



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for Palm Sunday

Philippians 2:5-11

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Our Epistle today, the lesson from the second chapter of Philippians, is the lens through which we read the Gospel. What's remarkable to me is that what took Matthew two long chapters to tell—we only read the second of those two chapters this morning—what took Matthew two long chapters to tell, St. Paul summarises in a mere thirty-six Greek words as he tells us about the servant-king. Most scholars think that verses 6-11 were an early Christian hymn, perhaps even written by St. Paul himself. Whatever the case, this poem brilliantly and succinctly sums up who Jesus is as it draws on both Israel's story and the story of the whole fallen human race.

What comes to mind when you think of a king? Today we might think of some of the modern kings of the world—or queens. Today they're figureheads and public servants. A few years ago, when our own Queen turned ninety, the Bible Society published a commemorative book titled "The Servant Queen and the King She Serves", in which she spoke of her faith. But the title highlights the role we expect of modern monarchs. When there's a war, modern kings stay home and work to bolster the morale of their people. Politicians make declarations of war, generals plan strategy, and soldiers go off to fight. But ancient kings—kings in Paul's day were very different. Alexander went off at the head of an army and conquered most of the known world. The Emperor Augustus headed an army that ended the Roman civil war and brought peace to the empire. Alexander and Augustus did

great things—and because of what they'd accomplished, both believed they had a right to divinity. Because they had taken charge, destroyed their enemies, and wrestled whole empires into peace with the threat of further violence. Why was Rome at peace under Augustus? Because he'd destroyed his enemies once and any would-be future enemies knew he could probably do it again. Kings and emperors grasped at divinity, men like Pharaoh and Alexander and Caesar. Even many of Israel's own leaders in the Old Testament, in Jesus' day, and in Paul's grasped for power. Now Jewish leaders knew better than to claim divinity as so many of the pagan rulers did, but they grasped at the same power that Caesar held and sought to control the reigns of empire in the hopes of one day climbing to the top of the heap.

And yet this was not just the problem of kings or would-be kings. Brothers and Sisters, this is the problem of the whole human race. Ever since Adam believed the serpent's lie and grasped at divinity for himself, we humans have been doing the same in one way or another. We fight, we kill, we steal, we cheat, we do whatever we can get away with to look out for ourselves, to get what we want, to climb to the top of the heap. The Lord's solution to humanity's problem was to call forth a people for himself, a people who lived in his presence for the life of the whole world, a nation of servants. Long before Isaiah's song of the Suffering Servant was claimed by Jesus, Israel understood this to be her role.

Of course, Israel suffered from the same problem as the rest of humanity and Paul uses this hymn to show us the solution.

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.

(Philippians 2:6-8)

God humbled himself. Jesus, who the hymn says was in the form of God, who was in some way God himself, emptied himself to take on Adam's flesh and Israel's servant role. Paul is clear that this doesn't mean that Jesus ceased to be God or that he gave up his divinity in some way. Just the opposite. Jesus actually shows us what true divinity looks like. It doesn't look at all like Adam's grasping or Pharaoh's grasping or Alexander's grasping or Caesar's grasping at power, authority, or divine prerogative. Rather, true divinity is revealed as God humbles himself for the sake of his rebellious people and offers himself as a sacrifice for their sins.

Jesus was rejected. Almost no one could accept that this is what divinity looks like, that this is what God would do. When he rode into Jerusalem, the people may have thought it weird that he rode a humble donkey, but they expected him to finally start an uprising—to bash some Roman and Herodian heads and to set things right. When later that day he flipped the tables in the temple and drove out the merchants, people were sure that this was it. Jesus was ready to clean house. But then it didn't happen. He got the people's hopes up. Here, finally as the Messiah. But—apparently—not. Jesus' own people, in anger, cried out for his crucifixion. As far as they were concerned, he was a blasphemous impostor. Even the servant people themselves could not understand the serving God. But, of course, God knew this and so the hymn turns on verse 9.

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.
(Philippians 2:9-11)

The people crucified Jesus as a false messiah and God overturned their verdict against him. Precisely because Jesus had humbled himself and taken on the role of the suffering servant for the sake of his people, God raised him from the grave and exalted him to his right hand—God declared Jesus to be the world’s true King so that in time every knee will bow and every tongue confess—that one day everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is creation’s Lord—and that in this God will be supremely glorified. This how God sets creation to rights, this is how God sets fallen humanity to rights: Not by charging in with a sword, but by submitting himself to the cross—by allowing evil and death to do their worst, by dying himself, so that he can pass through to the other side and leave them powerless over him—and powerless over all those with him. This is the new exodus and leads, not through the Red Sea, but through death itself to the life of God.

Now, back to verse 5. Paul doesn’t simply tell us this so that we better understand who Jesus is and what he’s done. That’s important, but Paul has a very practical reason for writing this to the Philippian Christians. He writes:

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

Jesus’ people are to “have this mind yourselves”. That’s why he’s done what he’s done, to solve the problem that began when Adam grasped at divinity for himself. As we identify with Jesus, we become a part of the renewed servant people of God. We are forgiven our past grasping, our past selfishness, and are filled with God’s own Spirit. As the Spirit turns out hearts and minds to the self-giving God, we become a people whose chief characteristic is self-giving humility. As we pass through death to ourselves we come out the other side alive to God. The Spirit works a miracle in

our hearts, he purges us of selfishness, of that powerful desire to grasp at whatever we can for our own benefit, and places in us a desire for God, a desire to please God, a desire to do the things that please God. In Jesus and the Spirit we finally become that servant people.

What does that look like? Well, it looks like the fruit of the Spirit. We’re the people characterised by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. We need this fruit now more than ever. As I’ve spoken with people over the last year—and particularly this week as we resume services—most of us are in some fearful or angry or impatient or fed-up or anxious. Everyone’s handling things differently. But notice that none of these things are the fruit of the Spirit. They don’t serve others; they turn us inward and have a powerful tendency to turn us against each other when we are confronted by our differences. Brothers and Sisters, Paul wrote these words as an exhortation to the Philippians to be that servant people God has created for the life of the world. We can’t be that people for the world when we aren’t the people for each other in the Church.

Here’s how he put it to the Ephesians:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
(Ephesians 4:1-3)

When you’re tempted to act out of fear or anxiety or anger, think of our King riding on the donkey, our King mocked and scourged, our King on the cross—for our sake. There we see humility and gentleness and patience as he bore with his sinful people out of love, eager to establish new body

united in the Spirit and in that we see God glorified as never before or since.

Let’s pray: 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.*