

Sermon - the humility of Christ

Based on Philippians 2, and Matthew 18.1-5 (NRSV)

A reminder that the 'letter' was compiled from three

- Last week we focused on the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, and today we are continuing with chapter two.
- Nevertheless, it will be helpful to remind ourselves about a few general points that I made last week.
- Research shows that what we have printed in our Bibles as one document is quite likely to be compiled from parts of three letters that the elders of the Philippian church kept as encouraging and useful instruction from Paul.
- Scholars generally reckon that part of a first letter is what we have as chapter 4, and that a second letter he wrote while in prison - probably in Ephesus - is the text for chapters 1 and 2.
- Part of a third letter is perhaps used for chapter 3.

Ending the first part

- Sometimes the compilers of such multi-part documents don't appear to have been too concerned about how the flow transitioned from one part to another, making the joins easier to discern.
- Nevertheless after the text had been translated into other languages, it was not always easy to work out *exactly* where the joins were.
- Round about 1215 AD, when the Magna Cater was being drawn up, the then Archbishop of Canterbury divided the Latin text of the Bible up into the chapters we see today.
- Later research now suggests that chapter 2 of Philippians might be better ended in the middle of verse 1 from chapter 3, in the way that I have done for today.
- Let me remind you of it:

Finally, my sisters and brothers, rejoice in the Lord. (Ph 3.1a)

- Including this sentence as the true ending of the original letter that chapters 1 and 2 consists of makes sense because it refers back to Paul's rejoicing in the way that the Gospel was being proclaimed even while he was in prison, and rejoicing in his confidence that the Lord would ensure that he would be released.

A libation to rejoice in

- In verses 17 and 18 of chapter 2 Paul adds further to his rejoicing at being able to participate in Christ's suffering:

But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

- Paul picks up this idea of his life being poured out, not only from the religious act of making a libation - a sacred offering of drink, oil or blood - but also the metaphor Isaiah uses when describing the Suffering Servant:

*he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors (Isaiah 53.12)*

- The key aspect is that Paul views his life as being lived according to God's divine purpose, and regardless whether his release from prison would come about through the door being unlocked or through his death - that is, being released from this life.
- Paul considered that either way it would be done in accordance with God's purpose, and that was something to rejoice in, both for himself and for the congregation at Philippi.

Timothy and Epaphroditus

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- Now I'm going to comment very briefly on the last third of chapter 2, from verse 19, before turning to the first part.
- Here we have two paragraphs where Paul talks about sending Timothy soon, and Epaphroditus - possibly sooner, maybe even taking the letter with him.
- Reading these sentences gives us a sense that these are more than just names on a page, but real people who were close companions of Paul, and who the Philippian congregation knew well, and had a great affection and respect for.
- Indeed, the church in Philippi had become distressed at hearing of Epaphroditus' sickness - and he, in turn, became distressed at hearing of their distress!
- This might sound a bit unnecessary, but it does indicate their mutual affection and concern for each other.

Hymn of Christ's humility and glory

- Let's now look at part of the chapter that Paul did not compose himself: the hymn of Christ's humility and glory.
- It consists of two verses, with the first focusing on Christ emptying himself of his divine entitlement:

*Christ Jesus, who,
though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Ph 2.5-8)*

- The second verse then describes how this humbling is reversed to bring Christ to the highest exaltation:

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Ph 2.9-11)*

- Paul is quoting a hymn that the Philippians would have been familiar with, and is using it to make a point.

The hymn writer

- We'll come to that point in a moment, but I want to draw the pre-existence of this hymn to your attention.
- Research suggests that Paul wrote this letter around 54 to 56 AD - about 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

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- During these two dozen years as the early church started to become established, the first Christians would have used hymns and prayers from the Jewish and Greek worship rites, and adapted them to reflect the understanding of what Jesus had taught and to reflect the life of Jesus himself.
- And would then have composed new hymns - maybe to tunes that they were already familiar with - such as this one that Paul quotes.
- Indeed, our first hymn this morning was composed for an existing tune by an Anglican priest here in Australia, Dr Elizabeth Smith, who has been honoured this year by being made a Member of the Order of Australia.
- The Reverend Elizabeth Smith has written many contemporary hymns to traditional tunes, to bring fresh insights into familiar forms.
- So it might very well have been a first century Elizabeth Smith who composed the hymn that Paul quotes.

Sharing in the humility of Christ

- Now the verses that Paul writes before and after this hymn are words of encouragement and guidance for that church community.
- As I have said before, the church that received his letter thought this was important teaching that was worth sharing - not only with future members of their church community, but with other church communities as well.
- And hence it has travelled across the world and across time to church communities like ours to benefit from as well.
- And so it is helpful for us to think of Paul writing these words to us as well.
- And the main underlying theme of Paul's teaching here in his instructions on how to work together in the church, is that of humility - of sharing in the humility of Christ.
- Paul tells the Philippians - and through them tells us - to be of the same mind as each other, and then further to have the mind of Christ.
- And he uses the hymn to describe Christ's humility: that Christ gave up his divine form to become fully human, and gave up his life to embrace death.
- God then rewarded Christ's humble obedience and exalted him to share in God's glory.
- And it is this humility that Paul encourages us to embrace, that is the attitude that needs to underpin the love and kindness we show others.
- And likewise, it is this same humbleness that we hear Jesus himself teaching us from the Gospel reading:

Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Matthew 18.4-5)

- Having humility and being humble is the same thing.

Not humiliation or feeling worthless

- We must not get these mixed up with the *action* of humiliation or of being humiliated: these refer to someone having their own sense of value and worth diminished, whether done justly if someone is too proud, or unjustly if someone is being abused.
- Rather, having humility - having a humble heart - is about not regarding oneself as having greater worth than others, even just one other person - regardless of who or what they are.
- I don't think that Jesus or Paul are encouraging us to think that we ourselves are worthless: that would have been anathema to both of them.

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- In fact Jesus, throughout his time of ministry, kept reaching out to people who were regarded as worth less - either by themselves or by others - and restoring their sense of dignity and value as children of God.
- And Paul, when he writes '*in humility regard others as better than yourselves*' (Ph 2.3), most definitely not telling us to consider ourselves as worthless, but rather to treat others as worthwhile.
- The whole point of the hymn that Paul quotes is that we know that Christ was worthy of the highest glory, and yet we see him treating the lives of others as worthy of dying for.
- *That* is the kind of humility Paul is talking about.

Sharing in the mind of Christ

- And this attitude of Christ's is what Paul is exhorting us to share in when he says: '*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*' (Ph 2.), and launches into that wonderful hymn.
- And then concludes his point by effectively restating in part what Jesus said about being like a child in God's kingdom:
Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. (Ph 2.5)
- And encourages them - and us - to be accountable in their faith to him, Paul, as the founder of their church community when he says:
It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. (Ph 2.16)
- And I conclude with what I think are Paul's final words for this letter of chapters one and two:
Finally, my sisters and brothers, rejoice in the Lord. (Ph 3.1a)