

Walking the Way of Jesus with Paul

In these three Bible studies I am dwelling on Paul's letter to the Philippians and on three key virtues or practices, practices that we might seek to nurture and encourage in ourselves and one another. They are **joy, humility and perseverance**, all things at the heart of the Christian vocation. I'm more and more aware that I am a practising Christian; that my faith is something I have to keep going at, that faith is something I *do* as well as something I *believe*.

Today, we're going to focus on chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the Philippians and on the practice of humility. But first, I would like to see how much we can remember together about a key passage in that chapter. So, let's see how much you can fill in the gaps from memory. I'll start and see if you can finish the sentence. And it matters not if you remember a different translation from the one on the handout.

*"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,
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. "*

This passage goes back a long way in my memory, but I first learned it through the hymn *At the name of Jesus* (sung repeatedly in my Sunday school days to a tune fashionable at the time), upbeat and beginning with the end of the story and the triumph of Jesus. The 'therefore' came, as it were, at the beginning.

But what might the first readers or hearers of this passage have heard most strongly when it was read out to them and then perhaps repeated again and again as this letter was read out at many of their meetings? Of course, we can't know for sure, but we can imagine.

It may be that they would first of all have been struck by the reminder that Jesus died the death of a slave, death on a cross (crucifixion, as you will all know, was the death reserved for the lowest people in the Roman Empire). And in this case, the profound theological irony is that Jesus was 'in the form of God'. In Graeco-Roman culture, in the culture that would have been well known and lived in in Philippi, it was not necessarily an odd idea to say that a God would come in human form, though it might have been striking to say this the other way round, that a human being was 'in the form of God', but it *would have been astonishing* to say that someone 'in the form of God' would empty himself and take the form not of a human king, but of a *slave*. Jesus, in this passage, is both 'in the form of God' and in the 'form of a *slave*'.

It was not an uncommon idea in the ancient world that a human being might become divine, but it would be Caesar who might do that - never a slave. In that wonderful BBC series simply called *Rome* from 2005-2007 there was an astonishing episode where Julius Caesar becomes divine for a day. This was part of the imperial culture and a way of honouring a great man. But anyone would have been horrified by the idea that a slave could become divine or that a God could become a slave.

What was shocking about Jesus, and counter-cultural in a Graeco- Roman context, was that he was both in the form of God and in the form of a slave. This is a radical subversion of the Emperor cult, and indeed a subversion of all that we expect still to be true about human hierarchy.

Today in the United Reformed Church I hear a variety of ways of talking about who Jesus was and is. There are those who would say that Jesus was a good human being, perhaps the pre-eminent human being, and needs to be considered no more. There are those who might say that he was the Son of God. Orthodox Christian faith has tried through the centuries to say that he was somehow both human and divine and to find ways to express the paradox and tension in that reality. People sometimes say that Christians started out thinking of Jesus as a good man and that only later they began to think of him as divine, but it's vital to remember that the letter to the Philippians was written not many years after the crucifixion and is also possibly drawing on even earlier material. This isn't a late development. But neither is it an easy one. It is filled with a dynamic tension. Jesus was in the form of God and yet also in the form of a slave. This is a dynamic in other streams of the tradition than the Pauline one too. See what happens if you put this passage alongside the passage from John chapter 13 about Jesus washing the disciples' feet – as Jesus takes a role that a slave would fulfil.

The foot washing story in John's Gospel (All Gospel references below from John 13 – NRSV)

Gospel of John: 'Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God ...' (John 13:3)

Philippians: 'Equality with God'

Gospel: '... got up from the table, took off his outer robe ...' (John 13:4)

Philippians: 'emptied himself'

Gospel: '... and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.' (John 13:4-5)

Philippians: 'taking the form of a slave'

Gospel: 'After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am."' (John 13:12-13)

Philippians: 'Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above

every name ...'

Gospel: 'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.' (John13:14-15)

Philippians: 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ...'

I wish I could remember who first alerted me to this astonishing parallel, but I can only remember the profound impact it had on me. You might think that the Johannine tradition and the Pauline tradition are rather different in their Christology, but there is so much in common here, and from early strands of the tradition too. Listen to this later, but still early, Christian hymn which seeks to express the same kind of tension and truth – that Jesus was both God and slave. It's a hymn you can find in *Rejoice and Sing*

From east to west, from shore to shore,
let earth awake and sing
the holy child whom Mary bore,
the Christ, the Lord, the King!

For lo! The world's Creator wears
the fashion of a slave;
our human flesh our Maker bears,
our fallen race to save ...

Caelius Sedulius c.450

tr. John Ellerton (1826-93) altd

But, what is also striking and profoundly significant about this Christology is that Paul turns it into a *moral* message, into something to encourage *us* to virtue. Perhaps we've forgotten how odd that is. We can't possibly be expected to imitate this can we? 'This is the great story at the heart of the Gospel not our story!', we might say.

But Paul says right from the beginning of this key passage, 'Let the *same mind be in you* that was in Christ Jesus'. And he uses the same language of slavery to describe himself and Timothy as 'slaves of Christ'. They, like Jesus, are *douloi*. What does this mean? How do we understand that? Is there something uncomfortable about Christians being 'slaves of Christ', in a world where we would actually want to abolish all forms of slavery? Didn't Paul write to the Galatians saying that in Christ we are rather rendered free – 'For freedom Christ has set you free' (Galatians 5:1)?

I would suggest that Paul wants to say that in the Christian life there is a parallel kind of tension with our own identity and nature as there is with Christ himself. We are made in the image of God, (men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile), but as those who follow the one who was in the form of God and who emptied himself to become a slave, we too are called not to hold on to that innate dignity for our own sakes, but to empty ourselves in the

service of others. That does not mean that we ever forget the reality of our freedom and nature, but that we live as those who are willing to be in the humblest place and take the dignity of our humanity there. It is not at all that we are called to self-abasement, because we are saved, beloved and redeemed children of the God who made us. But we are set free *to live as Christ did*, in the humblest service of others. And to live in such a way knowing that we are subverting all human attempts to humiliate or to debase. We are *free slaves*, in the image of God and yet occupying the space of those who, in the ancient world, no-one thought could image God, the slaves. That tension and dynamic of the life of one who was in the form of God and yet took the form of a slave is also the shape and the direction of our own lives.

Listen to these words about what humility truly is, from the American novelist and theologians Frederick Buechner;

‘Humility is often confused with saying you're not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship.

If you really *aren't* much of a bridge player, you're apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy.

True humility doesn't consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else. It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do.’ (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, Harper & Row, 1973, p.40)

I have often wrestled and struggled with the idea of Christian humility. The virtue of humility has often been urged on women more than men and has been misused as a way of keeping women in our place. I once preached the University of Oxford sermon on the sin of pride, and I wrestled then with the reality that an excess of pride is not the chief sin of women, who often need to be encouraged instead to think more highly of ourselves. But I have returned to humility, seeing it again through the lens of this crucial passage from the scriptures. To be truly humble in the Christian sense begins from a recognition of your true dignity as a human being, to see that first in all its wonder and glory. ‘The glory of God is a human being fully alive’ said Irenaeus. ‘We are glorious’, says the singer in *The Greatest Showman* (a Chernin Entertainment film, 2017), but even more so, says God. And once you know that, and live from that confident reality, you can find the power and the freedom to give yourself away. The Christian virtue of humility is not at all the terrible, forced humiliation of slavery, but the willing self-offering of the free. It is to this that we are called and it is for this that Christ leads the way. Paul seems to know that we will need to practice this. ‘Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’, he says. We will need to practice that self-emptying grace that knows we have a dignified self in the first place, that we are made in the image of God, and yet free not to stand on that dignity, but to let it go for Christ’s sake.

In the United Reformed Church, are we wary of humility sometimes because we fear humiliation? An experience of humiliation lies deep in our history (I am minister of one of our 1662 churches) and sometimes we find ourselves little regarded in church circles with our small congregations of older people. But can we find a way, in the face of those things, nonetheless to live out a confident humility? Can we resist any kind victimization and rejoice

instead in the freely chosen humility of those who know ourselves to be made in the image of God and yet also to be slaves of Christ (the one in the form of a slave)? I would like to see us become *boldly humble* as we let the mind be in us that was in Jesus Christ. That, I think, would be truly to remember Philippians 2.