



Revd Ro's Reflection on 17th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 21

Year A

Philippians 2.1-13

Matthew 21.23-32

As we have been following Paul's letter to the Romans we have explored Paul's theology and his instructions to the fledgling church in Rome. Last week in his letter to the Philippians Paul, in captivity, explained that whether he lived or died he would be satisfied. If he were to be released he could continue God's work of mission, if he died then he rejoiced to be united to Christ. Paul also had words of instruction for Jesus' new followers in Philippi.

'Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,' Philippians 1.27

Here at the beginning of chapter two Paul continues to give the Philippian church the pattern of Christian life. It is, if you like, applied theology – faith in Jesus, lived out in your own life and the life of the church. It applies as much to us, and any Christian, as it did to the Philippians all those years ago.

Paul really begins where he left off last time, his emphasis is on unity. Of course it is conflict that divides peoples and nations. That is not to say that we are all clones or have to have the same opinions, that would be impossible and ridiculous. Once again, look at the different churches today, they have different practices, different ways of worshipping but they are all doing what they do to the honour of Jesus Christ. That is the material point. That is what Paul was saying when he talked about observation of different feast days or eating different things. So long as what you do is in accordance with Jesus' teaching and to his honour that is fine, after all we have a lot to learn from each other. That is really what Paul means when he says at verse two, 'be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.' The point is they must be of one mind in 'sharing in the Spirit,' in other words motivated by the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Paul is giving them a concise picture of Jesus' way. He sums it up brilliantly and succinctly. ³ 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.'

Actually that is a guide for life, within families, communities, churches, institutions. It is what Jesus says when asked what should be done to inherit eternal life, 'Love God and one another'.

Paul understands Jesus' teaching and he knows how these first Christians must behave if the Church is to be built on the foundations Jesus laid. Paul is not giving some idealistic set of rules but a pattern built firmly on Jesus' teaching and for Paul there can be no other way for true Christians.

Jesus has made it abundantly clear that there are no half and half measures. A Christian has to be committed to following Jesus Christ and his good news. Sometimes that commitment will be costly but his instruction, 'Take up your cross and follow me,' encapsulates that.

Paul knows that the things that will destroy a church or any community quicker than anything are, 'selfish ambition and conceit.' There is no room for self-seeking, self-aggrandisement or power politics. Think of Jesus' comments about those who stand at the street corner showing off about fasting or praying. Ambition for power or status is not Jesus' way. No, they are to think others better than themselves. It is humility that Paul is advocating. He does not just leave it at this but he grounds his words in 'the mind of Christ,' in Jesus' example. That is his illustration for them.

What follows is, I think, one of the most beautiful poems expressing the nature of Jesus. It was, with Colossians 1.15-20, one of the earliest hymns of praise in the Early Church. It is in fact a creedal statement, a statement of belief. Paul in just a few sentences is developing Christology. Christology is really the study of the person of Christ, his divinity and manhood. The gospels are clear about it but only John really develops it. Later of course the early church would have to work out this theology more specifically but here we have it in its early form. There is nothing equivocal about Paul's writing here and it is a beautifully crafted piece. He is linking it to what has gone before in the instructions he gave to the Philippians. The key note of behaviour must be selfless humility and the motivation for action must be love – ⁵ 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,' Jesus gave the example.

The Jesus Christ Prayer, as I am going to call it begins,

'who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited'

Here is Paul's clear statement of Christ as pre-existent with God. We think of John 1.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Certainly Paul's theology may not be as fully developed, but Jesus is seen as 'with God' from the beginning. He did not 'cling to equality with God' to use the old translation, Jesus' equality to God is clearly stated. That is a huge claim, imagine how counter cultural this was for those first believers, no wonder they were persecuted. That however is the centre of Christian belief. In humility Jesus took on human form uniting it to his divinity, not a prince not living a life of privilege but

'taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness'

Paul explains clearly that Jesus is equally God and man. Paul goes on to the central point, the cross,

⁸ 'he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.'

Jesus died for humanity on the cross and rose again for us to win salvation. Paul stresses the resurrection,

⁹ ' . . . 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.'

That is why every knee should bow at the name of Jesus. Not incidentally, at the name of the Emperor who demanded it and who thought of himself as a god. No, there is only one Lord and that is Jesus. These first Christians were to find themselves living out these lines because they would not bow down to the Emperor, they would only confess that Jesus Christ was Lord and God. For many of them it meant death. These words of Paul are central to Christian belief and action.

Jesus' divinity and humanity is put well in these lines from the hymn,

'Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity, in perfect harmony, the man who is God.'

Another hymn we know which is inspired by this passage is, 'At the name of Jesus every knee should bow' and it is very worthwhile to read the hymn in conjunction with Philippians 2. Paul puts all this theology so beautifully it reminds me of a line from George Herbert's poem 'Prayer' he says that prayer is, 'the soul in paraphrase.' Well here Paul has managed, I think, to put the nature of Christ, his incarnation and resurrection in paraphrase. To teach clearly that Jesus' Christ is God and man. The beauty of his words inspires us with wonder.

¹² 'Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.'

Paul makes it clear to them that whether he, Paul, is with them or not matters little, the point is 'God is at work in you.' So God, the Holy Spirit is within each one of us as we try to do God's work. It is in the strength of God that we are enabled to live in his way.

It is interesting that Matthew 21 is set for our gospel reading for today. The chapter begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. Philippians 2.5-11 is the reading set for Palm Sunday and we can clearly see why.

Jesus has gone to the temple he had overturned the tables of the money changers. He had cured people there and the sounds of hosannas still echoed around the Temple precincts. The chief priests and the powers that be are already furious with him and, if truth be told, afraid of his power and popularity. Actually they probably are afraid of just who this man is. So when he enters the Temple the next day he is greeted with these words from the chief priests and elders, 'By what authority are you doing these things?' On one level they are asking what right he has to behave like this but on a much deeper level and in the light of what we have just read in Philippians 2, that authority takes on a huge significance. We know by what authority he does these things, it is God's authority. Jesus is from God and of God he is working God's purpose out.

Jesus will not be drawn however and cleverly turns the tables on them by asking by what authority John the Baptist acted. Of course he has them say, from God, and they should have believed him; also Jesus who was heralded as the Messiah by John is vindicated before them all. To say John was not a prophet meant the people would be furious. They can't answer and these priests and elders of the Jewish faith, who are meant to know all about God, look pretty stupid.

The story of the two sons is aimed squarely at them too. The son who said, 'yes' to his father then did not do his will is like those who pretend to be obeying God yet who ignore the teaching of Jesus and deny that he is from God and indeed the long awaited Messiah. In other words they do not do God's will, more than that they are plotting to destroy Jesus. He is pointing the finger squarely at these leaders and all who oppose him.

The other son who at first refuses the father's will represents those who are sinners but who turn to Jesus after having lived a life which was wrong. It is they who, in humility, are sorry for what they have done and turn to God in Jesus. It is they who say a whole hearted yes to him.

'Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

Linking it to the reading from Paul, those first Christians would, many of them, have worshipped idols with all the attendant practices. A life of sin might have been natural to them. In other words they were not doing God's will. But when they heard the Good News of Jesus Christ they turned from all that and accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Their lives were changed accordingly; these are the ones who do God's will. They are the ones who will receive the promises of God.

Jesus could not have been more specific. He gives these leaders a dressing down in front of the people. They have turned their back on God refusing to obey him, refusing to see Jesus as Lord and God. They continue their vindictive behaviour and it will take Jesus to the cross. But it is on the cross that he will vanquish sin forever. Jesus man and God will win salvation for us in love by his death and resurrection.

These passages both challenge our behaviour. The message of 'follow me' is clear. But also we know that we do so in the strength of God. We know that he is with us at every minute to strengthen and uphold us.

'He is God the Saviour, he is Christ the Lord, ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored.' Caroline Noel

~~~~~