

Humbled to be Exalted

Philippians 2:5-11

Last Sunday morning we looked at Philippians 2:1-5 and saw that Paul was encouraging the Philippians to have the right attitude towards one another towards being of one mind, considering others more important than themselves and looking out for one another. All were aspects of humility which goes straight across values common in their society and ours, to seek to serve oneself, to promote oneself and to look after number one.

And to convince them he makes the important point that their attitude should be the same as Jesus' Attitude. It's the pivot verse and there's no surprise in finding what we discovered last week is reflected in Jesus' behaviour.

How does he do this? He could give them a theology lesson based on scripture – he was good at that. But he doesn't. Instead he gives them the words of a hymn which we can be pretty sure must have been well known to them and used in their worship. It was a hymn that sums up who Jesus is, what He did and what praise he deserves now. Familiar – it's one of the things we still do in our culture; to use hymns and songs to sum up our worship. It's sometimes called the Christ Hymn or the Kenosis Hymn and is one of the most immediately recognisable passages in scripture. For them it was clearly a precious piece of worship material that summed up their faith and which Paul could then use to convince them of what their attitude should be.

The hymn itself is loaded with theology but I'm going to look at it this evening in terms of what Paul was using it for, to show how Jesus' attitude was and how in fact, Jesus' way inverts the conventional wisdom of self-development, self-promotion and self-interest. In fact, whatever others may conclude about it, the passage powerfully illustrates the principles Paul was teaching in verses 1 to 4 which then are the key to our understanding the hymn.

Let's start with verses 5 to 7 which actually illustrate Jesus' attitude. I'll give you them in the NRSV as it gives the nearest approximation to the original Greek. The GNB and NIV tend to do a bit more than give you a straight translation:

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. NRSV

Word association - when we say "God" what do we associate the word with - Heaven? Glory? Holy? Exalted? Throne? How about slave? obedient? death? lowly? pathetic? Shame?

What sort of Saviour do we have? The story is told of when King George V was doing a tour of the country on the royal train. A little boy went with his parents. He was excited – he had never seen a king before. The train arrived, the king and queen waved to the crowds. As usual on these events, King George wore a casual suit. The boy was deflated and complained to his parents "I came to see a king, but all I saw was just a man!"

The Son's nature was glory but he became just a man. To sum it up, the Son did three things: he emptied Himself, taking on the form of a slave – a human being. Then, even as a human, He humbled Himself and became obedient even though it meant the worst death that people had invented. And there you have it. A humility of spirit that meant that He became amongst the lowest people in society and He was obedient to God even though it meant death on a cross. Why? So that even the lowest of us could find salvation! Paul encouraged them in verse 3 to "*in humility consider others better than yourselves*" - and there is their example in Christ – that mixture of humility and obedience.

A Norwegian preacher once said that Jesus stepped down so low, so that he would always be below us, so that he could always be there and catch us when we fall.

Let me unpack all of this a little for us as the picture of humility in this passage is exceptionally strong. Verse 6 has had a lot of debate over the years - *6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself.* What on earth do these words mean? Being in the form of God is the direct translation (NIV/GNB). It is a

statement of the pre-existent deity of Christ and contrasts with the later statement about taking the form of a servant. It's an unusual way of expressing it. The NIV and GNB use the word, nature. In nature He was God and He took on the nature of a slave. The suggestion goes beyond nature and suggests something more of status as well. He was God – that was His status but he took on the nature of a *doulos* – a bond-slave, the lowest form of servant hood.

Similarly confusing is the phrase *did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited*. The word exploited in the NRSV is translated in the GNB as try to remain and NIV as grasped. It's an unusual word to use. This is what one commentator Bill Long says. The word *translated "exploited" is harpagmon, and is from a verb occurring regularly in Greek literature and meaning to "seize as a thief" or to "steal."* *I think the concept lying behind harpagmon may well be illustrated in Jesus' earthly life by his not taking the devil's bait during the temptation narrative. He didn't "steal" the authority over the heavens and the earth at the cost of worshipping Satan. Rather, he humbled himself, taking on the hard and long path to glory. There would be no shortcut to glory for Christ.*

The end of the process was that Christ was exalted to the highest place because of His death. To get the glory, the only way forward was the humility. Another more traditional view has been that Jesus did not take Adam's route of deciding to be like God because He wanted more for Himself, but did the reverse.

The upshot was that rather than claiming more than what was His or hanging on to the status that was His by right, the Son did the reverse. He emptied Himself is the literal translation. Other translations are GNB of his own free will he gave up all he had, and NIV but made himself nothing. Neither quite get there I think. It's quite clear that He put aside all the attributes of power that were at His disposal – His omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, transcendence – in itself amazing – how could God localise Himself in space and time. How far did emptying go has been a question people have tried to answer. I don't think I'm going to sort a profound question that people have tried asking for centuries in one evening. The limitations of the Son as Jesus are self-evident from scripture. What we do know is that He never lost that essence, that nature of God which is an example and model for us and allowed Him to be that perfect sacrifice that God required to deal with the sins of the human race.

The rest of it is pretty straightforward! We know that he was human and we know all about His status as a human being and we know of His desire to obey God and to humbly serve people – and his death on the cross.

What do we learn about Christ's humility here? *I'll sum it up in the words of another commentator, William Loader: Jesus chose to obey what God wanted. That entailed his entering into solidarity with human beings and becoming fully one of them. We might speculate about what he gave up. It was certainly not the consciousness of who he was as a deciding person. He knew what he was doing. His choice was to abandon an option which was directed towards what some would have seen as self-advancement.*

And we are called to obey God and be like Jesus and that is to have the humility that considers others better than ourselves. It's behind the whole idea of agape we were looking at this morning. How our society, our church and ourselves would change if we had the same attitude as Jesus.

But there's more verses in tonight's passage: *9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Our Saviour today is not a humble saviour – but what you expect Him to be exalted. Not because of what is His by nature, but what is His by right as a result of Calvary. He has that position of authority now and the name of authority is "Jesus" - the name of the humble and obedient slave on who died on the cross. And all the authority of that name derives from Calvary.

There is an important principle here. God honours those who act in obedience to Him. He calls us to be humble. We can't manufacture it and be like Mr Micawber who almost celebrated his humble state. The authority that Jesus has now and will have ultimately over creation wasn't worked for or grasped by Jesus, but it was achieved because He became obedient and went to the lowest of the pile – not an easy thing for even the eternal Son to do. It is close to 10 on God's scale of difficulty. That's why He is so highly exalted and has authority.

Tony Campolo: My mother had great authority over me. No power. She was a little Italian lady. I could have kicked her down the steps . But when she spoke, I obeyed because she had authority. Where did she get that authority? She got that authority by thousands and thousands of loving sacrificial things she did for me over the years . Her sacrifices , her loving sacrifices , earned her authority. There is a big difference between power and authority.

What does that mean for us. By His sacrifice we have got a position of honour in his name: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ , that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).

We are already rich because of Christ, now we are called to be Christ-like and show that humility and love that He showed in our lives, whatever the cost – because it's not going to be greater than His. We can't manufacture humility, we just need to submit ourselves to God and obey Him however that may cut across the wisdom of the world.

What does that imply for us – that God honours our humility and obedience towards Him and towards one another. *Jesus says: "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Mat t 23:11). words, the way to greatness is a way downwards. The way downwards, however, does not end at the bot tom. That is paradoxical message of the gospel. Luke 14:11 "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The way upwards ends at the bot tom, but the way downwards ends at the top. (Sigurd Grindheim)*

Let me end with a nice story I read

In the 1950-s, Sao Kya Seng, the prince of 34 independent Shan states in northeastern Burma, also known as Hsipaw, came to Denver, Colorado, to study agriculture. Since he wanted to experience what it was like to be a student in the US, he kept his identity secret . Not even his professors knew who he really was. One of his fellow students was Inge Sargent from Austria. Both of them being exchange students, Inge and the Burmese prince quickly found that they had a lot in common and started to spend more and more time together. Their friendship grew into love but the Burmese prince decided that he would not let on his true identity even though they were seriously dating. He did not want Inge's decision to date him to be coloured by the fact that she could marry into royalty. So when he finally proposed, with an engagement ring of ruby and diamond, Inge still did not know who he really was. Inge said yes and they got married, as any other couple, in the US. For their honeymoon, Sao Kya Seng was taking Inge to his home country, so that she could meet his family and see where he was from.

When their ship reached the shores of Burma, hundreds of people were waiting at the harbour. Many of them had gone out in small boat , holding up welcoming signs. A band was playing and some people were tossing flowers at the ship. Surprised at all this excitement Inge turns to her husband, and asks whose arrival they are celebrating. "Inge," he says, I am the prince of Hsipaw. These people are celebrating our arrival. You are now the princess." (From Twilight over Burma: My Life As a Shan Princess, by Inge Sargent .)

Inge became a princess because of her husband's willingness to come to her situation. We are going to enjoy an eternity as the children of God, but first we need to move through the same world He walked through in obedience to God. And we need to do the same. Let's sum up my last two Sundays in a sentence:

"Get your act together! Think like Christ! Love like Christ! and be humble like Christ!"