

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

Pentecost 18 2023.

“[Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”
Philippians 2: 8

As some of you have heard me say, I don't know exactly what heaven will be like. However, it's clear that it will include amazing music. For example, Revelation 5: 13:

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,
‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!’

Honouring God by singing was deeply rooted in worship by our Jewish ancestors; it has continued throughout the whole Christian tradition... For example, when the apostle Peter and Silas are arrested and imprisoned, they begin to sing in prison. Acts 16: 25: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...” Even in bad times, the apostolic Church sang praise to God through Jesus Christ. (Incidentally, Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from prison...)

The instructions to the congregation in the city of Colossae include these words: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God (3: 16)...” The Book of Psalms was the first Christian hymn book, and the practice of singing to worship God – Father, Son (revealed as Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit, continue, even to our gathering here this morning...

Today's second reading is a passage from Philippians 2. Philippians 2 contains what is widely regarded by Bible teachers as an early Christian hymn – or at least, part of a hymn. Verse 1 is about the humility and surrender of Jesus on the cross – surrender like a slave. The second verse of the hymn is about *our* surrender to the risen Jesus Christ...

In the first years of the Church's life, this hymn from Philippians 2 became a Christian confession of faith, a Creed, which developed into a fuller confession, called the Jerusalem Creed, which in turn developed into what we call the Nicene and Apostles Creeds, which we continue to offer today. (The Apostles Creed was not written *by* the 12 apostles, but it is the faith *of* the 12 apostles...)

(There were 3 Creeds agreed on by the whole Church while it was united – the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed – which explicitly states that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine – and the Athanasian Creed. We rarely read the Athanasian Creed these days, because it is very long and very repetitive, but it can be found in the back of the *Book of Common Prayer*...)

So, before us today, we have this amazing hymn about surrender and humility, which is a core teaching of the whole Christian Church, the catholic Church...

We're used to thinking about *our* humility before God – but have we reflected that part of God's own nature is to be humble?... Humble. Verses 5 to 8:

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.

The Creator and Redeemer of the whole universe insists that worship is to be directed at him alone. Commandments 1 and 2 of the 10 Commandments:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...

Yet this amazing God chose to become one of us, to redeem us for ever. God the Son emptied himself, becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who is both fully human and fully divine. Jesus Christ chose to undergo torture and death, to deal decisively with sin, so that you and I can become adopted sons and daughters of God...

We note that this ancient hymn doesn't end with what God has done by emptying himself. His is the name which is above every name, to which every knee shall bow. The hymn continues,

Therefore God also highly exalted him [that is, the risen Christ]
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.

Some of cross ourselves; some of us don't. Some of us raise hands in praise; some of us don't. Likewise, you might note that some Christians will give a small nod at the name of Jesus. Whether or not we bow on the *outside* doesn't matter. It does emphatically matter that we bow *in our hearts*, as it were... to surrender ourselves to Jesus Christ our Lord, to the glory of God the Father...

Further, Christians anticipate that great and glorious Day, one Day, when Jesus Christ shall come again, to bring about the new heaven and the new earth. Not everyone yet bows before the King of kings. Yet at that great and glorious Day, every knee will bow – all in surrender; some of us in delight; others confronted that in their dark self-centredness, they got it all spectacularly wrong...

We are to live joyfully for Christ, who surrendered himself to us in his perfect offering, and to whom we now in turn offer our lives in praise, thanksgiving, and humble service.

Thanks be to God...