

April 10, 2022 Palm/Passion Sunday - Sermon notes

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 23:1-49

The great drama of God's creation reached a climax in the city of Jerusalem in the days of Jesus of Nazareth. The story of humanity had begun centuries before after God had brought to life a lump of clay and 'blessed it with memory, reason and skill and made it the steward of creation'. All dominion over the created order had been granted to this creature and the freedom of paradise on earth was part of this prize. With only one exception humanity had freedom in the Garden and they chose to disobey their Creator and give up their dominion to God's enemy. The story we read in the pages of the Old Testament is the long saga of God's efforts in restoring the original plan through his selection of one family out of all of the families on earth. The descendants of Abraham were to be the means through which God brought about a restoration - a rescue - so that the pains and anguish introduced to creation through the original disobedience could be erased. We rehearse that portion of God's story today and in the week to come through liturgical actions but we also do so in order to participate in the ongoing story of restoration. The role of Jesus is pivotal to that story and was foreshadowed by the prophet Isaiah and depicted by the Psalmist. We heard the details of the experiences of Jesus during that last week in the Gospel reading for today and we are probably at least a little familiar with that story. In his letter to the Christians in Philippi St. Paul takes a slightly different approach to speaking about this wonderful story. He takes us into the throne-room of God and speaks of Jesus' role from a heavenly perspective. Even after years of studying and contemplating on this passage of scripture I find new things which challenge and delight me so I invite you to once again engage with the passage from the 2nd chapter of St. Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi.

St. Paul's desire is for the people in that Christian fellowship to grow as effective disciples of Jesus. A sort of outpost of the kingdom of heaven had been established in that city and St. Paul wished for the power of God to flow through them into the community in which they had been planted. In the opening verses of this chapter he urges them to 'complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind'. I confess that this is also my prayer for every congregation of which I've been a part. It is my wish for this parish that we would continue to grow into a community which operates under Christ's influence with the same mind, the same love, and in full accord. That we fail to do this completely is not a sign that we are somehow deficient because St. Paul wouldn't have had to include these words if the people of Philippi were exhibiting the qualities he is urging them to have. We are all invited to allow the Christ who suffered for us to create in us these qualities so that we will become an even more effective means of sharing God's grace. This parish is yet

another outpost of the kingdom of heaven that has been established through which the power of God can flow into the communities in which we live. St. Paul believes that this will happen most effectively if we allow God to create in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus and he uses what was probably a hymn to illustrate some of those qualities of mind.

The hymn begins with a description of Jesus' attitude about privilege. We are told that he 'was in the form of God and had equality with God'. The phrase 'equality with God' has been debated for centuries as to its exact meaning but I think we can all recognize that it is a description of a very privileged status. Having equality with the Almighty conveys a picture of tremendous power and authority. Perhaps you saw the film starring Jim Cary in which his character is given God's power. He, of course, abuses it with spectacular feats that are meant to show off his new abilities which is the exact opposite of what St. Paul says Jesus did with his equality. 'He did not count equality as something to be grasped (exploited). Whatever privileges we have been granted in this life are not things to be exploited if we are to have the same mind in us as that which is in Christ Jesus. We see the pain that is caused to others when privileges are allowed to be exploited in people's lives. The damage that African slaves endured was largely due to the exploitation of white privilege as was some of the injury suffered by our Indigenous brothers and sisters. In contrast, St. Paul points out that Christ 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant'. What a completely different reaction to the usual human reaction. In the clash of cultures which Jesus brought about we see a vast difference in the way privileges are used (or not used) and we proclaim that the ways in which these privileges are used in the kingdom of God is the better way. The task of God's restoration project asks for this adjustment in thinking from those who are called according to God's purposes. The scenes of Holy Week are filled with examples of Jesus 'emptying himself and taking the form of a servant' and the call is for us to allow God to help us grow into that same mind. It begins, it seems, with the refusal on our part to exploit for our own benefit the privileges we have been granted and to rather use them in the service of others.

In a very compelling scene Jesus spoke to his disciples about this kind of thing when he said "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:24-27). Once again we hear of the need to allow our thinking to be changed if we are to follow Christ in His way. The hymn in Philippians continues to illustrate this by speaking of Jesus' humility. "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on the cross". This humility, it seems, was not in order to earn anything

but was an act which demonstrated Jesus' heart of service. The contrast to the 'Kings of the Gentiles' and the 'King of kings and Lord of lords' is seen in this humility. Jesus fully accepted the need for him to die for the sins of others and, even though there were opportunities, he did not swerve from that destiny. The urging to 'Have the same mind in us that is in Christ Jesus' asks for a similar kind of humility. A full acceptance of the role of servant to others is one of the ways in which we are called upon to follow Christ.

The hymn continues with a beautiful picture of God's grace. The exaltation of Christ Jesus depicted in these words is not to be thought of as some kind of prize for obedience. If we take these words in the context of all of the message of God to us we see that the raising of Jesus and his exaltation was a pure act of the love of God. Indeed it is tied to his complete obedience but it is not helpful to draw the conclusion that Jesus somehow earned this prize. The title of Lord was already his because of his equality with God - that equality that he chose not to exploit. The exaltation that he received at God's hand was a restoration of his actual status in the universe. That restoration required his obedience because the penalty for the sin of the world had to be paid by a sinless, spotless lamb sacrificed for all. Once that restoration occurred the veil was removed and Christ Jesus' true nature was revealed and celebrated. All this came through the grace of God who loves all Creation and desires for it to be in the state it was when it was created. When we partner with God by having in us the same mind of Christ we become part of this restoration and share in the joy of all Creation that has been restored.

The journey through Holy Week can be spent by simply walking through the days as if we were traveling through a museum or it can be spent by asking God to send His Holy Spirit to us in order that our minds will become even more conformed to the mind of Christ. St. Paul's call to the people of Philippi are echoed to us as we hear him say 'make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do 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. 5Let the same mind be in you that was[9] in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:2-5). May our journey through these very important events do more than just cause us to remember but may they have a profound influence over our lives in Christ.

Glen +