

Heaven and earth, glory and humility

Philippians 2, John 1.45-51

Last week we began a journey with Paul's letter to the Philippians. This is a short book, only 4 chapters, but so personal. You almost feel that Paul is here with us, speaking of Christ and encouraging us to be true people of Christ.

Glory and humility – heaven and earth

Today we heard chapter 2 with the wonderful hymn in verses 6-11 that speaks of the humility and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Humility and glory – not presented as opposites but with glory grounded in humility and obedience.

Jesus is identified as being of the same nature as the Father. He is one with the Father, not lesser in any way; nevertheless, he did not seek power and glory but humility, service and obedience. In his incarnation Jesus is both God and man, he brings together the humility of his human nature and the glory of his divine nature. He is of heaven and of the earth.

Linking heaven and earth – Jacob's ladder

In Genesis 28:11-13 Jacob has a dream in which a stairway or ladder links heaven and earth, and angels are ascending and descending this ladder. The multitude of angels ascending and descending gives a vision that in that place and that moment, Jacob was in the presence of a linked heaven and earth. Here Jacob hears the promise of God that Jacob and his descendants would inherit that land.

Linking heaven and earth – Jesus

John's gospel, with the story of Jesus knowing Nathanael whom he has seen under the fig tree, has angelic echoes of the dream of Jacob. After declaring that Jesus is the Son of God and the king of Israel, Nathanael is told by Jesus, *You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that. He then added, Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.* John 1:48-51

Jesus is now the link between heaven and earth, not only in his divine and human nature but in his relationship with, and obedience to, the Father.

A relationship of obedience

Jesus' authority and identity are from God but it is authority and identity that is expressed in obedience. His obedience was total. *He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!* (Philippians 2:8)

Is our identity expressed in humility and obedience? Do we do the will of the Father as Jesus did? Do we identify ourselves with Christ and imitate his humility and obedience? If we seek to follow him, what will that look like? Clearly we would be seen to love God and to love one another, as Jesus commanded and as he lived.

Loving God and one another

Which one do you think is more difficult, loving God or loving one another?

Love of God is our first and supreme focus and joy. I believe that we are made to love God and to live our lives in the love of God, both given and received. I don't deny that there may be times of deep grief and hurt when we lament and express the difficulty of maintaining that loving relationship with the God who loves us so completely. Still, God is infinitely loving and worthy of our love.

Words and deeds

Jesus expressed in his words and his actions, and particularly in his death on the cross, the great love of God for humankind. This message of love is one that we can share with the world, through our actions as well as our words. We show God's love by loving one another.

Jesus said, *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* (John 13:34-35)

Unity

We know that this is easier in principle than in practice, at least it is for me. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he had some very specific things to say about how they loved (or didn't love) one another. In

chapter 2, which we heard today, they are told firstly to be in unity – not full of self-interest (a very comfortable place to be) but giving preference to the interests of others (a much less comfortable place).

Love

As fellow members of the body of Christ, we need to show love for one another. To love one another is to give a Christ-like message. Do we give that message to others? Do we show by our actions that we want to be in unity with one another, that we recognise that others matter, that they are important, that they are beloved of God, and that they are a vital part of the body of Christ?

Paul commended the Philippians for their obedience and encouraged them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. They were to show the humility and obedience of Christ. However, he cautioned them to do this without grumbling and arguing.

How tempting is grumbling and complaining! Not just personally but as a society, even as entertainment. It is all-pervasive in the popular media - on talkback radio, TV commentary shows, you name it and it is there. Grumpy old men and grumpy old women are loved for their grumpiness rather than their wisdom or experience. Politicians grumble and criticise one another instead of simply promoting policies they believe in. No-one needs to be an unquestioning doormat but unproductive grumbling that just undermines relationships is destructive, not constructive, and far, far removed from telling the truth in love.

Shine like stars

Can we let go of grumbling and complaining? Paul says that letting go of the temptation to grumble and complain will enable the Philippians to be *blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.* (Philippians 2:15-16)

Shining like stars comes not from self important achievement but from following the example of Christ, of loving and serving one another in the service of God, holding firm to the word of life. It is doing God’s will that enables us to shine like stars.

God exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. This was grounded in Jesus' willingness to humble himself by becoming obedient even to the point of death.

Marion Eva, an Anglican apostolic nun, while working as a doctor in a hospice for terminally ill children, said this about suffering and glory, *There is no glory in suffering itself. The only glory of God, as I see it – and it isn't like a great sunburst – is in self-giving love, and the suffering of self-giving love. The glory of God, in other words, is in the cross. The cross was self-giving, and Christ went knowingly and willingly to his death.* (Unveiled : Nuns Talking by Mary Louden, p.259)

Are we willing to show Christ-like humble obedience to God? Will others know us by the love we show to one another? Can we be self-giving instead of self-serving? In this way we too can shine like stars, to the praise and glory of God.

God of grace, we thank you for all your gifts to us: grant us to accept both pain and joy in faith and hope, and never to fail in love to you and to our sisters and brothers; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.