus best by exercising care in the human processions we join. As those of us who seek the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, we should beware of processions that exalt rivalry and selfish ambition, knowing that Christ has emptied those human spectacles of their power. We should rejoice in processions that exhibit humility, compassion, and a thirst for God's reign—participants in the Montgomery bus boycott walking and carpooling to work, South Africans moving in long, swaying lines to vote for the first time. There we catch a glimpse of the creaturely glory God has promised us in Christ Jesus. **Amy Plantinga Pauw**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.