

Sermon: Having the Mind of Christ (Phil 2:5) Sunday 27th September 2020

On the last Sunday of September last year – September 29th – I was in London and on that morning I went with a friend to a service at Westminster Abbey.

We went to the service of Matins, which is a very formal but simple service. I found it peaceful and prayerful to sit there in the choir stalls, behind the choristers, listening to the music and prayers and joining in a few congregational responses here and there. There was no sermon – which I was a bit disappointed about – but I felt that the building itself delivered a pretty profound message about the solidity and enduring nature of the Christian faith. In that place we didn't really need a sermon to inspire in us a sense of reverence for God – a healthy sense of God's bigness and our smallness, if you like.

I know that some of you have visited Westminster Abbey and other old abbeys and cathedrals in various parts of the world. Perhaps you can recall one particular place which inspired within you a real sense of awe and humility before God?

As you know, cathedrals attempt to communicate many truths about the Christian gospel through their architecture and art. The artists who contributed to their creation did their best to communicate key stories of the Christian faith through stained glass windows and sculpture and mosaics. These depicted events from the Bible, and stories of great saints throughout the ages, so that all people, whether or not they could read, could learn those stories and be inspired by them.

Above the West doors of Westminster Abbey there are ten quite new sculptures filling 10 niches which have been empty since the Middle Ages. They were unveiled in 1998. The Abbey has chosen to commemorate the lives of people who have died for their faith in the 20th century – martyrs from every continent and many Christian denominations. They include civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed by the Nazis in 1945, and Wang Zhiming, a pastor killed in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Later I want to tell you about one of the other people whose life and faith is commemorated among those statues, because her story illustrates quite vividly something of what Paul was trying to communicate to the Philippians in the section of his letter that we have heard today.

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians is divided into three sections, and in most Bibles it is quite clear from the way it is laid out that there's an introduction – in which Paul asks his readers to live in unity, and gives them some specific advice about what might promote unity – followed by another section, which Biblical scholars think was actually a very early hymn about Christ that Paul was quoting – and then a third section, which includes some very inspiring words of encouragement.

So let's look at each section in turn. In the first few verses Paul exhorts his readers to be "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." He writes, "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." The community of believers is built up when love is expressed through humility.

Humility is a virtue which is often misunderstood and not much prized in society today. I think the word "humble" has been rather tarnished by its use in literature. Because of characters like Charles Dickens' Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*, or Jane Austen's Mr Collins (with his "humble abode") in *Pride and Prejudice*, we might equate humility with obsequiousness or servility or inauthenticity. But that is not the nature of humility represented in the Bible, or seen in the life of Christ.

I'd like to quote a few paragraphs from a great book by Joanna Collicutt: *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation*. Collicutt is a psychologist as well as an Anglican priest. In this book she devotes a whole chapter to the topic of humility, making a clear distinction between humility and low self-esteem, and also looking at the snares of pride and narcissism. She also writes in some detail about Christ's humility – and I will quote her again on that topic in a moment.

Page 122.

"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." — CS Lewis

The hymn that Paul goes on to quote provides a concise summary of the entire mission of Jesus, starting with his pre-existence, continuing with his incarnation and life on earth, highlighting his death on the cross, and concluding with his exaltation and universal adoration. It's a theologically complex passage – it is the subject of whole chapters in theology textbooks, and even whole books – but it is also a song of praise. Joanna Collicutt observes, as an aside, that the hymn is a compelling illustration of the fact that our most sophisticated theology happens not so much in studies and libraries but in the context of worship.

The hymn illustrates what it means to have "the mind of Christ" or "the same attitude as Christ". It presents Christ's humility as having three parts:

- He did not treat "equality with God" as something to be exploited, or clung to
- He "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" – he set aside his entitlement to be served in order to take on a role of service

- He humbled himself and “became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” – he willingly took on the shame of the world in the humiliating nature of his death.

Joanna Collicutt points out that our humility isn’t a simple replication of Jesus’ humility. We don’t have any divinity to set aside; we are not entitled to be worshipped or served; above all it is not our job to take on the shame of the world in order to redeem it.

She writes: “On the other hand there is a connection between Christ’s humility and the calling of all Christians. ... (Page 113)

So let’s return to one of the 20th century martyrs commemorated at Westminster Abbey – Elizabeth of Hesse-Darmstadt, who later became Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia. Elizabeth was born in Germany but after her mother died she was brought up in England, under her grandmother Queen Victoria’s protection. In 1884 Elizabeth married Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, the fifth son of Tsar Alexander II of Russia. After her marriage Grand Duchess Elizabeth became increasingly interested in Russian Orthodoxy and in 1891 she adopted the Russian Orthodox faith herself.

In 1905 her husband was assassinated. Grand Duchess Elizabeth visited her husband’s murderer in prison, and publicly forgave him. Then she gave away all her jewellery and sold her most luxurious possessions and devoted herself to the Convent of Sts Mary and Martha in Moscow, serving the poor. In 1909 she and 17 other women were dedicated as Sisters of Love and Mercy. *Photo*

Elizabeth said, “I am leaving a glittering world where I had a glittering position, but with all of you I am descending into a greater world – the world of the poor and the suffering.”

Elizabeth’s words remind me of Paul’s words in the second letter to the church at Corinth: “Though Jesus was rich, yet for our sakes he became more.”

The women opened a hospital and carried a lot of other charitable works besides. But in 1917 the Bolsheviks seized power and persecuted the Orthodox church. The churches were closed or destroyed. Hundreds of priests and nuns were imprisoned, taken away to labour camps or killed. In 1918 Elizabeth was arrested and a couple of months later she was murdered in a mine shaft, along with another sister and members of the royal family. She was 54 – just a little older than me.

William Barclay writes of today's reading, "Paul is pleading with the Philippians to shed personal ambitions and pride and desire for prestige and to have in their hearts that humble, selfless desire to serve, which was the essence of the life of Christ." Grand Duchess Elizabeth followed Christ's example, setting aside her entitlement to be served in order to take on a role of service. And she obeyed and honoured God, even to the point of death. I am glad her life and faith is commemorated at Westminster Abbey.

But isn't all this just a bit too hard for ordinary people like us? The answer is, yes. It is too hard!

Thankfully the final verses of today's reading from Philippians remind us that actually "having the same attitude as Christ" doesn't depend on us. Paul says, "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."

Having the mind of Christ, or, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, "Christ being formed in us," is a result of God's work in us, not our own efforts. We are to co-operate with God – we are to work out our own salvation – but God gives us both the desire and the ability to do that. "It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work of his good pleasure."

And so we pray:

**Merciful God,
 give us the same attitude as Jesus,
 who emptied himself
 and was obedient to you
 all the way to his death on the cross.
 Make us eager to put others before ourselves,
 and their needs before our own.
 We ask this through your Son,
 Jesus Christ our Lord,
 who lives and reigns
 with you and the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and forever.
 Amen.**

— The Lutheran Church of Australia