



The Greatest of all Contrasts

Philippians 2:5-11

On Palm Sunday, we prepare ourselves for the week that lies ahead, when we shall explore the deep aspects of the way of Passion as we see it in Jesus Christ.

I am resisting the temptation to open up the Palm Sunday theme again, having done so during our re-enactment of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem earlier today.

There is, however, a very meaningful link between Jesus' entry into the city and the passage in Philippians 2. These words put the events of Holy Week into a larger context and, as such, help us to gain a deeper understanding of the Person of Jesus Christ.

There is something powerful about a contrast. It is a theme we find in John's Gospel, where good and bad, light and darkness, provide us with stark contrasts. These verses in Philippians speak of the humiliation of Christ which will eventually lead to his exaltation, described helpfully in terms of his death that leads to life.

Life is full of contrasts. We only have to look at Christmas and Easter and see that they are replete with contrast. Just before we began the season of Lent, we observed the journey towards Easter, witnessing the disciples on the mountaintop and their experience in the valley below:-

- There is the mountain of encountering God and the valley of human need
- There is the mountain of God's confirming voice and the valley where people argue about religion
- There is the mountain where disciples long to worship and the valley where disciples disagree
- There is the mountain where the glory of God is revealed and the valley where the power of unbelief is manifest

Yet it will be on another hillside outside the city where Jesus Christ will be crucified, as people gamble for his clothes and abuse him. By contrast in a garden, his body will be laid and his tomb will be discovered empty.

Paul appeals to the Philippian Christians to live a life of oneness, lowliness and helpfulness after the example of Jesus himself – and, in the opening verses of Chapter 2, there is a stirring call for us to demonstrate something of the life of humility that we discover in Christ.

It is important for us to note that Paul is writing from a place of captivity to a church for whom he has a deep appreciation. He also has genuine warmth toward them for their generous support of his mission but, at the same time, has a concern for the emerging disunity amongst them.

I turn to Philippians 2 and to what may well have been an early Christian hymn. It is certainly a wonderful description of the character and nature of God as we meet him in Jesus.



Paul urges his followers to think of the needs of others before they think of their own desires. This requires a new heart and mind; the kind of mind that Jesus demonstrated in all its fullness. Jesus emptied himself and poured out his life in servanthood, even though he embodied the very nature of God.

The final days of Jesus' ministry which will lead to his death and resurrection have acts of humble service, revealing his deep and inner-vocation. This must guide our living, not least when we have to face challenges as experienced in this early Christian community.

This would be particularly important when they were inclined to become preoccupied with their own discord. In such a situation, the hymn which speaks of Jesus Christ calls the church to recognise just who they are.

The stark contrast between the humility of Jesus Christ and the flawed earthiness of the Christian community cannot be ignored. We can be sure that the church at Philippi had many excellent qualities; otherwise how could Paul describe this church as his "joy and crown" (4:1)? He warmly praises them for their fellowship and their generosity, as well as pointing out those things about which he was deeply concerned.

We cannot know all the details about such things, though we might conjecture that people were not getting on with one another and so on, but what we can be certain of is that Paul addresses these issues by referring to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

When disciples and crowds greeted Jesus as he entered the city of Jerusalem, they had to face many challenges. There could be no better script for a people facing potential rejection, denial, betrayal and all the other features of Holy Week than the seven verses in Philippians 2:5-11.

The contrast I want to draw to your attention is between the life of those who live in Christ and the life of a community that sits apart from this glorious journey. I remind you of three aspects that I hope we shall together find helpful:-

A mind that is selfless – v.5

The phrase "mind control" has an ominous ring to it. The novels *Brave New World* and *1984* described fearsome situations where central government dominated the minds of the people of the earth. We have also seen terrible examples of dictators who exercised unbelievable control over their people.

Jesus will never seek to gain control of our mind through manipulation; it will only be by invitation.

When we read these words, we recognise that the mind is to do with attitude and so when Paul talks about having the mind of Christ, he means it is having the same attitude with each other as when we are conscious of Christ.

The contrast between our relationship with Christ and our living alongside each other should not be great, for a genuine life in Christ produces a harmonious relationship amongst God's people.

The mind of Christ is one that is selfless, that considers the interests of others before itself. We tend to be so preoccupied with our own concerns that we miss this most profound and wonderful quality.

Selfishness cultivates those things which will help us, but when I observe the way of Jesus Christ, as he moves to his cross, I see the exact opposite.



Paul is using the example of Jesus as an objective for us to reach toward. Indeed what he is saying is that to narrow the gap between ourselves and the life demonstrated by Jesus Christ is only possible by leaving our own interests to one side and focusing upon him.

Some are unfairly critical of the writings of Paul and have drawn attention to the fact that there is little reference to the actual ministry of Jesus. One of the ways in which we can answer that criticism is by showing how the Apostle expounded the ministry of Jesus in terms of his cosmic Lordship and how no-one has lived more selflessly.

Carl Yung told of a man who asked a rabbi, "How come in the olden days God showed himself to people, but today nobody ever sees God?" The reply of the rabbi was, "Because nowadays nobody can bow low enough!"

The mind of Christ does not mean that we cease to be concerned about ourselves, but it is an encouragement that the "attitude" Jesus Christ exhibited should be seen in our lives. Outlook does determine outcome. If the outlook is selfish then the action will always be destructive. The Book of James makes a similar point about giving our lives to God: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (James 4:1)

I am certain that there are all kinds of implications from this truth in a "me first" society. This is perhaps one of the helpful conclusions we can draw from the way Paul describes the Christian life in terms of living "in Christ". It is a kind of shorthand for what it means to live in the body of Christ.

Fred Craddock tells the story about a preaching weekend at a church where he was to hold services on the Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday morning. When he pulled into the car park of the church on Friday afternoon, a funeral was concluding. People were moving to their cars, but the hearse was still there. The minister saw him, recognised him and motioned him to come over.

Craddock didn't want to intrude; he was just waiting until the funeral was over. He was standing next to the widow. The pastor introduced her to Craddock and he felt awkward. He said to her, "This is no time for you to be meeting strangers. I'm sorry about your loss." Her husband had been killed in a car accident and she was left with four children. He said, "I know this is a very difficult time for you."

She said, "It is. So I won't be at the service tonight, but I'll be there tomorrow evening and Sunday morning." Like any sensible and caring person, Craddock said, "Oh, you don't need to."

"Yes, I do," she said.

He said, "Well, what I meant was, I know it's a very hard time."

And she said, "I know it's hard. It's already hard, but you see this is my church, and they are going to see my children and I am OK."

That's the kind of community that Paul is longing for the Philippians to be.

A life that is serving – v.7

The seventh verse of this chapter takes us a little further. Not only does it show Jesus is our pattern, it also talks about him assuming the nature of a servant. Some translations



use the alternative translation of “doulos” instead and say “taking the form of a slave”. In verses 6 and 7, this does not mean taking the outward appearance or physical characteristics of a servant, for these are not the characteristics that the Apostle is pointing to.

A servant or slave has the same anatomy, the same limbs, the same shape and one could even go as far as to say that there is often little difference of temperament from a free man or woman.

What distinguishes and provides the most helpful contrast is the spirit of servanthood. If we remind ourselves that Paul was in prison, then he would understand this model very keenly.

In his commentary, Caird suggests a very clear restatement of this truth as he offers a suggested understanding:-

“Christ, being in the form of God, was equally with God, but did not count this a prize to be clutched. The idea is so mountainous that we may never scale it. We will need to contemplate it, stand in awe of it, but whatever words we use they will be inadequate to get an expansive meaning and hear of what Christ actually did.”

Mark’s description of the ministry of Jesus is powerful, “...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

The renowned statesman and orator, Cicero, would sometimes defend an accused person by pointing to the scars on the defendant’s body as evidence of his worth, especially his physical qualities. The Apostle Paul bore scars that had been inflicted upon him in the courts for maintaining his ministry. He had suffered persecution and injury for preaching the good news. It was this that led him to say to the Galatian Christians, “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” (Galatians 6:17)

In John Bunyan’s timeless allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian at the cross received four gifts from the angels – peace, new garments, a sacred scroll and a mark. The mark had to do with Christian’s appearance and distinguished him from all others. The mark of Christian service is one that ought to distinguish each of us.

A commitment that is sacrificial – v.8

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many people used this particular passage in Philippians to offer fresh understanding on the theory of incarnation.

It was a Bishop Gore who built a great deal on what is known as “Kenotic thinking” which comes from the Greek word “kenosis” which means emptying.

Paul was not propounding a theory; he was offering an understanding of exactly what we see in the Person of Jesus, as he emptied himself in love for the world.

The Lord Jesus Christ was obedient to such a degree that he was ready not only to die but to accept death in the most ignominious way – death on a cross, death in public, death in agony, and yet this will be his way of triumph. Death and resurrection are so intricately bound together and this sacrifice leads to new life.



A preacher once said, “Ministry that costs nothing accomplishes nothing.” Here ministry has a broader context and includes us all.

When our mind is in conformity with Christ, we live for the glory of God and the better good of others. I suppose the real question that we must address is: What kind of sacrifice is involved in our own commitment? Put differently: What does it really cost us?

Sacrifice and service are brother and sister, when commitment is genuine.

In one of his books, Tolstoy portrays an ideal Czar as one who keeps an open house and spreads a table for all-comers. His guests must comply with one condition: each person has to show his hands before sitting down at the feast. Those whose hands are rough and hurt with honest toil are welcome to the best of the table; those whose hands are soft and pale receive only the crust and the crumbs. The rough hands for Tolstoy were an indication of character – and no-one’s hands knew roughness like the One whose hands were pierced with nails.

I have sometimes reminded people about the four “rules” by which we live:-

- The Iron Rule – do to others before they do to you
- The Silver Rule – do to others as they do to you
- The Golden Rule – do to others as you would have them do to you
- The Titanium Rule – do to others as Jesus has done for you

Here is the rule by which our life must be set, as we live within the grace and power of our loving God through Christ.