

Martin's Sermon 27 09 2020

Matt 21; 23-30 and Phil 2; 1-13

1,106

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Phil 2; 3

Before I changed career course and started working for the church – in fact long before I became a Christian – I worked in the world of marketing. When I was young it was a new discipline and was therefore seen – perhaps not unreasonably – as being a little bit flashy. I have often wondered how it would have been viewed back in Jesus' day and how it might have affected his ministry. Certainly my professional advice to God would have been significantly at odds with his self-promotion methods.

If it had been up to *me* his arrival on earth in human form would have been much more hyped – perhaps something involving white charger horses and adoring crowds might

have been appropriate... a bit more akin to the way that John imagines in Revelation that Jesus' return will be.

But no, 2,000 years ago God – who does, after all know a thing or two more than I do - saw fit to send Jesus as a baby born into a subsistence level, refugee family then to grow up as the son of a carpenter... after which he'd spend three years going around preaching and healing with little more to draw attention to himself than his personality, his knowledge of scripture, an odd miracle or two and a message which turned all accepted wisdom on its head. No wonder the teachers and elders whose job was to keep heresy out of the synagogues and who we heard about in the Gospel reading quite rightly wanted to question who he was and by whose authority he said the things he said.

Well, with the benefit of 2,000 years hindsight we can perhaps start to understand why God arranged things the way he did rather than my way! And the answer is simply this: he gave Jesus the mission which has sometimes been

summed up by saying **“he became what we are in order to make us what he is”**. If he had come with all the razmataz of a pop-idol then we might have thought that salvation was all about gaining personal riches and fame – but because he came in humility and modelled utter, loving obedience to his Father we can see that the true nature of our salvation, the means of becoming adopted as true children of God, and being brothers and sisters to Christ himself paradoxically lies in forgetting all about ourselves and in concentrating instead on God.

Now God knows that humility is a counter-cultural message today but it was even more counter-cultural 2,000 years ago. Both Greek and Roman societies at that time thought that honour and reputation were just about the most pleasant things you could contemplate for yourself – and when you were honoured and feted it showed just what a successful human you were. But on the other side of the coin their defeated opponents would be crushed, humiliated and humbled.

And when it came to the Jews – well Israel had been defeated many times and so it was little wonder that they were so heartened and excited when over the centuries prophets had begun to speak of God’s special concern for the defeated and told of the time to come when those who put themselves above others would be put down and those who humbled themselves would be honoured.

Our first reading was from the letter Paul wrote from prison to the church in Phillipi which Paul himself had planted twelve years previously. It was made up of people living in a Roman colony up in the northern part of Greece. Now when they had heard that Paul was in prison they’d sent one of their elders named Epaphroditus to take him money and provisions and tell him all the news. Paul’s letter was really a thank you note but in typical Paul-like fashion he didn’t get round to the thank-yous until he’d given them four chapters of encouragement and instruction. He’d heard that there was some disunity and rivalry creeping into the fellowship and so advised that there was only one answer to that –

imitate Christ himself in his attitude of humility and lifestyle of a servant.

As part of his argument Paul quotes that lovely hymn which is still used 2,000 years later in our churches today as a statement of faith: I'll bet that Graham Kendrick or Stuart Townsend hope that their songs last as long! I love the fact that it is so short and simple. It starts

Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

Wow! Only thirty years or so after the crucifixion people had stopped thinking of him as a teacher and prophet but were singing hymns to him as God incarnate. And, perhaps even more incredible, is the fact that they were singing about the cross.

..he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

He made himself nothing - *“he became what we are in order to make us what he is”*.

Death by crucifixion was invented by the Romans as being the ultimate humiliation ... publicly shameful and totally dishonouring. And yet Jesus submitted to it – it was a humility revolution. The concepts of honour and shame were turned on their heads. But here’s the thing - because he suffered the cross

God exalted him 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.

Christ's mission was to achieve God's will by giving up all riches and power and by acting with complete humility. Paul tells us that for the church to succeed in **our** mission we must follow Jesus' example and act humbly towards each other and those we seek to tell about Jesus.

So let me leave you with this thought as I close – when speaking about humility, C S Lewis said that “considering others better than yourself is not about thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less”. “considering others better than yourself is not about thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less”.

How can we – can I - help others this week by thinking of them more and thinking less about myself?