

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost Yr A 25 September 2011

Ezekiel 18.1-14, 25-32 Psalm 25.1-9 Philippians 2.5-11 Matthew 21.23-32

When Paul wrote to the Church in Philippi he imagined it was his farewell letter to that Church. Philippi is in northern Greece and the first city in Europe where Paul has created a community of those who followed Jesus on the way. At the time Paul wrote he was in prison, probably his imprisonment in Ephesus that produced the little letter to Philemon, in whose house a church met. We know that Paul's imprisonment is in an imperial prison; he was the prisoner of the Roman imperial power; such an imprisonment was dangerous and Paul would have been aware, may well have led to his execution. Paul was not writing to tell the Philippians off, to correct them for some fault or misunderstanding as so many of his other letters do. He writes with affection, perhaps with the urgency of imminent death, to urge the Philippians have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus.

Paul provides his friends with the fullest concise distillation of his theology in the passage from this letter we have just heard in our assembly today. He quotes an early hymn, probably the earliest of all, to show them what 'mind' he wants have. Perhaps Paul wrote this hymn; it certainly expresses his central convictions about Jesus. Now, by the word mind, Paul doesn't mean simply 'think this'; he means have 'this way of being and living, this path, this personal transformation' going on in you, that we see so fully in the Lord Jesus.

There are three ways of looking at this hymn.

1. The first is one you have heard me speak of before. It contrasts the old Adam of the Genesis story with the new Adam Jesus. The old Adam symbolises all humanity – the name means 'earthling' and 'the creature of dust'. Though a creature, this Adam sought equality with the Creator and tried to grab it by stealth when he ate the forbidden fruit in an attempt to be equal to God, the desire the serpent played upon to lead the earthlings to sin. It is Adam's hubristic desire that is contrasted with the humility of Jesus. So, in this way of reading it the story of God's redemption of humanity is a story in which the new Adam overturns the effects of the sin of the old Adam by living a life of perfect obedience to God. That is to say, he never fell away from an undivided love of God, which meant he was free to love others as he loved himself, and thus enabled God to keep the promise to bring new life from the death the sin of humans brought into the world. This is a symbolic telling of the story of our redemption from sin and death.
2. The second way of reading this hymn is to ponder the Word, to borrow John's profound imagery, the pre-existent Christ, the one who is with God in the beginning and who is God. All things have come into being through his being – what has come into being through him is life. Yet, for the sake of those whose being is eternally interwoven with his, he emptied himself of the glory he shared with God and took flesh as one of us, frailty and vulnerable as our human flesh is. He did not see his equality with God as something to exploit, he humbled himself and came among us, Jesus of Nazareth. He lived our common life; he knew our common joys and sorrow, our hunger and thirst, our ailments and limits, and our love.

This way of looking at the story of Jesus is called a ‘kenotic’ reading, the Greek word means ‘emptying’ and says that the Christ who was with God from the beginning, emptied himself to be with us.

3. And the third way to understand this hymn requires some knowledge of the times back when it was written. The Roman emperor claimed to be a god and was worshipped as such by the burning of incense before images of the Caesar. Later Christians who refused to do so were killed by Imperial Rome. The Roman emperor was called Lord, son of God, Lord and Saviour of the world. So the Christian affirmation Jesus Christ is Lord which is a very early confession of faith deliberately contradicted the prevailing world order by saying, no there is another way, God’s way. In the world as God orders human affairs, it is Jesus Christ who is Lord.

It is hard for us now to hear how radical, how counter the prevailing culture that affirmation is; how shocking and dangerous. But this is Paul’s central conviction when he says that he proclaims ‘Christ crucified.’ Note, not ‘Jesus killed’ or ‘Jesus dead’ but *crucified*. Only the Roman imperial power could crucify anyone, (it was not a Jewish method of judicial death) and only two groups of people were crucified: people who seriously threatened the authority of the state and recalcitrant slaves who would not accept it. Jesus was obedient to the point of death – even death *on a cross*. Jesus was executed by the political power that usurped the power of God and tried to destroy the one human life that reveals the alternative ways of God’s power, and justice and peace.

It isn’t necessary to choose between these ways of looking at this hymn – they all interpret it and like any great truth no one way of speaking about it will fully explore and reveal it to us. What this hymn reveals is the same mind, the same heart, the same disposition that we are to have since we have put on Christ in our baptism.

Let’s hear again how Paul prefaces his quoting of this hymn: If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

When they looked back to his life and teachings, the early Christians saw the pattern of this hymn lived out in Jesus’ every action. And Paul’s parting words to the church were that this is the pattern we should make ours. And what of the authority the early church very quickly gave to Jesus, risen Christ: it was the authority of one who enables others to live the pattern. Jesus would not tell those hostile to him where his authority came from; in his risen life and that of the community formed to live *now* in light of the resurrection, his authority is seen in the lives of his followers and his humble, courageous and costly obedience praised right from the earliest songs the church raised to heaven, just as we continue to do here, today.

