

# We are called to imitate the self-emptying love of Christ for others

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Pentecost + 19: Phil 2.1-11: Mt 21.23-32

Honour: is it an old-fashioned word? (*The story of elderly lady on the bus; the big boy and the little boy and the dual transactions of money and honour.*) In the Mediterranean world of Jesus and Paul, people were very concerned with their honour. There was a hierarchy of honour, and the person at the top of the pile was the emperor. His title was *Saviour of the world*.<sup>[1]</sup> Sound familiar? Anyone honoured to wield secular or sacred power in Rome's dominions might do so only with the emperor's consent. That included the chief priests and elders who were sparring with Jesus in today's Gospel. Their exercise of authority was an honour granted only at the emperor's pleasure.

Jesus had seriously confronted their sense of that honour and their status the day before. You know the story; he'd ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey surrounded by adoring crowds. He'd cleansed *their* Temple of all its pilgrim commerce – the animals and birds to be offered as sacrifices, the tables of the money changers exchanging secular money for the pure-silver Tyrian half-shekels which were the only money accepted as an Israelite's annual Temple tax. So no wonder they chief priests and the elders got stuck into Jesus today about his 'authority to do these things'. They had the *emperor's* backing; *who on earth* was backing Jesus?

We need to know about this economy of honour to understand what a threat Jesus represented to the chief priests and elders. He mounted a direct challenge to the social order. The

equivalent today would see him going into the Wall Street stock exchange, smashing their computers and pronouncing our immutable doctrines of economic growth and market forces as abominations to God. But would he do that? They're sacred! Nobody questions the centrality of economic growth or market forces, do they!

Jesus *was* this political; he *was* this radical; his way of living and dying was a huge challenge to the status quo in his time, just as it is in ours. Instead of amassing honour, wealth and power, <sup>Matt 4.1-11</sup> Jesus gave them up – and he gave up far more than these. Instead of condoning a status quo which saw a few people monopolise wealth and power to the detriment of the many, Jesus showed us an utterly different way to be. He gave himself both to set ordinary people free from the cruelty of a life of fear and poverty, *and* he gave himself to the rich and powerful – to us – to free us from our slavery to wealth and power.

In our epistle reading today, Paul gives us a hymn which names what Jesus did to enable this gift of setting us free. It's a hymn of such significance in the Christian Scriptures that it's been given a special name of its own – the Kenosis Hymn; which means the hymn to self-emptying love. It describes Jesus as emptying himself of his divine power to take the form of a humble, itinerant preacher.

Kenosis means 'empty' and the Kenosis Hymn – the hymn to self-emptying love – tells us that Jesus gave up equality with God to become 'a slave'. And Paul frames the hymn with a call to shed the chains that bind us to a life that *isn't* life giving: pride, greed, fear, delusional conceit. Our study group noticed an echo of the Buddhist teaching about striving for detachment. Paul emphasises that the purpose of this 'shedding the chains' is not freedom for self, but rather to give that freedom to others. <sup>3</sup> *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than*

*yourselves.* <sup>4</sup> *Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* That's the top of the fame that this Kenosis Hymn fits into.

It's intended that we apply this hymn to self-emptying love to ourselves; what are we meant to empty ourselves of; what are we able to give up that sets both us free, and sets the world free? In the season of creation, the climate crisis is a very obvious candidate. This hymn to self-emptying love shows God in Jesus coming to us where we are. It says Jesus comes as a 'slave' so that the most humble slave can say 'Jesus is *one of us*'. He's come with gentle, committed, rescuing love. And this message is in perfect continuity with the message of the Hebrew Law and Prophets. God feels the plight of the poor and helpless. Time and time again, God's commitment to justice for widows and orphans and other powerless people was repeated by the prophets who warned that you ignore their plight at your peril. A society which runs on the basis of preferring power and privilege is the antithesis of God's vision for humanity. God called the chosen people to be a nation that cared for the weak and the powerless; both their own, and others they called sojourners in their Land; the ones we call refugees.

And there's another self-emptying challenge. There are more than 100 million displaced people in the world today, and in the news this week, Europe declared that the refugees wanting to go there would be an unacceptable challenge to their way of life. They're very like us in that regard. So we have a situation where Lebanon, Turkey and Syria have each taken on millions of refugees. How can *they* manage that when we don't think we can?

William Greenway writes that *The Kenosis hymn is most easily heard in extremis. Then it surely comforts those with ears to hear, but otherwise? For those of us bearing critical responsibilities to family and others, and living within a fallen world where legitimate needs conflict? Well, then this*

*towering hymn, taken without compromise, is terrifying.*<sup>[2]</sup>

It challenges our whole way of being.

Paul reminds the Philippians of the Gospel he has proclaimed to them; that Jesus embodies all these principles – literally, physically! These principles are not imposed from above. Jesus, the itinerant preacher simply lived them out with us from the stance of the poor and helpless themselves; Jesus, who would be executed as a threat to the status quo.

Jesus is the most perfect revelation of God's love for us; Jesus is the most perfect revelation of God's commitment to creation by becoming part of that creation; Jesus is the most perfect revelation of God's solidarity with the poor, the marginalised and the despised, Jesus is the most perfect revelation of how we should measure our own values.

<sup>5</sup> *Let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus!*

Amen.

Notes:

1. Craig R. Koester "THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD" (JOHN 4:42) *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) 665-680
2. William Greenway, (2011). Theological Perspective on Philippians 2:1–13. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (Vol. 4, p. 114). Westminster John Knox Press.