

First Christian Hymn

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

September 27, 2020

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalm 25

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we heard one of the finest passages from all of Scripture. It doesn't come from the gospel, but from a letter by the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. Paul, you will remember, met Jesus on the road to Damascus and was struck blind and fell from his horse. As he lay blind on the ground, Jesus spoke to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul later recovered his sight, in more ways than one. After his encounter with Jesus, his eyes were opened to the gift of God's presence and grace. Paul became a devout follower of Jesus and, in his writings and in his own nature, we see the evidence of a man transformed by grace. Paul gave himself body and soul to the cause of the gospel, by preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

It was around the northern Mediterranean that Paul and his fellow travelers, such as Barnabas, brought the message of the gospel into towns and villages. One of the places Paul visited was the town of Philippi, located about ten miles inland in the province of Macedonia. Philippi was popular with veterans of the Roman armies, who settled there in numbers. The city had no synagogue, so Paul had preached at a "prayer-place" by the river.

Since then, Paul has been arrested and thrown into prison. It is interesting to see how Paul often seems to thrive in prison. Paul makes friends with other offenders, sometimes converting them to Christianity. Since the prison authorities do not feed the prisoners, inmates need friends and family to bring food. Apart from food brought to him, Paul is sustained by his knowledge and love for God in Jesus Christ. It gives him the strength and wisdom to bear all things and, in the letter to the Philippians, to expound on the faith.

This letter is justly famous for containing what is perhaps the first Christian hymn ever recorded. Early Christian hymns were composed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They were spontaneous compositions "given" by the Spirit, and were sung or chanted in public worship. Once, a few years ago in my church in England, I had an experience of the Holy Spirit speaking through me. It was during a gospel concert, with a mostly visiting black congregation, and as the organ played I could feel the words being lifted off my lips by the power of the Spirit.

In the letter to the Philippians, which, we must remember, was being dictated and written down by another, Paul hits one of these purple patches. He could be repeating an oft heard hymn, or it could be that the spirit is speaking spontaneously from within. Whatever it is, his words carry profound theological meaning: they are explaining Jesus to us.

The hymn is in Chapter 2, verses 5 to 11. It begins like this: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." When he says "equality with God" we can take that to mean "equality" with God the Father. The Son is not less than, or greater than, the Father. And when it says that he did not "exploit" this equality, the literal meaning of this word is "grasped." He

did not take advantage or try to assert his equality with the Father, since equality was already his.

So how does Jesus treat his equality with the Father? He does something utterly extraordinary. We read that he “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Jesus is a king who, out of choice, becomes a slave. What does he empty himself of? He empties himself of power, at least in the way we think of it, in terms of having power or dominion over others; of making others beholden to you.

This seems so “un-God” like, that we struggle to understand how God could be both all powerful and at the same time totally powerless. How is it that Jesus is *both* God-King *and* God-Slave? And who is he the slave of? In one sense he is the slave of the Father - slaves depended entirely on the will of their masters. In another sense he has become our slave - he is here to serve us. He has given away all his power so that he stands before us in complete vulnerability. He chooses to identify himself with those on the lowest rung of society. He has, effectively, turned upside down our understanding of God, kingship and power.

For American ears, there is an inevitable resistance to anything which appears to extol slavery as being something of value. That’s understandable, given our history. So it might help to place this notion in context - at the time Paul was writing, slaves accounted for between one fifth and one quarter of the total population. Slaves, and the consciousness of slavery, were an ever-present reality in the lives of all people. Paul is now placing Jesus in one of society’s most common categories - that of a slave.

The hymn continues: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.” This is consistent with what Paul has just said before: crucifixion was the slave’s death. As the hymn progresses, what we are entering into is a condensed version of Christ’s Passion. This is the Passion of Christ being described to us by the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ obedience to the Father’s will means death on a cross. This was a fully human death and, at the point of death, the fullest expression of Jesus’ divine self-emptying love. In dying, Jesus had given everything away.

Here is the turning point. The cross gives way to Resurrection. Easter’s story must prevail over death’s story, and so the hymn continues, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...” What is that name? That name is Jesus, the name which derives from the Hebrew word for “Savior.” Jesus is our Savior, a Savior-God.

Our Savior God ascends to the throne in heaven, where he rules as King over all. The hymn continues, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” Jesus is supreme over all, exalted by God and yet present to us now, today, in our waking, in our sleeping, in our rising up and in our going down. There Jesus is, giving us the confidence we need and showing us the path to life in all its fullness.

This confidence opens out like a flower in the final words of the hymn, “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” As Christians we are to confess Jesus is Lord, openly, joyfully - we are to shout it from the rooftops. This earliest Christian confession says: “Jesus Christ is Lord”. Not Caesar, nor Herod, nor Prime Minister nor President. *Jesus* is Lord. He is our Lord and Savior.

This hymn, a gift of the Holy Spirit, is perhaps best read slowly, so that every word, every nuance can sink into our consciousness, into our soul, so that we may be transformed as Paul was transformed. It can inspire us to reconsider our own lives. Do we think in a Christ-like way, or do think only for ourselves? What does it mean for us, if we empty ourselves of our ego, our pride, our prejudices, and allow God's Spirit access to our very being. How can I humble myself before God, and become obedient to his will?

For all those engaged in an honest search for meaning within their own lives, these words have an important message to convey. In Jesus, God has revealed himself not as an all powerful deity, but one with the same vulnerabilities as you or me. More than that, he has "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." It is almost more than we can comprehend and yet, we keep being drawn back to it. This hymn is one which is sung in depths of the human heart, that place of wisdom and abiding mystery, where God's truth ultimately resides.

Let it sing in your heart, then, as you approach the throne of grace, and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford