



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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To Grasp or to Give?

Philippians 2:5-11

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The Gospels are, in many ways, a tale of two kings. As we've seen in our study of Luke's Gospel, Jesus came as King to usher in a new kingdom that was very different from Caesar and his empire. In fact, even only five chapters into Luke, we've already seen that a lot of what Jesus said and did was meant to contrast his lordship with the lordship of Caesar. Jesus was the Son of God, but when he was born Augustus ruled the world. He'd had his father, Julius Caesar, deified and styled himself the "son of god". The people showed their loyalty to their emperor and to his empire by offering him sacrifices in his temples and by acclaiming: Caesar is lord.

As we've been studying Luke's gospel we've seen just how subversive and counter cultural Jesus' message was in light of Caesar's claims to lordship. Today we turn to St. Matthew's gospel in the Liturgy of the Palms and as we read the Gospel for Palm Sunday, and we get a glimpse ahead in the story. Again, we see just how much Jesus' lordship stood in stark contrast to the expectations of the people. St. Paul underscores it for us even more deeply as we read today's Epistle from Philippians 2. Paul could look back from the standpoint of several decades and see that Jesus' resurrection from the dead had proved him to be the Messiah that the Old Testament had looked forward to and that as

Israel's Messiah, Jesus was the *true* Lord—not just Lord of Israel, but Lord of *all* Creation. Jesus shows us what true lordship is all about and what true lordship looks like. For all his earthly power, Augustus was just a pretender. He had conquered the world with a sword and made the people his subjects. Jesus came as the *true* Sovereign and gave *himself* for his subjects—for the very people who had rejected him and had become his enemies. Jesus even said to his disciples:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them...[then, in contrast, he says of himself] **the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.** (Mark 10:42, 45)

That's what true lordship looks like and it stands in stark contrast to the world's emperors. And yet Augustine wasn't doing anything men and women haven't been doing ever since Adam. He wasn't doing anything that we ourselves aren't prone to doing. God created the cosmos as his temple and as the pinnacle of his Creation, he lovingly made men and women—even making us in his own image so that we could truly know him—and then he placed us in that temple so that he could love and care for us as we serve as his priests. But that wasn't enough for us. Adam believed a lie and tried to topple God from his throne. God had given him only *one* command, but Adam disobeyed that one command. He wanted to be on the throne. He wanted to be his own lord. And for all of human history, the rest of us have been trying to do the same thing:

rebelling against our loving Creator, trying to claim his throne for ourselves, trying to rule our own destinies, trying to make up our own rules to the game, all instead of simply trusting in God's perfect goodness and wisdom. Emperors like Augustus didn't and don't do anything that we all don't try to do—they just have more power, more money, bigger armies and can manage their rebellion on a much bigger scale. We all have the same basic rebellious problem in our hearts.

God's solution to the problem was to call some of these rebellious men and women to himself, to make them holy, and then to give them a mission: Be light in the darkness; instead of taking, give; instead of lording over others, be their servants. That was the mission God gave to Abraham and to his children—to Israel. And yet in Jesus' day—as we've seen in our study of Luke's Gospel—the Jews were looking for ways to overcome Augustus by becoming like Augustus themselves. The rulers and the priests of Judaea had sold out to the Romans. Herod may have rebuilt the temple, but he also built a new temple for Augustus—he paid lip service to God, but at the end of the day, he was more concerned about please the emperor. The priests, too, were afraid of upsetting the boat and losing their power and authority. In our Gospel this morning we saw Judas returning to the temple, sorry for selling out Jesus, and looking for absolution from the priests. Consider what the priests and the temple were there for. God had established them to deal with the sins of the people. But those priests couldn't help Judas. They'd sold their souls, they'd sold the soul of the priesthood, and they'd

sold the soul of the temple. Their day was over. Jesus had said that he would tear the temple down and rebuilt it. Its day was done.

In light of that, consider Jesus in our Gospel as he was crucified. He was led from one mount—the Temple Mount—down through Jerusalem, across the valley, and up to Golgotha, to another mountain, to Mount Calvary, and there he was crucified. There had been a time when God manifested his presence in the temple, his glory cloud sitting on the ark of the covenant. The glory cloud had been gone for centuries, but that day Jesus, God’s Son, left the Temple Mount with its corrupt and ineffective priests and went to Mount Calvary. At the moment of his death, the earth under the Temple shook. In earthly, physical, geological terms, the temple was built on the surest foundation in Jerusalem, but that earthquake shook it to its foundation—so hard that the great, heavy veil that separated the people from the Most Holy Place—the place of God’s presence—was torn in two. The ministry of the Temple and of the priests was finished. But at the same moment, across the valley on Mount Calvary, Jesus was giving himself—his own life—and in that act he was laying the foundation for a new and perfect temple—a temple not made with hands. Jesus took Israel’s failed *servant* role on himself, in his life and especially in his death. He was the light shining in the darkness; he was the one giving instead of taking; he was the one not lording himself over others, but serving them.

Our celebration of Holy Week begins with the account of Jesus

riding humbly into Jerusalem on a donkey. The people hailed him as king as he rode into the city, but they didn’t understand. They only knew powerful kings like Augustus. They expected the Messiah to another powerful king. They no doubt wondered when Jesus was going to throw off his disguise of humility and take care of business. But instead, here came Jesus: a humble man from a humble family who had spent three years humbly travelling Judea, humbly giving of himself, humbly healing, humbly befriending tax collectors and sinners, and now humbly riding into the city on a donkey. This really was who Jesus was. Humility was his mission. It was as a servant that he fulfilled God’s plan to save his people. St. Paul explains it all in our Epistle, in Philippians 2:5-11, but, brothers and sisters, there he also tells us in very practical terms what all of this means for the Church. We are the temple that Jesus began building on Mount Calvary just as the old temple on Mount Zion began to fall apart. When we consider Jesus humility, what does it then mean for us to be his temple, to be his Church, to be his people? Look at what St. Paul says in Philippians 2:5.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...

What is the Church supposed to look like? How are Christians supposed to act and live? Paul says that we have *something* because we’re in Christ Jesus. We’ve been baptised into him. That’s what it means to be his new temple not made with hands. Gods reside in temples and when Jesus made us his new temple, that means that

through his Holy Spirit, he now lives in us—like the statue of Athena in the Parthenon of Athens or the glory cloud that sat on the ark in the Most Holy Place of the Jerusalem temple, *Jesus is now in us*. And Paul says that means that his mind is our mind. The mind of Christ should be shaping who we are and how we live—with each other and as we engage the world around us. Jesus had a dramatic impact on the people around him because of who he was and, brothers and sisters, if we share his mind—if we think and act like him and share his values—we should impact and change the world as dramatically as he did.

Now, before we go on, think. Paul’s saying that we should be characterised by the mind of Christ. We need to ask: Does what he describes in the following verses describe us? Granted, we’re not going to be perfect at it, but are we anything at all like this? Is this our goal? Is this what we aspire to be? Where we haven’t made it yet, are we at least *striving* in the right direction?

Now, here it is:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Some of your Bibles may show this as verse or poetry and that;s because Paul describes the mind of

Christ in the words of a hymn. We don't know if he wrote it himself or borrowed it from Christians who were singing it in their churches. The key words of the hymn—the ones that establish its meaning—are difficult and especially so because they aren't common and because they aren't words normally used by Paul. What Paul's telling us about Jesus is hard to say and hard to grasp and it's heavenly and glorious all at the same time and it looks like rather than trying to explain it all in a heavy theological discourse, he borrowed the poetic words of a profound and deep hymn.

Wherever the words came from, they begin in verse 6 by reminding us of Jesus' divinity. He was in the "form of God", it says. "Form" is one of those Greek words that's difficult to parse out in this context, but the basic point is that Jesus was of the "being" or the "nature" of God. Divinity *was* his being or his character. In straight-up prose: *Jesus was God*. In fact, it goes on: he was "equal with God". Jesus wasn't a man that God somehow adopted and gifted to do his work—one of the early heresies of the Church. Jesus *was* God—fully and in every way. As St. John says in the opening of his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

And yet, the hymn goes on: Jesus was God—and that was a special privilege—but in his mind, he didn't see his divinity as something

to be "grasped". This is another one of those hard Greek words. The point is that even though Jesus had a special privilege by virtue of his very being as God, he didn't see it as something to be taken advantage of for his own benefit. He didn't see it as something to be *exploited*. Think about that. As we read Scripture one of the things that ought to stand out is that our God's nature is not to take, but to give. We see this in the very fact of creation itself. He chose to create humanity that we might share in his goodness. What Paul's saying is that precisely because Jesus was God, he never thought of his divinity as something to be exploited for his personal gain; instead he thought of it as reason to give—to be open-handed with us. That's the nature of true divinity.

And being God, Jesus didn't do this by half measures. He didn't hold anything back. In fact, Paul says, he emptied himself. Literally, the Greek word means that he "poured himself out". That doesn't mean he stopped being God in the Incarnation. It goes along with Paul's statement that Jesus didn't see his divinity as reason to grasp, to take, or to benefit himself. Instead, he gave. He poured out the fullness of his divinity and his divine prerogative so that he could share it with us. Instead of keeping his divinity to himself and using it for his own benefit, Jesus knew that only God could conquer sin and death and only God could redeem humanity, and so he poured that divine prerogative out in full on us that we might be restored to him.

Paul says that in Jesus, God became one of us. He became a servant—one of his own creatures,

meant to serve and worship in his temple. Imagine that. God humbled himself and became one of his own functionaries. If his earthly priests weren't going to be obedient in their calling, he had to fulfil their calling himself. And that humble obedience to his calling led him to the cross—to a painful, brutal, and humiliating execution that the Romans reserved for the worst of the worst.

Jesus did something extraordinary and yet what Paul's saying here is that what he did he did *because* he was—because he is—God. So what does it mean to be God? It means you pour yourself out to save your rebellious and sinful creatures. When we read the Gospel and imagine Jesus dying on the cross, brothers and sisters, *that* is what it means for Jesus to be God. Our God is a god who gives himself in love. Does he punish sin? Yes. But he also gives everything he has—his very self—to make a way of restoration so that we might escape that punishment.

This is an amazing thing. And it was just as amazing to the people of St. Paul's day. Their gods were jealous and greedy and capricious. Men like Augustus grasped at divinity because of the things they could gain from it. The core of the pagan mindset is the idea that if we can only learn what the gods want we can then manipulate them to get what we want. It's all about "grasping"—it's about the very thing that Jesus, in his divinity, did *not* do. And Paul is very clear. Some people might think that Jesus, as God, was normally "grasping" at his divinity, but for thirty years grudgingly stopped grasping so that he could do his work on earth and then when he

was finished, went back to heaven to grasp and exploit his divinity. No—just the opposite. In Jesus’ humbling himself in his Incarnation and in his crucifixion we see God as God. We see God being as godly or as goddish as God can be—we see him living out his own character as the loving giver of himself. That’s what it means to be God and that’s why the Father has now exalted and glorified his Son—because Jesus has manifested the glory of his divinity in pouring it out for us. And so Paul goes on in verses 9-11:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In Jesus—and most of all in his Incarnation and at the Cross—we see the very character of God on display. It’s as we think and meditate on and ponder Jesus’ giving of himself that we begin to understand God and his character. This is an incredibly rich passage, but we have to come back to Paul’s main point. In the Incarnation and in the Cross we see the mind of Christ—a mind of humble self-giving. And Paul tells us: “Have *this* mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

Brothers and sisters, how much of our lives are spent grasping as opposed to giving? This works out in a thousand different ways. We are people immensely blessed in material things. Even the poorest of us is rich by global standards.

But we find it so hard to let go—it’s much easier to grasp than to give. God has enriched us all with talents and with gifts that he intends for us to use in the service of his kingdom—to build his Church—but again, it’s all too often easier to grasp than to give. Maybe most importantly, he’s called us to a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing. We’ve all been hurt and we’ve all hurt others. We live in the midst of broken relationships. And yet because of our pride, it’s much easier to grasp than to give. The fractures and schisms of the larger church and the broken relationships and “church-hopping” over petty issues we see at the local level are evidence that we are *not* living out the mind of Christ as we should. And yet it is in our ministry of forgiveness and in our unity as the Church that we should be living out the mind of Christ in the most profound way possible. Jesus humbled himself, pouring himself out, to restore us to himself. He was the one hurt. He was truly the innocent party, but he gave anyway instead of grasping his pride. One of the most profound witnesses we can offer the world, my friends, is to stop grasping our pride and instead give to others the same grace that God has shown to us in Jesus.

These are hard things to do, but the more we do them, the easier they become. But remember what St. Paul says: This is the mind of Christ, but it is *our* mind too.

Brothers and sisters, we have been baptised into Christ Jesus and what is his is now ours. And so as we walk through the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection this coming week, think of the “mind of Christ” and what it means for us as his

people. Think on the practical ways that we can give of ourselves instead of grasping for ourselves. And when the challenge and the hardness of it all hits you, remember your baptism and remember that here at his Table he offers us grace and new life. Here we recall that he humbled himself and gave his all for us and here we find the grace needed to live the life he has purchased for us.

Pray our collect again with me: “Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for mankind you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*”