

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13

Exodus 17:1-7 continues the theme of grumbling. This time, it is the Israelites' need for water. But in this confrontation, it takes a distinctly nasty turn as the grumbling accelerates significantly.

“From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as Yahweh commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test Yahweh?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to Yahweh, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” Yahweh said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested Yahweh, saying, “Is Yahweh among us or not?” (Exodus 17:1-7)?

The key to fully appreciating this passage and its implications is one little Hebrew word, *rib*, that is here translated “quarrel” or “test” (vss. 2, 3, 7). *Rib* is a technical legal term. It means “to bring suit” or “to plead your case” (e.g., Micah 6:1). In other words, in this event, Israel is bringing a suit against Moses and Yahweh. They are “suing” God! Their quarrel with God has now escalated into a formal legal suit! It is the embracing of this recognition that makes sense of the otherwise strange particularities of this passage.

Initially, the suit is brought against Moses. The Israelite people and their leaders put Moses on trial. Their accusation is, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Their legal demand is “Give us water to drink (or be found guilty, convicted and executed)”.

When Moses realizes that he has been placed on trial, his response is highly defensive. “Why do you quarrel with *me*?” he replies; “your quarrel is with Yahweh!” The Hebrew that is translated “Why do you test Yahweh” implies a shift of responsibility, not simply a parallel construction (“Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test God?” would be a parallel construction). It is more that Moses, intimidated by such aggressive anger on Israel’s part, is shifting the blame, in essence saying “It’s not my fault; it’s God’s fault! Blame him, and not me!”

The people then press their case further (vs. 3). It is not simply that Moses has brought Israel out into the desert; it is Yahweh that has brought them into the wilderness to die there of thirst! Moses is thoroughly intimidated by their opposition; the formerly fearless leader seems to have lost all his nerve. He appeals to God, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me (that is, to kill the messenger)” (vs. 4)?

What Yahweh answers is stunning beyond belief! “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink” (vss. 5b-6a).

If the people want a trial, Yahweh will give them a trial! Hebrew law required that at a trial, the accused would stand before the court, would be both accused and given opportunity to speak or act in his or her defense, and then would receive the verdict given by selected “elders of Israel” (Deut. 19:17; 25:1-3; 17:8-13). Thus, God instructs Moses to select elders of Israel to join him (as an elder) to watch the accused speak or act in his own defense and then render verdict. But here is the remarkable twist: “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb”. Yahweh would be the one who is on trial! Yahweh will stand as the accused. It is not Moses on trial, but Yahweh. Normally, it would be Israel (or some portion of Israel or humanity) standing on trial before God, not vice versa. But here, God takes the place of the accused and stands on trial before Israel.

The issue of Yahweh’s trial, then, is this: Did God intentionally bring Israel “out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst”, or did God bring them out into the wilderness for another purpose? God must now speak or act in his own defense. So as God stands “in the dock” before gathered Israel with its elders in the front row to declare either judgment or validation, Moses steps forward as the “defense attorney” for God. In his hand, he holds the staff with which he smote the Nile River which then turned to blood, and God began the plagues that would eventually bring about the liberation of Israel. But instead of speaking, he does what God told him to do. Moses strikes the rock upon which Yahweh now stands, the rock splits, water gushes forth and the people, with a shout, rush to the torrent of water to drink to the full! And the author of the story ends this account of God on trial with the words, “Moses did so, *in the sight of the elders of Israel*”. In other words, the “jury” (the elders) saw God act in his own defense, and thus they find God innocent of the charges made against him.

Yes, indeed! Yahweh – and Yahweh alone (in the final analysis) brought Israel out into the wilderness. But he didn’t bring them out into the desert for them to die of thirst! He brought them out into the wilderness for another purpose – both to worship him at Mount Sinai and to begin the process of becoming the people he had called them to become – “a light to the Gentiles and to my people Israel” (Luke 2:32).

The water that gushed forth from the slash Moses had made in the rock with his staff became a frequent reference in Israel for God’s life-giving water flowing from the throne of God (because God, standing on that rock made it his throne: Zech 13:1; 14:8; Ezek. 47:1-12). Its imagery was incorporated in Israel’s worship life when, at the annual Feast of Tabernacles, the priest poured freshly drawn (or “living”) water onto the altar as an offering to God. It was this act that prompted Jesus to refer to himself as “living water” and to make the offer, “let anyone who is thirsty come to me” (John 7:37-39).

The story of God’s trial before Israel is concluded by the author’s words, “Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested Yahweh, saying ‘Is Yahweh among us or not?’” (17:7)? *Massah* means “trial”, and *Meribah* means “contention” (note how

the word is built around the Hebrew *rib* which means “to bring suit”). Thus, in its very naming, Moses is declaring that this was the place where Yahweh went on trial before Israel around the issue, “Are you among us or not?” And the living water from the rock gave Israel its answer! God is indeed for us! The issue is whether we are for God.

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16 is a reference to the incident recorded above of God on trial before Israel and having Moses split the rock to provide them with life-saving water. But in this psalm, this incident is placed within the larger context of God’s mighty saving acts in Israel’s 40 year sojourn in the wilderness that formed them into a nation.

Psalm 78 is a lengthy psalm (72 verses) that is basically a recital of Israel’s history. It opens, not with the praise of God, but rather with “dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us” (78:2b-3). What those “dark sayings” will soon demonstrate is that Israel has gone through a continuing cycle of being blessed by God, becoming arrogant in that blessing, then being punished by God for their unfaithfulness, repenting and receiving God’s forgiveness, being once more blessed by God, and then becoming arrogant in that blessing. Thus, the cycle continues on, over and over. God, in the midst of all this, will still remain God ethically and morally, so that Israel must recognize “the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done” (vs. 4b). But Israel will keep on “limping between two opinions” (II Kings 18:21) – whether to serve God or to serve Ba’al and the marks of Ba’al worship: oppression, exploitation and domination of the people in order for the elite to garner power to themselves.

A portion of one of those cycles, the psalmist states, is presented in today’s Old Testament lesson. “(God) split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers” (vv. 15-16). Thus, God’s action of miraculously providing water vindicates the accusation brought against him by Israel and thus wins his trial.

What makes this psalm unique, however, is how clearly this psalmist presents the vicious cycle into which Israel keeps falling. This is particularly true in verses 32-41 of this psalm.

“In spite of all this (that is, God’s mighty acts in the wilderness) they still sinned; they did not believe in his wonders. So he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror. When he killed them, they sought for him; they repented and sought God earnestly. They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer. But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not true to his covenant. Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again. How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert! They tested God again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel”.

Matthew 21:23-32 is this Sunday's Gospel Lesson in which Jesus finds himself on trial before the chief priests and elders of the people. It is not a formal trial, but it is a trial nevertheless, in which Jesus' authority is being questioned.

It is also important to note here how the struggle between Jesus and Israel's elite had escalated. Formerly, Jesus' conflict was primarily with the Pharisees and scribes (lawyers). These groups were the local manifestation of the religious and political elite. In every Israelite village and town, there was a synagogue. Although Sabbath worship occurred there, that synagogue was more a learning center for instructing the people of that town in those portions of the Law and the Hebrew scriptures that would support and justify the agenda of the Jewish clergy aristocracy. The Pharisees were the rabbis (the word "rabbi" means "my teacher") or teachers of the Law, playing in the local synagogue a role similar to that today of a pastor of a local church. The scribes were the lawyers of the Law, adjudicating it and giving authoritative interpretation of it when so needed.

It would be reasonable to assume that the first religious/political elite with whom Jesus would be in conflict would be the Pharisees and scribes, because it would be they who would be resident "in the field" and thus would most immediately impact the lives of the people to whom Jesus ministered. Thus, it would be the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus would most challenge and criticize as he carried out his ministry centered in Galilee. But now a subtle shift is taking place in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is in Jerusalem in his last week of life, and the people with whom he is now doing battle are "the chief priests and the elders of the people (i.e., the priesthood and the Sadducees)".

This is not simply a shift that is occurring because of the shift in venue. Jesus is not now confronting the priesthood because he happens to be in their primary territory – Jerusalem. This signals a shift in intensity. Jesus has shown himself adept at handling the Pharisees and scribes, winning his arguments with them and exposing them for the manipulative, dominating force that they are in the hinterlands. But now, Jesus has become a big enough threat to this cabal of power so that its most powerful leaders – the "chief priests" (not just ordinary Levitical priests) and the "elders" – are taking out after Jesus. They are now confronting him directly because he has become a significant threat to their maintenance of power. And their objective is not simply to defeat him or discredit him before the people. Their objective is to destroy him!

The next section of Matthew 21 (verses 21 through 46) deal with Jesus' conflict with "the chief priests and elders of the people" – that is, the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy. This pericope consists of three stories – Jesus' handling of the questioning of his authority, the parable of the two sons, and the parable of the wicked tenants of a vineyard. We will examine the first two stories in today's Gospel lesson. And we will examine the third story in next Sunday's Gospel lesson.

The questioning of Jesus' authority is the first story (21:23-27). The clerical aristocracy challenge Jesus by asking, "By what authority are you doing these things" (vs. 23b). Like so much of their interactions with Jesus, they are laying a trap for him, because if he says "My authority comes from God", they can accuse him of heresy and have him stoned. And if he

answers, “By no authority than my own”, he can lose credibility with the crowd while their credibility will be strengthened as the only legitimate interpreter of the Law.

Instead, as he usually did, Jesus outmaneuvered them. “I will also ask you one question,” he responds. “If you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things” (vs. 24). They agree, thinking that Jesus has just stepped into a trap. That is because, between them, they know they can answer any question regarding the Law that Jesus might ask. And that, in turn, will force him into a self-intimidating answer to their question. But they never envision that Jesus will ask them the question that he is about to ask them.

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin” (vs. 25)? With this question, the chief priests realize that Jesus has no intention of justifying himself to Israel’s religious/political elite. Jesus has set a trap for those who set traps and they, focused upon their own connivance, have unwittingly stepped into it.

The priests caucus together how to avoid this trap. If they answer Jesus’ question with “John’s baptism is of God”, Jesus would challenge them why they hadn’t believed him but instead opposed him. If, on the other hand, they answer “of men”, that answer would reveal to the crowds the naked truth about them – that they weren’t really interested in bringing the nation and themselves into a closer relationship with God but that they were using religion as a way of controlling and dominating the people. Their answer would expose the chief priests for what they really were – and such a revelation would cause them to lose all credibility before the people and, consequently, all usefulness to Rome.

So there was no way that the chief priests could dare to answer Jesus’ question except with the noncommittal answer, “We do not know”. They knew the inevitable response that would then come from Jesus. “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things!” Foiled again!

But this is more than a story about how Jesus had outwitted the chief priests and elders. It is also a story about the capacity of the people to shape and dominate the powers, if they chose to do so. The chief priests had the authority of their 2,000 year old religious tradition on their side as well as the military might of Rome. Jesus appeared to have nothing more than his own wisdom and wit. Yet he had something else on his side. He had the people. And he knew how to organize the people to exercise the power that they had – the power of each other. They had the power to withdraw their support of any religious or political system, if they both recognized that and exercised that power. And Jesus knew how to use that power. With his skillful use of his wisdom and the implied threat of the withdrawal of the people’s support from them, the clerical aristocracy realizes that they have been defeated in this effort to put Jesus on informal trial. So this is a story about how to use people power for the common good!

It is also a story about the exposure of the real agenda of the religious establishment. Their agenda was not to seek truth. It was not to seek God. And it was not about the implementation of God’s intentions for society (the shalom community), with its concomitant redistribution of wealth and power. It was about maintaining themselves as Israel’s central power brokers with Rome. It was about the subtle exercise of dominating power, whether to control the responses of

the people or to destroy Jesus' credibility. It was about the maintaining of the status quo with themselves, as Israel's religious/political elite in political and economic control. And thus it was all about the threat of these selfish and self-serving intentions of the religious establishment exposed to the masses. That is what makes this story such a powerful story – because it both reveals the world as it truly is, and how God's people can astutely exercise power for the good of that world. Therefore, it is a story about the successful and unsuccessful exercise of power!

But the story doesn't end with this "showdown" between Jesus and the chief priests. They turn in defeat to leave. But Jesus won't let them leave. He immediately asks them a question, a rabbinic question that requires their response (or they will lose face). The question is, "What do you think" (vs. 28)? It actually means "What is your ruling or judgment on the legal question I am about to put to you in your capacity as Israel's official interpreters of the Law?" They are required to answer that request. And that requires them to listen to Jesus' full question.

"A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not', but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, 'I go, sir'. But he did not go. Which of the two did the will of the father" (vss. 28-31)?

The chief priests didn't want to answer this question because they sensed there was a trap hidden within it. But because of Jesus' request for a ruling, they were required to answer it. And so, reluctantly, they did with as few words as possible: "The first"! Inevitably, as the chief priests and elders squirmed and were required to listen, Jesus voiced the intent of the story.

"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For 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" (21:31b-32)!

The accusation Jesus was bringing against Israel's highest religious/political leaders was witnessed to by the gathered crowd. The tax collectors and prostitutes (people who, because of their work, were placed among Israel's lowest class) originally said "no" to God. But when God revealed Himself in a new and profound way through John (and, implied, through Jesus), they were both needy and receptive enough to perceive what God was doing and respond. So they eventually did say "yes".

On the other hand, Jesus is saying, you priests and elders have appeared to say 'yes' to God all along, but in reality you are motivated by your lust for power and wealth and your need to control and dominate. So when God came more clearly and more powerfully to you through John and Jesus, you couldn't be open to this new revelation. You had too much at stake in your commitment to domination. And so it has become clear to all that your "yes" is truly a "no".

Therefore, the result of your refusal to be receptive to God's work in your midst is that these supposedly evil and scorned people – the tax collector and prostitute – will enter God's kingdom ahead of you. And that is because you have chosen to shut yourselves out. It is a most profound and damning statement!

What is particularly intriguing about this pericope is that it begins with Israel's religious/political leaders attempting to put Jesus on trial before the people, and instead find that Jesus deftly places them on trial before the people so that they are exposed for the power-hungry and deceptive people that they truly are!

Philippians 2:1-13 begins with a description of the characteristics of the Christian community and of individuals within that community. Paul's list is as follows:

Christians, and the church itself must: 1) be of the same mind, being in full accord regarding its mission (vs. 2); 2) have the same love for each other (vs. 2); 3) do nothing from selfish ambitions or conceit (vs. 3); 4) act out of humility, regarding others more than one's self (vs. 3); 5) be concerned about what improves the lot of others, rather than one's self (vs. 4); and 6) imitate Christ (vs. 5).

What Paul is portraying here is a Church which is greatly concerned or centered on three things: 1) being an authentic community together; 2) being centered in mission; and 3) being concerned with each other's spiritual formation. It is not that the church can select between these three, but must rather incorporate all three within its life and work in order for it to be an authentic church. This is a great model of what church should be in its life and work.

The section begins with an introduction that I particularly like. Paul writes, "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" (vv. 1-2a)! Paul then states what would make his joy complete – the living out in the life of the Philippian Church of the six characteristics listed above.

The Greek word translated "if" in verse one is not a word connoting a range of possibilities but rather a state of reality. It cannot be translated "perhaps", but rather "since" (or another way to translate it is, "If such is true – and of course we know that it obviously is – then . . ."). Paul is stressing here that being a part of Christ's body, the church, means that we experience encouragement in being centered in Christ, comfort in the love we receive from Him, living life dominated by the Spirit, and experiencing compassion and sympathy both from Christ's followers and from the very fact of being a part of the church. There is much that is profoundly good in being united to Christ and in the Church. When we are pressed by all the pressures, priorities and poor choices of living in society, it is important that we not lose sight of these privileges. It is **good** to be a Christian – even in the face of the worst persecution – and we need both to never forget that and to celebrate that reality.

Paul began today's Epistle lesson sharing the characteristics of truly authentic Christian communities and individual lives. He now moves on to liken our call to that to which Jesus was called. For Christ is our clearest example of what authentic Godly life is all about. To present that description, Paul writes the most beautiful and profound statement of the nature and mission of Jesus Christ that appears anywhere in scripture.

“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” (2:5-11).

William Barclay, the great biblical commentator, wrote of this passage, “In many ways this is the greatest and most moving passage Paul ever wrote about Jesus. It states a favourite thought of his. The essence of it is in the simple statement Paul made to the Corinthians that, although Jesus was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor (II Cor. 8:9). Here that simple idea is stated with a fullness which is without parallel. Paul is pleading with the Philippians to live in harmony, to lay aside their discords, to shed their personal ambitions and their pride and their desire for prominence and prestige, and to have in their hearts that humble, selfless desire to serve, which was the essence of the life of Christ. His final and unanswerable appeal is to point to the example of Jesus Christ”.¹

It is important not to ask this magnificent poem to do what it was not designed by Paul to do. And in the above quotation, Barclay writes well what it is designed to do.

Philippians 2:5-11 is an astonishingly clear Christological statement. But it was not written to be a Christological statement but to be a motivational statement to move the church toward living out in its life together and its mission faith-in-action that would be truly consonant with the life and mission of its founder. Therefore, it is important to not lay upon this statement a weight the statement was not designed to bear. What do I mean?

There are those scholars who have argued that this was a hymn of the earliest church that was appropriated by Paul, while others argue that it was a poem written by Paul himself. The fact is, nobody knows! There have been those who have argued that the text is written out of the belief in the pre-existence of Christ before his birth, while others contend that its reference to Jesus’ not regarding himself equal with God is a reference to an event in his earthly life, like his temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane. Again, the fact is, nobody knows what Paul was suggesting here! There are still others who insist that this poem suggests that Jesus added human nature to his divine nature, while others argue that he emptied himself completely of his divine nature so that he assumed human form with all the limitations humans have. The fact is, nobody knows what Paul had in mind. The attempt to use this passage to build such Christological arguments is doomed to failure, simply because Paul did not mean this to be a carefully-crafted Christological statement; such a task on his part simply does not fit either the point he is seeking to make in the larger passage nor is it relevant to the book of Philippians. Paul’s purpose in writing this statement was to make the argument that we Christians are to imitate Jesus Christ in our humility, our behavior and in our mission! This intent is clearly given witness in Paul’s introduction to this passage, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”. That’s the purpose of this magnificent hymn – and nothing more!

¹ William Barclay, *the Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 34-35.

This is not to say that the passage is useless Christologically, however! It does give us some keen insights about Jesus, and those are important insights for us to have. It is simply that the passage has been often misused to carry arguments it is ill-equipped to carry. But let's look at what the passage does clearly say about Jesus as the Christ.

First, it tells us, "though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited". The word Paul chose that is translated "form" is a significant word; it is the Greek word *morphe*. There are two Greek words, both of which must be translated "form" but have distinct meanings. *Morphe* means the essential form which does not alter; thus, a person's *morphe* is that he is male or female. *Schema* means the outward form that changes from time to time and circumstance by circumstance. Thus, a person's *schema* is that he was, at one time, an infant, at another a child, at another a youth, at another a young adult, at another an old person. Therefore, when Paul stated that Jesus "was in the *morphe* of God", he was not saying that Jesus was "like" God, "looked like" God, "was similar to" God – but that he was, through and through and in every way, God – God in the flesh!

Second, Paul goes on to say that Jesus "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (vs. 6b, NRSV). Other translations read "a thing to be grasped" (RSV, NIV, ESV), "thought it not robbery to be equal with God" (KJV), or "to snatch at equality with God" (NEB). What all of these translations are struggling with is how to translate the Greek word, *harpagmas*, which literally means "to snatch" or "to clutch". What Paul is seeking to say is that because Jesus was in the *morphe* of God (and was, therefore, God-in-the-flesh), he had no need to snatch or clutch at equal standing or being with God because he already was God. Instead, because he was of the very essence and sameness with God, Jesus could be free to act in an entirely different way.

Third, "(he) emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." There are two critical Greek words in this passage that tell us a great deal about Jesus. The first is the word translated "emptied (himself)". It is the Greek word *kenoun*. Because it is such a powerful word and is used in such a powerful context, this entire hymn (or poem) of Phil. 2:5-11 has come to be known as the *kenosis* of Jesus. The verb *kenoun* literally means "to empty", of pouring out the contents of a vessel and even shaking it after it has been emptied to be sure that every drop has come out of the vessel. It is a total emptying of a vessel of its contents. So Paul has used here the most vivid word in the Greek language to state the degree of the sacrifice Jesus paid by choosing to be incarnated upon the earth. He gave it all up! He gave up every ounce of his divinity in order to become a human being! There was nothing left!

The second key word is "form" – "taking the form of a slave". There's that word "form" again – and again, it is *morphe*. Paul is saying, Jesus is God in *morphe*; Jesus is a slave in *morphe*. He is "God-in-the-flesh", but he is also "a-slave-in-the-flesh". He is not play-acting at being a man. He is a real live man, fully human, profoundly human, but more than that, a slave, a peasant, an expendable. He is not a king; he is not high priest; he is not given a lofty position or status as the God who has become a man. He is assigned the very bottom of human status and dignity.

But Paul is not done yet. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (vss. 7b-8). Not only did Jesus give up any semblance or privilege of being God, emptied himself of every ounce of divinity, became a human being and became the poorest of the poor, the slave of the slaves, the expendable of all peasants. He humbled himself even further. He “became obedient to the point of death”, and that was not simply peacefully dying in his sleep or mercifully dropping dead of a sudden heart attack. The death to which he was subjected was the most painful, prolonged, agonizing, ridiculed, mocked death a human being can have – “even death on a cross”. This was the degree of Jesus’ humility – and this he did to win humans and their society back to God.

The primary point of Paul’s poem is to state as clearly as was humanly possible that Jesus’ life was a life of humility, obedience and self-renunciation. This was not simply what he did – that he acted humbly, obeyed and was willing to be thoroughly disrespected. It was that this was who he was. His entire existence was that of humility, obedience and self-renunciation. And so should our life and ministry as followers of the Christ also be! If humility, obedience and self-renunciation were the hallmarks of Jesus’ life, ministry and death, so it should be that these should be the same hallmarks of the church and of each Christian within the church. This is how we are called by God to live – and to die!

But now comes the Great Reversal. Paul continues, “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” (vss. 9-11).

The story of God’s intervention in human life doesn’t end at a cross or in a tomb. It ends with a risen Lord and a transformed people. It ends with the exaltation by God of this one who is model to us all of humiliation, obedience and renunciation. It ends with the triumph of the one who was once made a slave of all.

One of the most significant portions of the triumphal portion of this hymn is the words “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord”. Given Paul’s cosmology that appears throughout his writings (but is particularly stressed in Colossians and Ephesians), the most significant term in this phrase are the words “under the earth”. “Under the earth” means to Paul the demonic dimensions of the principalities and powers of the earth. Paul believed that the political, economic and religious systems of Rome, Israel and of all humanity, and those who occupied and operated them were the means by which society is ordered, goods distributed and values codified and lived out. These domination systems and their dominating occupants were themselves dominated by the demonic powers of darkness at the core of the universe, what Paul called the “principalities and powers”.²

² For a more thorough examination of Paul’s doctrine of the principalities and powers, and their intimate relationship with the world’s domination political, economic and religious systems, see Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God; City of Satan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 40-79 and Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 9-127.

Consequently, when Paul is saying that “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend in heaven and on earth and *under the earth*”, he is declaring that it is not simply that all human beings will someday confess that Jesus is Lord. He is not even saying that the entire angelic host (“heaven”) will confess Jesus as Lord (we would expect that!). He is saying that all the political, economic and religious systems that have ever ordered any society or that will ever order societies – *and the spiritual dimensions of those systems* – the “thrones and dominions and principalities and powers” of darkness will confess Christ as Lord. That confession may be a reluctant confession, but it will be a confession nonetheless! All will recognize Christ as Lord of the universe and will worship him as such. Here, therefore, is one more clear statement by Paul of the potential redemption of the principalities and powers, the systems and structures, even the forces of darkness (see selected other Pauline statements, such as Rom. 8:18-39; Eph. 1:19-23; 2:11-22; Col. 1:15-20). The day will come when all will confess Jesus as Lord!

What a vision Paul had. And what hope he provided for the future of the world!

But today’s Epistle lesson is still not finished. Paul has more to say to us. He writes, “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” (vss. 12-13).

As we reflect on these final words of Paul’s in this passage that deals with the behavior of the Church to which God has called it, it is important to keep in mind one of the two contexts of this passage. This scripture is not simply written to individual Christians regarding their behavior (although it is indeed written to them). It is also written to the Church regarding its lifestyle, priorities and mission, as well.

Paul is therefore saying to the Church it is to “work out its own salvation, for it is God who is at work in you”. That is, the Church must be responsible for the formation of its own life and mission. No one else can do it for them – not even God! Thus, this is a statement of self-determination and empowerment. The Church must assume responsibility for the quality of its life together, its purity of doctrine and life, its peace and unity, and its carrying out of its ministry in the world with faithfulness.

But we are not alone – for the Church is Christ’s Body. God is alive and well, and working through the Church. Therefore, he is always working in it and through it, “enabling (it) both to will and to work for his good pleasure”.

The second context for this passage is the *kenosis* passage that immediately precedes it. The model of Christ is put forth to the Church as a model of humility, obedience and self-renunciation to God. This Christ is willing to “take the form of a slave and become obedient to the point of death on a cross”. He is now exalted by humanity and God alike – but not because he sought exaltation, but because he lived out of obedience and humility (in fact, John Calvin taught that the redemptive factor in Christ’s crucifixion was precisely his obedience). Exaltation came to him; he did not seek it!

The command of Paul to the Church therefore is “let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (vs. 5). In other words, he is saying, “Church, be an imitator of Christ – Christ for today – in your attitudes, intentions and actions”. Therefore, in the light of the example of Christ, be responsible for being in your actions, life-together and in your witness the Body of Christ (2:12). And God, who is in and through you, will work to enable you to be all that you can be (vs. 13).

This passage deals secondarily with the individual Christian. That is a secondary emphasis, not Paul’s intended primary affirmation. But it is no less important than the primary reading. We, as individual Christians, are also called to be responsible for our own lives as a reflection of what it means to be part of the Body of Christ. We must individually assume responsibility for the quality of our life, the purity of our faith and belief, our peace and unity with our brother and sister Christians, the carrying out of our mission call in the world, the sharing of our faith, and the living responsibly of our lives in social justice and action. But this is not a burden for us to shoulder alone. The reality is that God lives in us and is therefore at work in our lives, “enabling (us) both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13).

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