

Every Knee Should Bow

Philippians 2:5-11

Palm/Passion Sunday is a time of praise. As we come near this final week before Easter we hear the shouts and songs of the first Palm Sunday crowd. "Highly exalted ... the name above every name ... every knee should bend and every tongue confess"—this is not far from "Hosanna" as sung by the happy parade hailing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but their rapture rings hollow, since they were oblivious to his intentions and his fate, in which some of them will even be complicit. This reminds us of the book and movie *Ben-Hur*, the one we associate with Charlton Heston. According to the book Ben Hur faithfully followed Jesus, but totally misunderstood the nature of the kingdom which he preached. Ben Hur heard Jesus' words as the overthrow of Rome when Jesus was speaking about the souls of humanity. Therefore many who followed on the Palm Sunday morning did not really follow at all. They made music that was empty of anguish, courage, and sacrifice. Interesting, isn't it, that the words from our text we know best and quote most often are the last lines, the triumphant ones—praise that is true but premature and dangerously naive when removed from a sense of the horrible and the awful descent of love into the mindless cruelty of the world.

The death of Jesus was an unbroken extension of everything else that he was and did. The core choice of his existence was refusing to clutch divine status, but emptying himself, taking the form of a slave. This language describes his whole life. For the sake of multitudes, for befuddled disciples, for the diseased, for outcasts, for women, for children, for Pharisees, he was

and is a self-giving servant. Into his healings, his teaching, his liberations, his confrontations, his prayers, and his ongoing obedience, he emptied himself. His dying was of a seamless piece with his living. He was not a victim. No one emptied him; he emptied *himself*. No one made him a slave or humbled him; he *took* the form of a slave and humbled *himself*. Jesus choose to pour himself out, even to the point of crucifixion. **Paul Simpson Duke**

This text, in its original setting, was not primarily intended to encourage an individual ethic of spiritual humility. Paul addressed it to his beloved Philippians, whose struggles to become an authentic Christian community had occupied a large share of his energy and his heart. "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others," he said, hoping to evoke the spiritual strengths of a community. He sent his words to wash over the church in waves of support: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy ..." (v. 1). Fred Craddock pointed out that, despite the conditional tone of the English rendering, the sense of the Greek is that "one could just as well begin the four clauses in 2:1 with '*since* there is.' ... Paul was not raising any question about the quality or genuineness of the Philippians' faith and life. On the contrary ... Paul lifted to the conscious level those qualities of common life by which the church has been identified and sustained."

The "mind" Paul hoped to evoke was a communal consciousness, a faith held in trust together. It was the faith that he had seen in them all along, the faith that had inscribed them on his heart, the faith that prompted him, even in prison and facing possible execution, to express in this letter what Ron James has called "a joy wider than the world." Yes, there were tensions within the community, interpersonal and institutional distractions from life

in Christ. Paul the pastor knew them well. Paul noted that "most" of the brothers and sisters proclaimed the word with boldness and without fear, but apparently some were motivated by "envy and rivalry." But he was speaking to his beloved church at a level deeper than all their contentions. To them—and to us—he says, *you have more than enough of everything you need*. For underneath the struggles of the moment, and beyond the threats of the times, Paul said, there *is* encouragement in Christ, there *is* consolation in love, there *is* sharing in the Spirit.

Paul exhorted the community to strive to be "of one spirit" and not to be intimidated by "their opponents." The community should strive to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" and not do anything "from selfish ambition or conceit." In a world that offered no safe passage to "faith-based communities," Paul dared the Philippians to believe that, in Christ, they already had among them more than enough of the spiritual gifts that would see them through adversity. It was precisely this abundance that would make it possible for them to "have this mind of Christ" among them. If hardship or distress or persecution or nakedness or peril or sword should threaten to empty them—even then the things that suffering with Christ took away would not deplete their abundance in Christ.

So Paul had the audacity to say, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7). "Do not worry," in this world, at this time. Only have this mind among you, Paul says, and you already have more than enough of everything you need.

This text is believed to be one of the earliest Christian hymns. **Richard E. Spalding** The hymn asserts the divine status of Jesus, a status he did not cling to; instead, he "emptied himself" to take on a human "form," indeed the "form of a slave." The hymn describes a self-emptying that moved Christ Jesus from the heights of divine status to the lowest of human levels.

In response to Jesus' total act of obedience, God exalted Jesus in a manner that reversed the course of his descent. He was and is given the name "Lord," the most exalted of titles for Jesus, one that implies his divine status as the risen Christ. All of the universe—the hymn cites—is to acclaim and "confess" Jesus' exalted majesty, with all things directed ultimately to the "glory of God the Father."

Paul invited the Philippians to have the same guiding perspective as that of Jesus himself, who freely put aside his own unique status and honor in order to bring life to others, even if that means giving their lives for others. The "emptying" encouraged here is a free, generous, and life-giving act of love that represents the most noble qualities of human life and commitment. To live in this manner calls for a true conversion of heart and transformation of life. It is this perspective Paul encouraged all Christians to embrace.

Donald Senior

So what is this Christ mind: not to grasp at glory, but to live, to love, to die, an emptied self. Paul urged us to be so minded and we can be, because we are in Christ and Christ is among us. So let us hear the beginning of the chapter as Fred Craddock instructed us:

¹ ~~If then there is~~ (*since* there is) ~~any~~ encouragement in Christ, ~~any~~ (*since* there is) consolation from love, ~~any~~ (*since* there is) sharing in the Spirit, ~~any~~ (*since* there is) compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of

the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Verses 1-4)

These words remind us of the attitudes and behaviors befitting the communal Christ mind, our only hope for a faithfully unified church. **Paul Simpson Duke**

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