

On the Letter to the Philippians (2)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

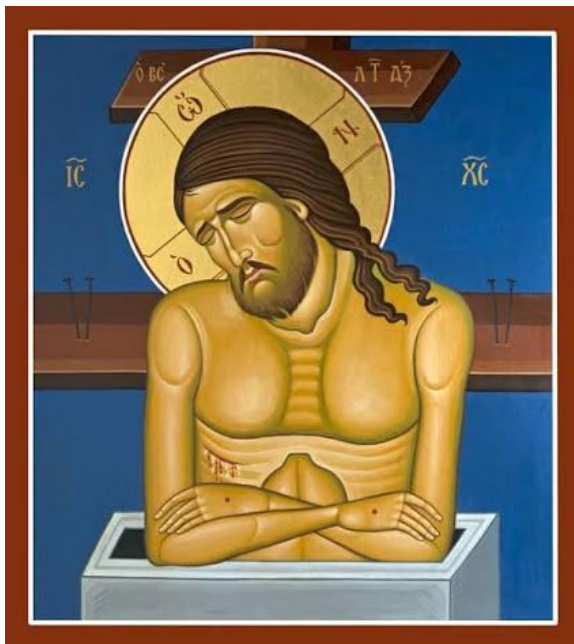
Philippians 2.1-13

One of the consequences for the earliest followers of Jesus Christ, in their recognition that he was more than a prophet – that, within him they encountered the *Living Presence of God*, as the ‘Christ’ (or *anointed one*) of God – is that they found themselves having to explain (especially to their Jewish neighbours) *what kind of relationship* they understood to exist between the *One true God*, and his ‘Son’, *Jesus Christ*. In particular, how would they defend themselves from a charge that they were worshipping *two Gods*? How would they explain how the *oneness of God* could express itself in both *divine* and *human* forms? (Or, put more simply, *what kind of relationship* did they think existed between divinity and humanity as they can be perceived in the human being, Jesus Christ?) These are not easy questions to answer, although they are very obvious questions to ask, especially of a faith emerging from within Judaism, with its perception of the *absolute oneness of God*. For those of us who live among Muslims today, these very questions will be familiar if we have ever tried to explain

the basis of our Christian faith or the way it is credible in the face of the Muslims' own belief in the absolute oneness of God – what they call '*tawhid*'.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians contains one of the earliest, and one of the best, attempts to summarize all this from the Christian point of view. Remember that for Peter and James and John, there was *no question* about this in their encounter with God at the top of Mount Tabor during the *Transfiguration of the Lord* (Matthew 17.1-8). The experience, for them, was *self-authenticating*. Similarly, some of us may have had *transcendent visions of the Glory of God* which cast aside any doubts we ourselves may once have had: But how do we try to *explain* it to others who have not seen such things for themselves? It is one of the basic reasons why Christianity puts its *Creeds* – its summaries of belief – at the heart of its worship and prayer.

Philippians 2.5-11 can be interpreted as a very early example of a Christian *Creed*. It is a summary of belief, in particular as it relates to the work of God in and through Jesus Christ. It explains why we who are Christian maintain our claim that Jesus is 'more than a prophet', but, instead, 'the Son of God' – the *embodiment* of divinity, insofar as he is *Jesus Christ*.



For St Paul, it is the process of *self-emptying* which explains how God is able to manifest himself in and through the limitations of humanity. We might think of Jesus' humanity as a vessel into which God's divinity is *poured forth* and made tangible to us. This is one reason why a chalice full of wine is so powerful an image of how God becomes present to our consciousness and understanding. Another key word which helps explain this process is *humility*.

This is to say that St Paul recognises self-emptying (in Greek the word is '*kenosis*') as the means of Jesus' humility and *self-offering on our behalf*. He *pours himself out for us*, even to the extremity of death, so that there can be *no part of experience*, and *no place in the creation*, which is not

subject to his presence and his touch. *Nothing* is beyond the scope of God's mercy. (That is not the same as saying that everyone and everything *will* accept God's mercy; but that the *possibility is there* for all who *choose* to accept it.)

But there is another side to this process of Jesus Christ's self-emptying. In turn – we might say, *in return* – God responds to Jesus' pouring forth of himself with a limitless infusion of *exaltation* and *honour* and *glory*. What Jesus continually pours out of himself on our behalf, God the Father continually replenishes in a never-ending cycle of self-offering and glorification. And the glorification, which we might interpret as the gift of *return into the embrace of God*, is intrinsically connected to the self-emptying, which is what *allows for it* and *merits it* in the first place.

When this perception takes root within our consciousness and our understanding, we come to a point of recognition (similar to that expressed in the Gospel according to John) in which Jesus' humiliation in the Passion and his glorification before the Face of God can be beheld as a single thing; and the return into God's embrace is seen to be every bit as important as the self-offering in the first place. They cannot be separated from each other, and the one cannot exist without the other. It is a logic which makes sense of itself when the two halves – the self-emptying and the glorification by God – are held together.

All of this is what is meant by affirming, with the Apostle Peter, that Jesus is '*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*' (Matthew 16.16). For many of us, it will be the fruit of a lifetime's reflection and meditation to become fully awakened to its significance. But already we see in the Apostle *Paul's* words to the modest and lowly Church in Philippi a summary of our faith which is both *straightforward* and hugely *profound*. As always, these ruminations on the meaning of our faith are combined with exhortations which relate to our pattern of life and our behaviour: '*be of the same mind,*' says the Apostle, '*having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*' Banish selfishness and self-regard from your minds and your hearts – be like *Jesus*, and let yourselves be poured out for each other's good, that you all may share in the benefit of compassion and renewal. May it be so in our *faith*, and in the way we put it into *practice*. Amen.

The image shows an icon which represents the 'Extreme Humility'. In it, Jesus, bearing the full weight of his self-emptying, and surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, is so placed in the tomb that he is primed for the resurrection which is the corollary of these other elements, and their completion.