

***Who Is Christ For Us? A King***  
**A Sermon on Philippians 2:5-11**  
**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 3, 2019**

## **Introduction**

When Disciples confess that Jesus is the Christ, what does Christ mean for us? If we look to our tradition for help, we find that Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement, writes in his major book on theology, *The Christian System*, that three offices in the Bible are anointed by God: prophet, king and priest. God appointed Jesus as the Christ to hold all three of these offices for us.

This was not new with Campbell. John Calvin said the same thing in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. We may not like to admit it, but Disciples are spiritual heirs of Calvinism. Our founders, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, were Presbyterians before they left to start a new movement.

Last week we talked about Jesus as a prophet. Today we will explore what it means to say that Jesus is a king. Next week, we will conclude this sermon series with Jesus as a priest.

## **First Move: Jesus Humbles Himself**

The Christ Hymn in Philippians begins with the humiliation of Jesus and ends with his exaltation. It has a poetic structure like a hymn. It is an enconium, a hymn of praise to Christ. We also could call it a creed. It summarizes the significance of the life and death of Jesus.

There are two parts to this hymn: verses 6, 7 and 8 describe Christ's action, his willingness to humiliate himself, and verses 9, 10 and 11 describe God's action, God's exaltation of Jesus.

Morna Hooker, a British theologian who was the first woman to hold an endowed chair in divinity at the University of Cambridge, breaks each part into three smaller parts. Verse 6 begins with Jesus' attitude before he became human. Verse 7 is his attitude in becoming human. Verse 8 is his attitude in his passion and death.

The hymn begins with Jesus' attitude before he became human: "He was in the form of a god, but did not regard to be equal with a god as booty [to be seized]." The early church thought this verse referred to the pre-existence of Christ and presumed

that Paul understood Christ as being beside God at the creation of the universe, as he was in John's Prologue. Yet Paul does not say that, and the Gospel of John was written at least 30 years after Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians. Modern commentators have suggested several other possibilities. I don't think we have to choose one. Paul writes in a time when Jewish eschatology was in the water. The heavens were filled with angelic beings, who brought messages from God to earth. Paul may have thought Jesus was one of them.

The second verse describes Jesus' attitude when he became human: "He emptied himself and took the form of a slave, becoming in the likeness of men." Ancient commentators thought that Christ emptied himself of his divinity and became human. This became orthodoxy in the tradition. A recent interpretation is that Christ was being described as a second Adam. Paul talks about Christ as a second Adam in Romans and it is assumed he is making the same reference here. Instead of obeying God, Adam grasped for the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil so that he could be like God.

The interpretation that makes the most sense to me is that Christ emptied himself of honor. Paul is comparing Christ to Caesar. Paul says that Christ did not regard equality with god as booty to be seized. The Greek word for booty suggests robbery, something that is taken by violence.

Paul describes Jesus as refusing to act like Caesar. Caesar was always grasping, trying to take more territory, trying to exact tribute from the Jews and the other peoples that the Romans had conquered. The Caesars wanted wealth and power and honor. They thought it made them like the gods.

Jesus emptied himself of honor and took the form of a slave instead of taking the form of an emperor and grasping for more. Romans considered the Jews to be an inferior people, fit only to be slaves. Seneca, a Roman statesman who lived at the same time as Paul, said that Jews were "born for servitude." By taking the form of a slave, Jesus stood in solidarity with the lowest members of Roman society.

Our studies on the mystical tradition of the church has led me to believe that a spiritual interpretation is also possible. Christ emptied himself of himself. The Greek verb, κενόω, means to empty. It is where the term kenotic theology comes from; it is a self-emptying theology. That was the theology of the desert fathers and the mystics. They got it from this text. Jesus empties himself and sets aside his own desires. He leaves his own desires and needs behind in a cloud of forgetting and has a naked desire for God. He is obedient to God's desire even unto death on a cross. When you get yourself out of the way, a whole new world opens up. You notice

people and things that were invisible to you before. You can see the world from God's perspective.

We don't have to choose between these different interpretations of what Jesus is emptying himself of. The text is deeper if we try to hold them all together. Jesus empties himself and God exalts him for it.

The third verse describes Jesus' attitude in his passion and death: "Being found in bearing as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient until death." Paul says Jesus humbles himself, not he was humbled. He became obedient until death. Paul doesn't say to whom Jesus is obedient. Ancient commentators assumed that Jesus was obedient to God, but Paul could be saying that Jesus was obedient to the human authorities. He didn't resist them—he submitted to them. That is hard for social justice warriors to hear, but it is one possible interpretation.

## **Second Move: God Exalts Jesus**

The second half of the hymn describes God's exaltation of Jesus. I skipped over this part when I have preached this text in the past. Mainline Christians are uncomfortable talking about the heavenly throne and Jesus' sitting at the right hand of God. We don't like to talk about the divinity of Christ. We much prefer to talk about the humanity of Jesus. We can identify with that. We get in secular or interfaith settings and we are uncomfortable talking about the divinity of Christ.

Morna Hooker divides the second half into three parts: Verse 9 is God's response in exalting Jesus, Verse 10 is God's granting Jesus dominion over all creatures, and Verse 11 is God's purpose in exalting Jesus.

God super-exalts Jesus by graciously giving him a name above every name. God's action is gracious giving. God chooses to exalt Jesus. Marcus Bockmuehl, a scholar in early Christianity at Oxford University, says that God doesn't reward Jesus; God chooses to vindicate the innocent suffering that Jesus endured. This is an act of grace. It reminds us of God's hearing the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, groaning under their oppression. God has a preferential option for the vulnerable. God is moved by suffering and acts to relieve it.

To give someone a name is to give them status and power. God gives Jesus a name that is above every other angel and every other person.

To go along with this name, God gives Jesus authority over those in heaven, on earth and under the earth. This is all three levels of the three-tiered universe in the ancient world. Those in heaven are the angels. Those on earth are living people and creatures. Those under the earth are those who have died. Bending every knee is an act of submission to the authority of Jesus and an act of worship.

The last verse sets forth God's purpose in exalting Jesus: so that "every tongue might acknowledge or confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father." This reflects the gathering of the Gentiles on God's holy mountain in the end times that Isaiah and the prophets longed for. All people on earth will recognize that God is the only true God and will come together to praise God. Paul revises the prophet's eschatology: all people will recognize that Jesus as Lord. Lord was a substitute for the name of Yahweh in the Old Testament. Jews would say Lord instead of Yahweh. God in Paul's hymn elevates Jesus to the status of Lord.

The Gentiles in Philippi would have heard this as an unmistakable reference to Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar is Lord. Philippi was a Roman colony in Greece with a large population of retired veterans of the Roman army.

This is story told on a cosmological scale. I think our attempts to radically demythologize the gospel have gone too far. It leaves us with what Karl Barth calls "colorless philosophy." How do we know that God superexalted Jesus? That is how the earliest followers of Christ understood Jesus' death on a cross and God's response. Sometimes our pursuit of the historical Jesus causes us to focus on the composition of the frame instead of standing back and beholding the painting with awe and wonder.

Myth is not a good word to use. Too many people associate it with something that is not true. Scholars today use the word narrative instead. People understand things better if we have a narrative to shape our views. Trial lawyers say that they need to construct a narrative of the case so that the jury will have something to hang all the facts on. Otherwise the facts are just one damn thing after another, and it is hard to make sense of them.

Let us simply behold the narrative. Jesus humbles himself, then God exalts Jesus as Lord. God's glory is reflected in the one who voluntarily humbles himself to stand in solidarity with the slaves. That is what Paul wants us to come away with.

### **Third Move: Jesus Is Lord**

"Jesus is Lord" was the earliest Christian confession. Lord is synonymous with king and God. People could have many lords in the Roman world, but Jesus is given supreme authority over all human lords.

Mainline Christians today no longer hope for a theocracy, where a religious leader sits on the throne. That was essentially the situation in the Middle Ages, when the Roman Catholic popes had religious and political authority. We have believed in separation of church and state in the Western world for several centuries.

Calvin describes Jesus' kingship as spiritual in nature. Church and state each have their own jurisdiction. The state rules in civil and temporal matters, the church in spiritual matters. The state is also under the authority of God, but we won't get in to that today. Calvin believes that Jesus rules the church and rules over the eternal lives of each person. Eternity for Calvin meant eternal blessedness, our life in heaven. "Christ's kingdom lies in the Spirit, not in earthly pleasures or pomp."

Calvin makes the move from Jesus's authority as spiritual not political. Mainline Christians today can agree with that, but we no longer share Calvin's disdain for the temporal in favor of the sweet by and by. We care about temporal life here on earth. We see heaven as something here on earth rather than as something beyond the clouds.

We can agree that Jesus has authority over the church and over our spirituality. Our spirituality governs how we look at the world, where we find our center. Jesus is the center of spiritual and moral influence for Christians.

I would let go of talking about the divinity of Christ. It carries overtones of the supernatural that are hard for modern people to accept. I would talk instead about the transcendence of Christ. Jesus is more than just a role model and a teacher. Jesus reflected God's values. He had no use for the rewards that the culture offers: political power, wealth and honor. Instead he staked his life on God, following God's will, even though it led to suffering.

Jesus is king for us not because he earned it, but because God graciously gave him the throne.

God chose Abraham to be the father of faith. It wasn't because of anything he did. He was a wandering Aramean when God first appeared to him.

God chose Israel to be a blessing to all nations. It wasn't because of anything the people did. They were a small, insignificant group of tribes situated at the crossroads of empires when God selected them as the Chosen People.

God chose Jesus to be Lord of the church and Lord of our lives. Jesus didn't ask for the job. As Christians, we recognize that it is God's will for Jesus to have authority over our lives. God doesn't compel us to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. We freely consent when we are baptized, and we deepen our commitment to Christ with every step of our faith journey.

When we recognize Christ's authority over our lives, we add meaning to our lives. We rise above our preoccupation with celebrity and politics and tweets and wins and losses on the basketball court. We are filled with spiritual food instead of fast food. Christ will lead us to places where we meet what is really real, both in our communities and deep within ourselves, if only we will follow.

## **Conclusion**

It is not fashionable today to speak of Christ as King. Mainline churches have turned Christ the King Sunday into Reign of Christ Sunday. Being gender inclusive, anti-imperial and anti-triumphal is important and long overdue, but I think we lose something when we stop talking about Christ as King.

Jesus sits at the right hand of God because that is where God asked him to sit. Jesus is beside us, above us and beyond us. Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God.

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