

SERMON AT APPLECROSS: OS/26: 26/9/93: GEOFF CHADWICK :

Phil 2:1-11 : "HUMILITY"

Today's second reading (Phil 2:1-11) contains one of the most famous and ancient of all Christian hymns; the so called "Song of Christ's Glory". This ancient hymn, perhaps one of the first ever sung by Christians, contains some of the most profound statements ever written about Christ. Let me read it to you again:

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.

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 (Phil 2:6-11, NRSV).

The origin of this hymn is uncertain but one thing remains - it describes the very character of Jesus as the humble servant God. Furthermore, the purpose of Jesus' humiliation is given: that "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" (Phil 2:10-11, NRSV).

Now it is no idle coincidence that this hymn was placed in the middle of a pastoral letter by Paul to the church in Philippians. If you examine the whole letter you will see that this church had a number of problems. These included:

- 1) False teachers.
- 2) Rivalry
- 3) Envy

- 4) Proclaimers who proclaimed for selfish ambition.
- 5) Murmuring and argument.
- 6) Division

Humility, it seems, was far from many of the members of the church. Maybe they even sang this song to Christ, but they weren't living what it proclaimed. Selfish ambition seemed to be one of the biggest problems - it even appears that certain people were proclaiming the Gospel, not actually to proclaim the Gospel, but to boost their own egos. Paul challenges this great contradiction by quoting this hymn:

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who... emptied himself (Phil 2:4 ff, NRSV).

We are challenged to live as Christ, as people of humility, as people who are prepared to empty ourselves for others. This is what Christ did for us, this is the Gospel message, this is the Good News of salvation, this is what we are meant to live. "The Lord came to serve, not to be served."

Once I received in my letterbox a card which reflects the antithesis of this Gospel message of Good News. Unfortunately it is the type of "False Good News" to which many today succumb. Let me tell you about this card which I found most offensive.

Some time ago I received my letter-box a card which reflects the antithesis of this gospel message of good news. Unfortunately it is the type of false good news to which many today succumb. The card reads:

Good news! Are you ambitious? if so, I can show you how to build your own business, full or part time, in such a way that you may well become the wealthiest person in your street within two years! This is an opportunity not a job! Sign now for more information.

Just as well there only two other houses in my street!

Good News? Is it really good news that there is someone around who will teach you how to become 'the wealthiest person in your street within two years'? Well the only "good news" is for the guy who gets rich from those he beguiles into attending his seminars - I wonder how long his street is?

You see, the real Good News is the exact opposite to the sentiments expressed on this card. Exultation comes not through grasping, but through the humble, obedient self emptying of oneself. Ambition, false teaching, rivalry, envy, murmuring, argument and division will get us no-where - it is the example of the humble, self emptying Christ that is to be our moral and spiritual model for how we should conduct our lives. As a good commentary of the book of Philippians states:

... the true nature of God is not to grasp or get or selfishly to hold onto things for personal advantage, but to give them up for the enrichment of all (Hawthorne, 1983, p95).

So we, who are created in the image of God and in the likeness of Christ, are not to be grasping (ie wanting to hold on to things for personal advantage), but are to give ourselves up for the enrichment of all. This is how I understand Christ's humility. We who call ourselves Christians realise only too well that we are called to model our lives on the humility of Christ, yet I think that there is much confusion over what we actually mean by humility.

Too often I think we confuse humility with being a "door mat". That is, we ignore our own needs and our own worth to the extent that we ultimately lose any sense of self. This is not humility, it is misplaced humility which leads to the loss of self esteem and the neglect of the wonderful and beautiful gifts and talents God has given us. Humility is not discounting our own worth, it is recognising that our worth comes from the use of our gifts and talents for the service of others.

Arrogance is the use of our gifts and talents for our own gain.

Humility is the use of our gifts and talents for the service of others.

It is OK to know that you are good at something; it is OK to be the best in the world at something and feel proud of it; humility is using it for the service of others. This is where I would like to encourage you. Be prepared to find out what God given gifts and talents you have - if you're not sure what they are ask a trusted friend, they're usually a source of good information - and use these gifts for the service of others. This is what Christ did for us. He was born in human likeness with all the gifts and talents of a normal human being, and he "humbled himself, taking the form of a slave". And what forms of service did he perform for us?

He healed our sick.

He challenged our errant ways.

He washed our feet.

He served the meal of life for us.

He showed us the Father.

He died for us.

And he reconciled us with God.

None of this was done through selfish ambition, it was done through self-giving, serving love. And what was the consequence of this outpouring of God's self-giving love in Jesus?

It was his exultation:

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 (Phil 2:9-11, NRSV).

Jesus is not self exulted. He is exalted by God, exulted by every created thing, and exalted by every tongue that he is Lord to the "Glory of God the Father".

And what about us? What is our task? It is to serve as Christ did, not that we might exalt ourselves but that every creature may come to realise the ultimate hope of God that "every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord".

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hawthorne, G.F., 1983, Philippians, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, Waco