

## The Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 18:25-28
<i>Response</i>	Be mindful of thy mercy, O Lord
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 2:1-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 21:28-32

The twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Philippians. And this week we turn to chapter 2 of the letter to the Philippians, and this is easily the most famous passage from this letter of Paul. It's commonly known as the Christ hymn, because many scholars actually think Paul here is actually quoting an early Christian hymn that kind of sang a song of the mystery of the incarnation, and the passion, death, and resurrection. We can't prove that to be sure, although Paul is certainly very poetic in this particular section of the letter.

What is clear, however, is that this is one of the most important theological and christological sections of all of Paul's writings, because he deals with the mystery of both the incarnation and the passion, death, and resurrection...so the two great pillars of the Creed. It begins with the incarnation and ends with the passion, resurrection and the section on Jesus Christ. And also it's Paul's...arguably his clearest teaching on the divinity of Jesus, on the fullness of Jesus' humanity and divinity, so the mystery of the incarnation.

So with that in mind, let's read through Philippians 2:1-11. It's a long reading — the lectionary often picks shorter passages. But because this passage is so important, the Church thankfully gives us the entirety of the text. So Philippians 2:1 and following, we read these words:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in 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.<sup>1</sup>

I hope you can tell that he just said a lot. There's a lot going on in these verses. So I'm just going to kind of walk through them and try to unpack them for you. So let's begin with the first theme here. The first theme is the humility of Christ—Christ as a model for the Christians at Philippi. So notice the first point Paul says here is:

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)

The Greek word *tapeinophrosynē*—that's a long one—literally means “lowliness.” So if something is *tapeinaō*, it's low. Latin writers will say the same thing about the word “humility.” It means to be close to the ground. So humility, lowliness, is the opening theme that Paul gives to the Philippians before he gets into the hymn itself, before he starts talking about Christ. He exhorts them to have the same mind (intellect), the same love (meaning the heart, the will)...

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

...being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

So what he's trying to tell the Philippians—before he gets into the hymn about Christ Himself—is that first, as Christian, you need to learn to cultivate the virtue of lowliness, of humility. And what does that virtue entail? Well, first it entails counting others better than yourselves. That's a fascinating thing. Most of us are naturally inclined to think of ourselves as better than others. Pride is all about a disordered self-love by which we exalt ourselves over others. We think ourselves better than others. We put ourselves first. "I am first, number one. I'm number one."

Paul is saying, "No, no, no—to the contrary":

...count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

So instead of being self-focused and rooted in self-love, humility is focused on the other, and it's rooted in love of God and love of neighbor. So Paul is trying to cultivate a virtue here of humility, and he grounds that virtue that he's teaching to the Philippians in the imitation of Christ. So he's going to say, "The reason you Christians need to exercise humility is because that's what Christ did." The reason you want to think of others before you think of yourself is because that's what Christ did. That was the mind of Christ. The reason you want to look out for the interests of others over your interest is because that's how Christ lived. That was the heart of Christ.

So in the Greek, you can actually see this, that Paul is using the same words to describe the Philippians that he uses to describe Jesus. So for example, he says first, the Philippians are to do everything in humility—*tapeinophrosynē*, I just mentioned that. Well, in the verses we're going to see in a second, what is Jesus going to do? He humbles himself—*tapeinaō*. In other words, He lowers Himself. Secondly, he wants them to regard others, to think about others as better than themselves. *Hēgeomai* is the Greek word. Well, what is Christ going to do? He

does not regard—same word, *hēgeomai*—his equality with God to be something grasped, but he lets it go. He empties Himself of His glory in order to take on the form of a servant, the form of a slave...take on a human nature.

So the first point is just that Paul is trying to teach Christians that the reasons Christians should cultivate the virtue of humility is because as a Christian—he doesn't use this language, Paul never says anything about being a Christian. That's the language we get from Acts. Paul doesn't use it in his letters. But as a Christian, they are to imitate Christ. They are to be little models based on Christ Himself.

Okay, so what is the humility of Christ? What does the humility of Christ look like? Well, here we have to go to the hymn itself, where Paul describes in these beautiful verses—which are very poetic, almost like a song in Greek, kind of a hymn—the *kenōsis* or the emptying, the self-emptying of Christ, both in His incarnation and in His passion and death. If you want to dive in a little more deep than what I'm going to do now, you can check out this book that I co-authored with Michael Barber and John Kincaid called *Paul, A New Covenant Jew*. We have a chapter in here on Paul's christology, on his theology of Christ. And a lot of that chapter is actually focused on Philippians 2 and the whole issue of how Paul understands the humanity of Christ, as well as the divinity of Christ. So that's the place you can go if you want to dive in more deeply.

But for our purposes here, I just want to make a few brief points. So let's back up and walk through the hymn slowly. First he says:

...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...

Pause there. The first point we want to look at here is...what does it mean to be in the form of God? Well, the Greek word for form, *morphē*—it literally means an outward appearance. So for example, if you think about the Transfiguration when Jesus goes up the mountain with the disciples, and it says that His appearance was altered.

The Greek word there, we get the English word “metamorphosis.” It’s a change in the outward form, the outward appearance. He begins to become luminous from within. The light of His divinity shines through (so to speak) the veil of His humanity, so that the disciples get to glimpse it for a bit. So Paul says here that originally, Christ is in the form of God, and He possesses equality with God. So this would obviously be before the incarnation. This is the preexistent state of the eternal divine Son.

And it’s really important to see here that Paul talks about the equality with God. So in Philippians 2, Paul is teaching the co-equality of the Father and the Son. So God—whenever Paul says God, he usually means God the Father. It’s implied. And when he talks about the Son, obviously he’s going to talk about Christ, but he’s saying that they are equal. So Christ has the form of God, but He doesn’t count His equality with God the Father as something to be grasped at or held onto, but instead He empties Himself, and He takes the form (same word) of a servant.

Now the Greek word here for “servant” can also be translated as “slave.” So it’s a very lowly status. So he goes from being in the form of God to taking on the form of a servant or the form of a slave. Well, when does He do that? It’s in the incarnation, because it says:

...being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:7c)

So Paul doesn’t use the language of incarnation. That’s from the Gospel of John. We get that from John 1, where John says:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Down to verse 14:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... (John 1:14a)

So incarnation means to take on flesh. Paul doesn’t use that language, but he’s describing the same reality here in the *kenōsis* hymn. So he describes what we

would call the incarnation based on John's language with the language of self-emptying—taking on the form of a human. So He has the form of God; He's equal with God, but now He assumes a human nature and is found in a human form. And the distance between being in the form of God and being in the form of a human is literally infinite, because God is infinitely above human creatures. And yet, the Son lowers Himself to take on a human nature in His birth:

...being born in the likeness of men.

And then He keeps going, because that's actually not the full extent of Jesus' self-emptying. He doesn't just humble Himself down to the form of a human being. He goes deeper. He goes lower, because as in verse 8, he says:

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

So what does that mean? Well, Paul would have understood—and certainly the Philippians would have understood, being a Roman colony—that crucifixion wasn't just the most cruel form of execution by the Roman government. It was also the most shameful form of execution that the empire would inflict on anyone. So for example, if the Roman state was going to execute a citizen, they couldn't do it by crucifixion. They had to do it by decapitation, by beheading, because it was undignified to be crucified. Crucifixion was the form of execution reserved for slaves, not for citizens.

And that's why when Paul is eventually executed in Rome—right now he's still in prison but eventually he'll be executed—he's going to be decapitated. He's going to be beheaded in keeping with his dignity as a Roman citizen. But Jesus isn't a citizen of Rome. He's a slave from the east part of the empire. He's from Judea. He's one of the Jews, and so He's executed with the form of execution that a slave has—the lowest, most shameful possible death you could experience. It wasn't just meant to strip you of your physical life; it was meant to strip you of your human dignity.

And so Paul is saying that Christ, though He was in the form of God, He not only humbles Himself to take on the form of a man, but He goes even deeper and lower to the form of a slave and the death of a slave on the cross. That's how much Christ lowers Himself before others. And why does He do it? For the sake of our salvation. For the sake of the salvation of humanity.

Now in verse 9, Paul says (and here's where the shift comes in the hymn):

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

Pause there. What's he referring to here? Well, this is Paul's language for the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. Think of it this way. There's a twofold movement taking place. Jesus is coming down in the incarnation and further down in the crucifixion, but then the turning point is at His death. And then after His crucifixion, now the direction is up. He's raised up from the dead in the resurrection, and then He ascends—He's brought up—into glory in the Ascension into Heaven, where He's seated at the right hand of the Father. 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.

If you pause here for a second...ever since Christianity came onto the scene, there's been a debate about the relationship between the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Is He just a man? Is He just a god pretending to be a man? Is he fully God and fully man? What do we make of the mystery of the divinity and humanity of Jesus? And we see here Paul teaching very clearly, I think, an incarnational christology, where Jesus is both fully God—He's equal with God, He has the form of God—but He's also fully human. He empties Himself of divine glory, the appearance of divinity, but He takes on the likeness of sinful flesh, as Paul will say in Romans 8. He is like us in all things except sin. That's how Hebrews is going to articulate it.

But there are some scholars who will say, “Well, Paul thinks that Jesus is divine”...but they don’t necessarily think that He’s God. Some scholars will actually argue, “Paul thinks that Jesus is like a divine being. He’s like an angel. He’s above human beings. He’s very powerful...but He’s not the same as the one God of Israel.” After all, Paul is a Jew. Paul is a rabbi. He’s a Pharisee. He would have known in Deuteronomy 6, the famous creed, the Shema:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.  
(Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

There is no other God; there is *one* God. Monotheism is what it later comes to be called. So some scholars will say, “Well, Paul thinks Jesus is a powerful divine being, but He’s not the one God made man.” But Philippians 2 is one of the best texts to show that that is wrong. But you can only really see it clearly if you look at Paul’s use of the Old Testament. Because when Paul 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.

He’s actually alluding to a passage in Jewish Scripture. He’s alluding to a text in the Old Testament. And it’s in fact the most monotheistic text, arguably, in the entire Old Testament—apart from Deuteronomy 6 itself. So he’s quoting here Isaiah 45, so let’s just go back there for a second. In Isaiah 45:18, 21, and 23, we read these words. Listen to this:

For thus says the Lord,  
who created the heavens...  
“I am the Lord, and there is no other.

And there is no other god besides me...

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 this is happening in the context of Isaiah's oracle against idolatry. The Israelites have fallen into idolatry. Some of them are worshipping false gods and other deities. And in the midst of that, the Lord—the God of Israel, the one God—says, "Listen up. I am the Lord, and there is no one else. There is no other God beside me. And the way you'll see that is to me, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear." In other words, "Every creature is going to worship me as God and no other."

So Paul takes that monotheistic text from Jewish Scripture, and he weaves Christ into it. In other words, he takes the words that are applied to the one God in the Old Testament, and he applies them to Jesus. So where Isaiah says:

'To me every knee shall bow,  
every tongue shall swear.'

...to the Lord, the one God, Paul says:

...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.

Now watch this. This is so cool. The Greek word here for Lord is *kyrios*, and it has two connotations that are really important to understand. *Kyrios*—it just means Lord. It can be used to refer to an earthly master or an earthly king. And that would be true in Gentile contexts, especially.

In a Jewish context, however—especially Greek speaking Jews, like Paul—it's also the word *kyrios*, Lord, that's used to translate the Hebrew name of God, YHWH...the Tetragrammaton, the four letters, the holy name. So when a Jew would read the Old Testament over a thousand times, God is called *kyrios*. That's

the Lord's name. But it's also a word that can mean a master or a king. *And* it's a title that was often given to Caesar. Caesar was called *kyrios*. Caesar was called Lord. So Paul is writing to this Church at Philippi, and what does he do? In one breath, he both upholds Jewish monotheism by quoting Isaiah 45, and at the same time makes clear—implicitly, he doesn't say it—that Jesus is Lord and who is not Lord? Caesar.

So Jesus is being revealed as the one God of Israel who has become man for the sake of human salvation...has gone down into the depths of crucifixion and death, but then been exalted by God the Father to take His seat of equality with God (in the Ascension) so that at His name, every creature will bow and recognize that He is *kyrios*. He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So we see a revelation here, too, of the mystery of the Trinity—that both the Son and the Father are equal. They're equally God, but they're two distinct persons in the godhead.

Alright, well, there's a lot more I could say about this. Let me end with two points. First, from the living tradition. It's very important that you not misunderstand what Paul says when he speaks about Jesus emptying Himself. Since ancient times, some interpreters have been inclined to misinterpret this and say, "Well, He *was* God, but then He stopped being God and became man." He emptied Himself, in other words, of His divine nature.

No, no, no. That's not what Paul means. And St. John Chrysostom, in his commentary on the letter to the Philippians—his *Homily on Philippians*—he made this clear in the 4th century. Listen to St. John Chrysostom's words:

He was not only human, which is what he appeared to be, but also God... We are soul and body, but he is God, soul, and body. For this reasons Paul says in the form—and so that when you hear of his emptying you may not suppose that he underwent change, degradation, and some sort of

annihilation of his divinity. But remaining what he was he assumed what he was not. Becoming flesh, he remained the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

That's John Chrysostom, *Homily on Philippians*, homily 8, paragraph 2. So this is classic statement of the mystery of the incarnation...that when Paul says He emptied Himself of being in the form of God, what he means there is the outward appearance. So Jesus doesn't look like He's a God when you see Him as a little baby or when you see Him sleeping in the boat. He looks fully human, but He doesn't divest Himself of His divine nature. He retains what He was—namely, His divine nature—but He assumed what He was not...His human nature. And that is the great mystery that Paul's singing a hymn of praise to in Philippians 2.

In closing, then, what does this mean for us? Well, remember...Paul begins this hymn to the Philippians by saying:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...

...to do everything in humility. So basically, what he's saying is this: If you want to go up to Heaven, if you want to be exalted to Heaven, then you have to do what Christ did. You have to lower yourself while you're on Earth. You have to seek the lowest place. You have to cultivate and practice the virtue of humility—of putting others before yourself, for their salvation and for yours.

And this really is the great mystery of the cross. There's a great quote from St. Rose of Lima in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that I'll end with. It's in paragraph 618. And she says this:

Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven.<sup>3</sup>

And I think that's true on two levels. First, it's true objectively speaking. In other words, that Christ's suffering, death, resurrection, is the only way to eternal life.

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily on Philippians* 8.2.5-11, quoted in ACCS 8:248

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 618

But I think it's also true on a subjective level. Namely, if we're going to participate in the salvation that Christ has won for us, we also have to imitate Him. We have to take the path of the cross. So the only way to climb—that would sort of be the ladder to paradise, like Jacob's ladder to Heaven—is to climb up on the ladder of the cross. It's to lower ourselves through the practice of humility, that we will be exalted into the heavenly kingdom.

And you don't have to take my word for it or even St. Rose's. You can just take Jesus' word for it, because in the Gospel what does He say? Whoever humbles Himself will be exalted, and whoever exalts Himself will be humbled.