

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 50:4-7
<i>Response</i>	My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 2:6-11

At last, we come to Palm Sunday, and we are celebrating and memorializing the Passion and death of Christ. And as you know, on this Sunday every year, the Church will read one of the narratives (the Passion narratives) in its entirety from any one of the Gospels. And because that text is so long and so powerful, it's easy for it to overshadow the second reading. But the Church gives us a very important reading from St. Paul for the second reading from today on Palm Sunday...and that is the famous hymn of Christ crucified, known as the kenosis hymn—the self-emptying hymn—that Paul gives us in Philippians 2:5-10. So this is a beautiful, famous, very important text.

Let's read through it together, and then we'll see...it's going to be very obvious why the Church chooses this, because this is perhaps the most profound and powerful description of the crucifixion of Jesus in all the letters of Paul. So it's very fitting that we would hear these words today on Passion Sunday—technically it's Passion Sunday—where we remember the Passion of the Lord Jesus Christ. So let's begin. Philippians 2:5-10:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 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.¹

Very beautiful passage. I hope you can even hear — even in an English translation — that it has a kind of hymnic quality to it. It almost sounds like a poem or a song. And many scholars actually think that although manuscripts of Paul's letter are in prose form, that this particular portion of the letter to the Philippians, that Paul is actually giving us a hymn, a song...whether it was sung by Christian churches or composed by Paul himself, that's all debated. But this famous hymn is a Christological hymn. It is a beautiful poetic description of two great mysteries—what would later become to be known as the mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of the redemption.

So let's look at each one of these as we walk through the letter, and we'll just kind of unpack certain verses here. Now, there's a lot more that could be said about this text. If you want to dive in a little deeper...before I get into it, I just want to recommend this book, *Paul: A New Covenant Jew* that I co-authored with Michael Barber and John Kincaid. There's a chapter in there—a beautiful chapter that Michael Barber was the principal author of, we all contributed to it—on the divinity of Jesus in Paul, on the Christology of Paul. And the Philippians hymn in chapter 2 is really front and center in that chapter. Michael's treatment is the best treatment of the divinity of Jesus in Paul that I certainly have ever read, and I would encourage you to read that if you want to dig in to this hymn a little more deeply.

For our purposes here, I just want to walk through it and make a few key points. So number one: the preexistence of the Son. Paul starts here by making a staggering but very important claim, namely that Christ Jesus, before He is born in the likeness of men, before He's found in human form, He is already in the form of God and possesses equality with God. So theologians refer to this as the preexistence of the Son. It's a very important theological teaching. It's a very important doctrine. Namely, that unlike all other human beings—you and me—

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

who were created by God, when we were conceived in the wombs of our mother...Christ Jesus as the divine Son, as the divine person, existed before He took on a human nature, before He was conceived in the womb of His mother, Mary:

...he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped... (Philippians 2:6)

...at or held onto. So the two terms Paul uses here...the form of God. The Greek there is *morphē theou*. We get the word morphology from that Greek word for “form.” And then he also talks about equality with God. So notice, what is Paul saying here? He is saying that the Son possessed equality with God before He takes on a human likeness or a human form.

Now, you might be thinking, “Well, wait, what exactly does that mean?” One thing I found helpful for reading Paul is to remember this: that although, for example in the Gospel in John, Jesus is called God by Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” When Paul’s referring to these two divine persons—the person of the Son and the person of the Father—he tends to use the word God to refer to God the Father and he tends to use Jesus or Christ Jesus or the Son of God to refer to God...what we could call God the Son. You can actually see this if you skip down to the end of the hymn there, when he says:

...every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:11)

So if you read the implicit word “the Father” into Paul’s use of the terminology of God, you can kind of interpret him correctly. So Christ Jesus possesses equality with God the Father. He’s equal. He has the form of God, but what happens? He says he did not count that something to be held onto or grasped, but he:

...emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:7)

So here's step two. First we have the preexistence of the Son, where Paul affirms His equality with God and His divinity. He's the form of God; He's divine. He's also equal with God the Father. But with step two, His birth...He says that Christ Jesus the Son "emptied himself"—*ekenōsen* is the Greek word. We get the noun "kenosis" from this. It literally means an emptying or pouring out. And He takes the form of a slave. Here Paul uses the exact same term, *morphēn doulou*. So instead of *morphē theou*, form of God, now He takes the form of a slave. And he appears in the likeness of a human being. And here the Greek word is *schēma*. We get the English word "scheme" or "schema" from that.

So what is Paul saying? That although Christ Jesus is equal with God, although He's divine...in the Incarnation in the birth, He takes on a human form and is born in a human likeness. So if you look at Christ, if you look at the human Christ, what do you see? According to appearances, you see the form of a slave, or you see the likeness of a human being...even though He is at the same time equal with God.

So Paul describes, number one, the preexistence of Christ; number two, the Incarnation of Christ (although He doesn't use the language of Incarnation...that's from John); and now number three, the third step in the hymn is to describe the Passion and death of Jesus. This is what he said:

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)

Alright, so let's pause there for a second. Notice three elements of the Passion of Christ that Paul's highlighting. First, his humiliation. What does he say? He humbled Himself. The Greek word here, *tapeinoō*, means to make yourself low or to make yourself lowly. So if you think about it, the only thing more humiliating or more self-abasing...or the only way you could possibly make yourself lower than descending to become a human being, is to take the lowest and most shameful form of death, which was crucifixion. So not only does the Son empty Himself by becoming a human being, but He humiliates Himself by being obedient even unto death on a cross. So humiliation, obedience, and then the third one is of course the cross itself.

Now why does Paul say:

...even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8b)

Well, he's assuming that his Greco-Roman audience—the people at Philippi—both Jews and Gentiles would know this, that crucifixion wasn't just any form of execution in the ancient world. There are lots of ways you could kill a person. You could stone them to death, for example. You could behead them—decapitation was another method of execution. But crucifixion...taking a person, tying them or nailing them to a tree, impaling them on a piece of wood and then allowing them to suffer and die slowly by asphyxiation in public was considered not just the most cruel manner of execution possible, but even more importantly, the most shameful of all deaths.

If you want some proof of this, you can listen to the Roman orator—famous Roman writer Cicero—who actually says in one of his works that crucifixion was:

...[the] extreme and ultimate *penalty for a slave*.²

And then again, another Roman writer, Valerius Maximus, called crucifixion:

...the slave's punishment...³

What do they mean by that? Well, in the Roman Empire, if you were a citizen and you committed a capital crime, you could be put to death, but it had to be by decapitation. That was considered a noble form of execution. So for example, according to ancient Christian historians, when Paul was executed under Caesar Nero in Rome, they beheaded him because Paul was a Roman citizen. He received a dignified death. It was violent to be sure, but it was still considered as dignified.

By contrast, when Peter was executed in Rome, Peter was just a Jew from Galilee. He was considered a slave of the Roman Empire. So since he was a non-citizen, he

² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *In Verrum* 2.5.169

³ Valerius Maximus, *In Verrum* 2.7.12

received the manner of execution of a non-citizen. Namely, they tied him to a stake. According to ancient tradition, he was crucified upside down, because he didn't even think he was worthy of being crucified in the same dignified position as Jesus Himself had been. But he was put to death by crucifixion upside down. So when Paul says that Christ Jesus:

...humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

What he's saying is this: that the one who had the form of God before He was born, the glory of divinity and who had equality with God the Father...not only emptied Himself in the Incarnation—being found in human form and becoming in human likeness—He even humiliated Himself unto the most shameful death possible. That is, death on a cross. He took literally the form of a slave, not just in the sense that he took the appearance of a human servant of God, but He took the literal form of a slave's death on the cross. He is the quintessential example of the suffering servant, the suffering slave—the one who dies like a slave on a cross.

And it's important to remember here that one of the reasons crucifixion was considered a slave's death was because you would be stripped of your garments down to either just the loincloth or no clothing at all, in order to be humiliated and shamed before everyone. It was a public death. Everyone got to watch you slowly suffer, bleed to death and asphyxiate and die. So it was humiliating. It was meant to be cruel. It was meant to be humiliating and not just physically painful. And that's the death, Paul says, that Christ lowers Himself to receive. This is what theologians call the kenosis of Christ, the emptying of Christ, the humiliation of going to death, even death on a cross.

In Holy Week, we need to remember that. It's not just the pain of the cross, it's the shame that Christ undergoes that is so painful. And if you've ever experienced being humiliated or being shamed, you'll know that the interior pain of humiliation can be just as painful—if not more painful—than exterior physical pain. And both of those come together, they merge into one in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Now, importantly, Paul doesn't stop the hymn there though. It's not where the story ends. It doesn't end with the death of Christ; it ends with His resurrection and His exultation, His ascension into Heaven. So he says:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 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)

Alright, so three elements here that are important. Paul is describing the fourth step in the hymn, the resurrection and the ascension. So he's dealt with the preexistence, then the birth, then the Passion and death, and now he concludes with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. And the three elements He highlights here are first His exultation. So although other passages will speak of the ascension of Jesus, Paul describes it as His exultation. In other words, God the Father is exalting Jesus to Heaven, to the throne in Heaven, to the heavenly kingdom. It's kind of like a triumphal entry into the heavenly throne where the one who was regarded as a slave is now actually revealed to be king. Second, he:

...bestowed on him the name which is above every name... (Philippians 2:9b)

Now what is that name? Well, on the one hand, the name is Jesus, right? Because Paul says:

...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... (Philippians 2:10a)

...and every tongue confess... (Philippians 2:11a)

And Jesus' name literally means in Hebrew "the Lord saves." So the name of Jesus is very powerful. It tells you both who He is and what He's come to do. It reveals His identity and it reveals His mission.

But in context here, when Paul says:

...the name which is above every name... (Philippians 2:9b)

...he's not just talking about the name of Jesus. Because it says that:

...every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord... (Philippians 2:11a)

And the Greek word there is *kyrios*. It literally means “Lord,” and it could be applied to a king or to a lord. But in Jewish Scripture, if you look at the Jewish Scriptures, you'll see that the word *kyrios* is the Greek translation for the Hebrew tetragrammaton—the four sacred letters, YHWH, that are the sacred and unpronounceable name of the Hebrew God, the name of the God of Israel.

And so what Paul seems to be describing here is that when Christ ascends to the throne, the entire cosmos—everyone in Heaven, everyone on the Earth and everyone under the Earth—will confess that Jesus Christ is the *kyrios*, that He is the Lord, that He is the one God of Israel who has come in person. And although human beings regarded him merely as a slave, merely as a man, and they put Him to death on the cross, the reality is that through that cross and through that death, He has now been raised from the dead and exalted to be revealed as equal to God the Father, and as sharing not just the glory, but the name of the one who also has the form of God. So He's being revealed not just as Christ, the Anointed One, not just as Jesus the Savior, but as *kyrios*, as the Lord of Heaven and the Lord of Earth.

And if you have any doubts about that, all you have to do is go back and look at the Old Testament passage to which Paul is alluding. So in the Philippian hymn, Paul describes every knee bowing and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, but when he makes that image, he's actually alluding to the passage from Isaiah...which may be one of the strongest affirmations of monotheism in the Old Testament, where Isaiah is insisting there is only one God. Listen to this in Isaiah 45:22 and following. It says, the Lord speaking:

“Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn,

from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
a word that shall not return:
'To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear.'

So notice...Paul takes a passage, which in Jewish Scripture is referring to the one God of Israel, to the Lord, in which the Lord says, "I am God. There is no other. To me, every knee will bow and every tongue confess." And Paul takes that text, and he applies it to Jesus. And he says that when Jesus is exalted, then every knee shall bow...

...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:11)

So what Paul's beginning to reveal there is the mystery of what would later come to be known as the doctrine of the Trinity—that although there is one God, we have (in this hymn he mentions) two divine persons, the person of the Son who is in the form of God and equal to God, and the person of God the Father...and that when the Son is exalted to Heaven with his human nature, his human body in the ascension, every tongue will confess that He is in fact the Lord, the one God of Israel, "to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:11). So there's a mystery of not just the cross, not just the resurrection, but also the mystery of the Trinity.

So I'll close here with a quote from the living tradition. St. Augustine wrote a famous *Reply to Faustus*, who was one of the early heretics in the Church. And in that *Reply to Faustus*, Augustine—in book 3 paragraph 6—says this about that famous Christ hymn in Philippians 2:

Christ, therefore, our Lord and Saviour, true Son of God in His divinity, and true son of man according to the flesh... thought it not robbery to be equal to God, was He born of a woman, but in the form of a servant, in taking which He emptied Himself. *He is therefore said to have emptied Himself because He took the form of a servant, not because He lost the form of God.* For in the unchangeable possession of that nature by which in the form of God He

is equal to the Father, *He took our changeable nature, by which He might be born of a virgin.*⁴

So I just want to close with that sometimes interpreters of Paul have suggested that when it says Christ Jesus emptied Himself, it means that He emptied Himself of His divinity and took on only our humanity. So what Augustine is saying, which the Church has always held, is that in the emptying Himself, in taking on the form of a human being, Jesus does not lose His divinity. Instead, what happens in the Incarnation is the wedding (so to speak) of divinity and humanity. As a divine person, He assumes a fully human nature and yet retains His fully divine nature. And that's why in the Creeds we confess that He is "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." He doesn't lose His divinity. He assumes our Humanity and takes that humanity not just to the cross and to the grave, but He raises that humanity up and then (this great mystery) exalts His human nature to the right hand of the Father in the resurrection and ascension into Heaven.

And that's really what this Christ hymn in Philippians 2 is all about. This is, in essence, a summary of the Paschal Mystery that we're preparing to celebrate at Easter—His passion, His death, His resurrection and His exaltation as the one who all creation, in Heaven, on Earth, and under the Earth, will one day confess as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

⁴ Augustine, *Reply to Faustus* 3.6; in *NPNF1* 4.161