

Sermon Given by

Simon Scott

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Philippians 2:5-13 - "Downwardly mobile"

I don't know if you have heard of the American writer Gore Vidal. He seemed to enjoy making shocking statements, 'It is not enough to succeed', he said once, 'Others must fail'. And then in a similar vein: 'Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies.'

We might not like that sort of approach, but in business circles there is a school of thought which says that if you want to get to the top, then you can't afford to worry about whose shoulders you are climbing on to get there.

Of course this is not just confined to the world of business. Many have commented that socially the nineteen seventies saw the arrival of the Me Generation – a generation committed to self.

That finds expression in our language. In the Oxford Shorter English dictionary there are more than fifty self-words with a pejorative meaning: Self-assertion, self-indulgence, self-applause, self-advertisement, self-gratification, self-glorification, self-pity, self-will and so on. We evidently need this rich vocabulary to express our multi-faceted self-centredness.

But let me ask you now to put *those* sentiments of Gore Vidal's are alongside another thing he said, when he described Christianity as 'the greatest disaster ever to strike the west.'

I don't think there is any coincidence that the man who considered Christianity the greatest disaster to strike the West was also someone who was committed to self-promotion at the expense of others.

And our reading in Philippians 2 bears out the close link between the core truths of the Christian faith and a lifestyle marked by genuine humility: so it's no surprise that a man who rejects the Christian faith had no time for a character quality that goes hand in hand with the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

We ended up last week with our verse of the month: '**each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others**' (2:4). It seems like this was a challenge which the Philippians church needed to take on board. Because self-interest was threatening the harmony and happiness of the Christian family in Philippi.

One of the key lessons in a richer appreciation of the New Testament letters is to try and work out what the melodic line of a letter is – what is the underlying tune which if you listen carefully you can pick up. The reason it makes your study of a letter richer is it helps you understand why Paul was writing the letter.

People often say that Philippi seemed to be a church with no problems – almost too good to be true. But that may not be right... Because there is a recurring theme of unity in the letter. Self-serving, self-interest was threatening to splinter the church.

So in Chapter one Paul mentioned in verse 17 those who preach Christ out of ‘selfish ambition’; he called on the Philippians to **stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the Gospel** – that was verse 27.

In Chapter 2 after our section today, Paul praises Timothy and Epaphroditus as people who don’t look to their own interests, but to the interests of others. Which is a not very subtle way of saying: why not take a leaf out of their book, you Philippians.

In Chapter four it becomes even more explicit, because if you look over the page Paul actually exposes the culprits in verse 2: **I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord**. Two women who are at odds with each other and Paul has to bring in others to help them help Euodia and Syntyche to get along.

Once you start seeing that melodic line, you will pick up snatches of that tune all over the letter. For example, when Paul says in that well-known verse Chapter 4:5 **‘let your gentleness be evident to all’**, it wasn’t because he had been commissioned to find a caption for a Christian poster of two kittens playing! There was an implied rebuke which the Christians in Philippi needed to take on board.

So our passage today really takes us to the heart of the letter. And it does so by focussing on Christ. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus – or more literally let this mind be among you which was in Christ Jesus....

If you were to come upon a diary of someone’s innermost thoughts and secrets –. I’m sure if it was someone we were interested in we would have an almost irresistible urge to read what it says.

If it said ‘Private and Confidential’ on the outside that could almost be guaranteed. Well – we have here the innermost thoughts of Jesus – what made him tick...

We’re going to consider this window on the mindset of Jesus as if it were a parabola – and the line moves through three different stages.

To begin with there is **a movement from Deity to humanity**. Let me read verses 5-7 again:

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

**⁶Who, being in very nature^a God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature^b of a servant,
being made in human likeness.**

Paul is talking there about what happened at Christmas – but the description goes back beyond and that first Christmas – because it talks about Jesus’ pre-existence. He was nothing less than God himself, by nature.

So when it says that Jesus didn't grasp equality with God, it doesn't mean he decided not to reach out for something which he didn't yet have.

It means that he didn't grasp tightly onto all the privileges of Deity. In the mists of eternity he decided that he would become nothing. That is an exaggeration, because he didn't cease to exist – and indeed he was still God Almighty.

The exaggeration is meant to give us a sense of the huge scale of what happened in the Incarnation as the God who inhabits eternity beyond space/time co-ordinates willingly became a human being: as John Donne put it: Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.

Verse 6 Very nature God – Verse 7 very nature servant. A slave – never mind scrambling to get to the top – he became the lowest of the low. It is the ultimate loss of status. That is what it means for God to be made in human likeness.

And that is flatly at odds with every conception of greatness which this world has. I was reminded recently of the Vasari Corridor in Florence.

The Grand Duke had a problem – how was he to get from his palace to the parliament without rubbing shoulders with the unwashed masses? His solution was to build a raised private corridor running all the way from the upstairs quarters of his palace on one side of the Arno river to the seat of government on the North bank – a distance of at least 500 meters – so that he would never need to come down to street level. He even had the city's meat market below the corridor relocated so that the smell wouldn't seep into his corridor!

Well – we may not have the financial resources to plan building schemes like that. But you and I are no different when we consider that 'doing such and such' or 'fraternising with so and so' is 'beneath us'. We are at odds with the mind of Christ.

Then a second stage in the downward curve of our parabola. Here the line goes right down to the very bottom. **A movement from Humanity to mortality**

***⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!***

It's very striking how the in the Gospels the narrative moves very quickly on from the start of Jesus' life to the end. Mark's gospel doesn't even include the Christmas story at all. It's wonderful enough that the one who was in very nature God should be made in human likeness; but even more amazing that he should willingly go to death.

Once again this is unlocking for us the thinking processes inside Jesus' mind: he humbled himself – deliberately deciding to do something which he didn't have to; something which involved his humiliation. Consciously obeying the plans and purposes of his Heavenly Father and saying to him again and again throughout his life: 'Your will be done, not mine,'

But even that doesn't plumb the depths to which he went. ***He became obedient to death – even death on a cross***, says Paul.

Banish from your minds nice silver cross pendants on necklaces or black leather Bibles with gilt crosses on the cover. We are meant to shudder at that point! The Romans were absolutely clear how barbaric crucifixion was.

Cicero the lawyer said: 'the very word cross should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his eyes and ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the mere mention of them that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man'.

To the Jews it was even more significant than that. To die on the cross was to die under God's curse. Which is exactly what was happening when Jesus died – he was taking the curse which we deserve for our disobedience, so that the curse is lifted from us and we don't have to bear it ourselves.

I love that story told about the two Dutch sisters in World War 2, Corrie ten Boom and Betsie Ten Boom. Corrie found herself discharged from Ravensbrook Concentration camp and as she left her sister made her promise to tell people around the world – that 'however deep the pit, God's love is deeper still.'

Let's remember that tonight as we share in bread and wine – **he became obedient to death, even death on the cross.**

Then the line moves upwards: a third movement – **from curse to crown**

**⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

Here it isn't so much the mind of Christ which we are seeing in action – but God's response to the mind of Christ, vindicating him completely. No matter how low he came – and he couldn't have stooped any lower. Now he is raised as high as he can possibly be raised. It's referring initially to the resurrection, but beyond that to the Ascension.

And strikingly Paul is adapting the words we had from Isaiah which were describing The Lord God Almighty – and applying them unashamedly to Jesus. You will know how the name of The Lord was held in great reverence by the Jews. And here God shares his name with Jesus and entirely logically he shares his worship with Jesus. So that at the name of Jesus every single knee bows, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord.

It's a striking idea for us as we send David Green off to Cambridge University Christian Union Main Event for a week and as we build up to a series of invitation events ourselves, isn't it?

Why do we invite friends to talks like the Tim Keller events in March or Lee Gatiss this week, or Bob White at the end of the month? It is because God has moved Jesus on, from curse to crown. One day every knee will bow to acknowledge that - and it would be so much better to do that willingly **now** than reluctantly when Jesus comes again.

The whole culture is against the absolutism of these verses, I know. Have you heard these lines describing our relativistic age?

It all depends on who you are

And it all depends on how you are

It all depends on how you're raised

And it all depends on what is praised.

What's right today is wrong tomorrow –

In Europe joy, in Asia sorrow.

It all depends on point of view,

Australia or Timbuktu.

In Rome, do as the Romans do.

If tastes just happen to agree,

Why then you have morality.

But where there are conflicting trends,

It all depends, it all depends.

Well – however fashionable it is to imagine that we can all make up our own minds how we live, if God has already exalted Jesus to the throne of heaven, there is no doubt about it. It just is not true that 'it all depends'; every knee will bow; every tongue will confess.

At which point we need to remind ourselves of why Paul is writing this; it isn't simply a creed about Christ. The point he is making is that the mind of Christ stoops very low and leaves the outcome of that decision entirely in God's hands. In the case of Jesus, the curse became a crown – he was completely vindicated, because God always exalts those who humble themselves.

We've reached the conclusion – and it's spelled out in verses 12-13.

¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

I've always loved those verses but I'm not convinced I have always grasped exactly what he is saying there. It isn't just a call for individual Christians to go on in the Christian life: 'Simon Scott – take responsibility for your own keeping going as a Christian and as you do that you will find God gives you the strength. You **work out** your salvation and God will **work in** the power you need'.

No. Ask yourself: 'what is the therefore there for in verse 12?' Surely he is encouraging the Philippians to work out their salvation together. Particularly in their relationships with each other. To put an end to the self-interest which mucks up church fellowship and really to help each other on the way to heaven. To allow Jesus name to be no 1 not fighting the corner for my own name. And to know as we do that together that **God** is absolutely committed to that process.

As **we work out** our salvation in our relationships, living out the mindset of Christ – **he will work that mindset into** us so that it increasingly becomes what we want and how we live.

The applications of this are many: if I am someone who tends to feel that they are being dealt with unfairly, or if I'm someone who is looking for the limelight, because I consider myself talented and gifted; or maybe I keep a low profile, because of low-self-esteem; if I'm impatient with others; if I'm forever telling other people what to do. Lots of areas where the mind of Christ would make a difference to our relationships.

But let me sow just one thought as we close: I don't see how we can obey the spirit of verses 12-13 unless we are meeting with Christians in a small group – a Bible study or a prayer triplet - as well as part of a Sunday gathering.

If you never get close enough to Christians to irritate them or to be irritated by them, well by definition you are not getting close enough to be blessed by them. You're denying other Christians the possibility of crucifying their selfishness; and you are denying yourself that possibility as well.

Gore Vidal obviously disliked that feeling he sometimes had, that something inside him had just died. You may well have to die a thousand deaths in Christian fellowship. But those deaths are actually the path to life – and Jesus Christ is the proof of it.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)