



Reading: Philippians 2:1 – 13

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Faith in the faithfulness of Christ

In the Greco-Roman world, rhetoric was highly praised, both as a speaking skill and its direct match in writing. To convince a crowd of a proposition was a powerful gift, both in the democratic world of Greece and in the Roman Senate. And there are many rhetorical ‘tools’ that a good speaker relied on to win an argument or to win over a crowd. And scholars are quick to notice many of those rhetorical ‘tools’ in the letters of Paul. It makes sense, he was a Roman citizen, writing to churches in the Greco-Roman world, and wanting to convince his audience of the way of Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

One of those rhetorical tools is to compliment people on some aspects of their current behaviour and then remind them of some teaching or cultural wisdom that prompts that behaviour. You then have their warm attention to hear the message that builds on that wisdom and takes them to the next level. Paul wants to encourage the Philippians in the hard life that comes with following Jesus and the suffering that comes with that life. Not to recommend suffering for its own sake, like some Stoic virtue, but to point out that suffering comes from humble service. And, as humility is not a virtue in the Greco-Roman world, he needs some help from rhetoric to get that message across. And that is what this section of Chapter 2 is all about. Compliment the Philippians on their understanding of the faith and then remind them of the humble service of Christ. “You know about the encouragement of Christ, the consolation of love and the sharing of the Spirit, but also remember that hymn from your baptism that all that comes from the humble service of Jesus?”

The power of this piece of scripture is that this is a lesson that is well worth hearing time and time again.

“Be like Jesus, do not regard your treasured position with God as something to be exploited, but in humility, regard the needs and interests of others.”

It’s clear that Paul understood the dominant Gentile culture of the church at Philippi. For his piece of teaching or cultural wisdom, he doesn’t quote a story from Hebrew scripture like he does in other letters. He knows there is a small number of Jews in Philippi and so calls up their common culture by reminding them of a well-known retelling of the Jesus story. Scholars are divided over the source of this text; some think it may be a poem that Paul wrote himself, however, if this is rhetoric, it can’t be something new, it must be a part of the cultural memory. Therefore, most scholars think it is a hymn that would have been known in the Philippian church, perhaps a piece of baptismal liturgy that Paul introduced. And whatever we may want to mine from this passage about theology or the divine nature of Christ, the point of the passage is to teach the Philippians about the value of humble

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service. And the passage he has chosen as his rhetorical device does that very well. There are only four main verbs in the passage; Jesus empties himself, humbles himself and therefore he is exalted and confessed. A simple, memorable lesson. Humility is not a vice; the humble service of Jesus was rewarded by God with resurrection and exaltation. The lesson is clear; Don't think highly of yourself, do nothing from selfish ambition, rather, in humility, regard others as more important, because that is what Jesus did and God honoured that behaviour. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

In the first chapter, Paul talked about rejoicing, a theme he takes up again and again through the letter. Rejoice because you are with Christ; you know about the encouragement that being with Christ brings, you know about the love of God in Christ and you know about the communion and sharing that comes with the Spirit, but now, understand that all of that is because of the faithfulness of Jesus in humble service. Your faith comes through the faithfulness of Christ. Jesus didn't reconcile us to God through force or power or coercion, he reconciled us through humble service, obedient even to the point of death. Jesus didn't lean on being God to dominate or bring people to obedience through fear, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave. Your faith comes from his faithfulness and now you are called to the same faithfulness. Empty yourself of pride and achievement and ambition and become a slave to the Gospel. Humble yourself and consider others as more important. And this is not a new thought in the letter, it is the rhetorical extension of the point in chapter 1, 'live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel.' Humility is not a vice or a weakness, it is the way of God. You must unlearn your cultural heritage of honour and shame and take up the mind that was in Christ Jesus. The Gospel stories show that Jesus made the same point time and again; 'the meek shall inherit the earth', 'unless you become as a little child, you will not enter the kingdom', 'whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.'

There are two parallel truths about the church that are always in tension; the church is God's chosen instrument for the mission of the Gospel, and there is something terribly wrong with the instrument. Paul's rhetoric points to those truths in Philippi and right down to us today. The great blessings of the faith are known and valued – Christ's presence and encouragement, the wonders of God's love and the communion of the Spirit – but do those blessings affect our behaviour? Do we really get that all those blessings, our faith, come from the faithful, humble service of Jesus and that they are the resource calling us to the same faithful, humble service? This isn't just about having the same mind in the sense of unity or common worship or theology, this is about sharing the common understanding that our faith is about service, love, compassion, and reconciliation. Our faith comes from Jesus faithful service. There is a little quirk in the Greek language that leads to some tension our English translations; in chapter 3, and in other letters of Paul, he uses the phrase 'faith in

Christ' which can also be translated 'faith of Christ'. But this is not a problem, because our faith in Christ comes from the faith of Christ. Both translations are true, particularly if we put our faith into action and follow the faithful service of Jesus with our own faithful service.

It is not just Greco-Roman culture that regards humility as a weakness or a vice, our currently dominant individualist, assertive culture looks down on humility or servanthood and calls for young people to aspire to leadership, power, and self-actualisation. And into that culture we are proclaiming the Gospel of faithful service, the Gospel of a God who self-emptied to create this world and who, in Jesus, demonstrated the value of humble service to bring us back from the misery of selfish ambition and conceit. We will not win the world to Christ through power or dominance or assertive shouting, our way is clear; we are called to share the same mind that was in Christ Jesus and walk the way of humble service and the interests of others. Amen

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