

Philippians 2: 6-11(NRSV)

Jesus Christ,

6. who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7. but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8. he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

9. Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

10. so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11. and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

We will hear these verses, from of Paul's letter to the Philippians, on Palm Sunday. Part of a longer letter, these verses seem to jump off the page together, and are sometimes referred to as the 'Hymn to Christ': not surprising, since these verses speak of Jesus' incarnation, suffering death, resurrection and glory.

Some say that when Paul was writing, he would have imagined that this letter would be read out loud during community worship. If so, he might have purposely tried to include material to help the community in their times of worship, hence this hymn for example. That being said, its not sure that Paul actually wrote these verses on his own, he may have been inspired by material that already existed and adapted it for his own purpose.

Nonetheless, these verses are very fitting in the letter to the Philippians. Throughout this letter, Paul encourages the Christian community to imitate the humility of Jesus. This was probably no easy task, as in Philippi social categories and status were very important in society in general. Thus, anything that could bring someone more authority, power or titles must have been very tempting. In verses 6 and 7 Paul speaks of Christ '...who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...'. There have been and still are many debates as to what Paul means exactly here. Some say, based on the importance of social categories in Philippi, that he is using the image of Christ becoming humble through giving

up something like an important social standing. This would have been an image that the Philippians would have understood well. Whatever the case, what is clear is that when Christ was ‘born in human likeness’ (verse 8) he was both fully human and fully divine.

In verse 9, there is a sudden change in focus: rather than being on Christ, the focus is now on God’s response to Christ’s humility and obedience. God ‘exalts’ Christ, which refers to both the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The hymn finishes in declaring Christ the supreme authority in any, every, and all places as Christ was, is and always will be present. Not only that, we are called to ‘confess’ this fact: in other words we are called to proclaim it. Proclaiming Christ as supreme authority would have been risky business for the Philippians, who were under the rule of the Roman Emperor. The Emperor was seen as not only as supreme authority but also as a god. If you dared say otherwise, there were serious consequences. In fact, Paul ran himself into trouble (and into prison!) on these very grounds, and despite that still tells the Philippians to proclaim Christ as supreme authority.

The Hymn to Christ sums up much about what we as Christians believe about Jesus: one with the Father, he became fully human, all the while being fully divine. He lived among us, obedient to his Father at all times, even to his death. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. He is alive and working everywhere and at all times. And all of this ‘... to the glory of God the Father’. When we enter Holy Week, reading these verses, “taking them in”, can help us enter more deeply into the mysteries we will be remembering.

Sources

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