

Philippians 2 – MHCC – 19 Feb 2017

Further conversation about Paul – issue of him being put on level with Jesus.

Paul himself would be appalled to have people consider him as equal to Jesus. He is always a servant of Christ, never a competitor with him.

AND: We don't have the words of Jesus from Jesus. He never wrote a book (and was almost certainly illiterate). We have the words and actions of Jesus as remembered and passed on and valued by communities of believers after Jesus' life, written in response to specific needs of the recipient audiences, probably 35-60 years after his death.

BUT: Paul is earlier than the gospels. Quite probably all Paul's letters (almost without doubt at least Galatians and Thessalonians) written before any gospels. Philippians – depends if it was written in Ephesus (c.55) or Rome (c.62) – the latter MIGHT be after Mark (although Mark could be as late as 70).

Compare: in Paul we have (not the remembered words and actions of Jesus but) the sense of what the events of Jesus' ministry MEANT for the communities of believers, about 20-30 years after his death, written in terms of the practical needs of specific recipient audiences.

And here in Philippians, we possibly have something earlier than Paul...

Two Sections:

Philippians 2:6-11

2:6-11 – almost certainly pre-Paul, a liturgical piece (hymn?), poetic utterance, expressing early core understandings of who Jesus was. Likely one of the earliest written pieces of Christian tradition we have – from between the life of Jesus and the first written letters. Hence voluminous study/ Trinitarian discussion/ doctrines of divinity of Jesus;

Presented as a given, a shared understanding, not a case argued – so it is good evidence for what the church of the time, and earlier, thought of Jesus.

Limited Listeners: Just let this roll around: Jesus, though equal with God, let go of it all and poured himself out as a complete nobody, all for the needs of others and the service of God. This is the Jesus you are following.

2:6-8 going down. COULD HAVE HAD IT ALL... but didn't. Tricky Greek words (v.6)

Morphe – form (or likeness? Or essence?) Does he LOOK like God or is he actually made of the same stuff as God? IS he God? Is he 'in the form of God' the way people are created 'in the image of God', or is this different? Is 'form' like 'mould' – can put chocolate or concrete into it? Like 'a chip off the old block'?

[morphe: form	ousia: being/essence (higher)	scheme: changeable exterior (lower)
eikon: image	Homoioima: likeness	and these meanings overlap]

Dennis Hamm: gist of the whole is re social status, not metaphysics

Harpagmus – something to be exploited. Literally: robbery. Very unusual word. Related words give sense of grasp, seize. But can mean EITHER: reach out and snatch at something you DON'T have, OR keep a fierce hold on something you DO have, or use it selfishly. If the former: then he is an ordinary human being who did not seek to be like God; If the latter then at some point he was like God and chose to let it go. Possibly comparing Jesus to Adam (AND EVE!!!) – they ate from the tree to try and be like God; Jesus replayed the temptation and chose not to. (Works if he is human – a second round of the human-makes-a-choice story; works if he is divine

– where Adam&Eve tried to grasp what was NOT rightly theirs, Jesus chose to forfeit that which WAS rightly his)

Then verses describing his downward descent (6-8): Emptied (of what? more likely idiomatic/poetic; better to think of it as ‘made himself nothing’); took morphe of slave; human, but even humbler – a dead human; even more so – a shamefully dead human (the cross). From equality with God to nothing; from privilege to powerless outcast.

Possibly contrasts the ‘true’ use of Divine power – for others – with the Greek/Roman gods who used it for selfish or capricious ends.

2:9-11 going up; subject of the sentences changes from Jesus to God – where JESUS did all the action moving down, GOD does all the action moving up. Jesus never brushes the dust off and says ‘that’s enough of that then, I am out of here!’ God lifts him; gives him ‘the name above all names’ – could refer to him thereafter being referred to as Lord Jesus, with Lord the Greek wording used for the unspeakable Hebrew name of God. OR could mean that hereafter Jesus, his ordinary human name, will be held as the most important name ever.

Is he raised back to where he started, or up to somewhere he never was? Argued both ways. Possibly both true: back to where he was but with new credentials, new understanding, new dimension of reality

can skip [2.10 All beings... describes the three levels of reality in Greek understanding: above, on and below the world, each inhabited by a range of beings.]

2:11 Acknowledge: Jesus Christ as Lord – the basic declaration of Christian faith in this time, the ‘Jesus Prayer’ of Pauline conversion. The song has a vision that eventually all Creation will recognise this.

2:10 re ‘every knee’ - Will God be kneecapping people to ensure Jesus gets his due worship? (anyone here have a past that made them feel like that? – Worship Jesus or Else!) OR Because Jesus is so amazing that everyone will be gobsmacked when they really see him? (round a dark corner suddenly the sunset has the sky on fire...) OR Because his lowliness was so incredible but its lowness made it invisible, so God lifted it up high so everyone could see this humility and give praise?

OR knees will all bend in recognition that God, revealed in Jesus, is not up high in the clouds for people standing proud but down low in the dirt where you need to bend down to see. Like Leunig’s talking to a duck? I removed this questions because it felt offensive but then put it back because: perhaps that is the point, that this sort of Jesus, devoid of status, is an offense to our sense of how the world, and God, should work.

AND: In case all this casts ‘One God’ into doubt – it will be for God’s glory, not for Jesus’ glory. God’s exaltation of Jesus for his path of humble service shows us what God is like and what God values. *Passage also parallels Isaiah 45, which is an oracle of the supreme one-ness of Yahweh, the Only God, the Only one to whom knees will bow and tongues swear – to use this language for Jesus is both affirming the One-ness and throwing up some significant new aspects to it.*

Ending in ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ as the end suggests this may be credal – a statement of the essence of Christian faith. What lead them to consider Jesus of Nazareth to be both Christ (the Jewish Messiah) and Lord (the One God)? HUMILITY AND SELFLESS LOVE, RENUNCIATION OF STATUS AND PRIVILEGE. And the resurrection, interpreted as God saying YES to Jesus.

Lots in there to chew on – but I don’t think any of that is what Paul is writing about in Philippians 2.

The whole section, with P2:6-11 in context

2:1-4 – picks up from 1:27-30, about unity, suffering, and the centrality of living so the gospel can be seen in their lives. ‘Let Christ motivate you’:

Be of one heart, one mind, one love

Not selfish

Humble

Putting others first

Not jealous or vain

Both affirming that they are already aiming for these things, and urging them to be dedicated to them, on account of Christ. LIMITED LISTENERS: what does this call YOU to today? (repeat 5 things above)

Note: unity not between churches/denominations (no such thing)/mission groups – WITHIN the congregation at Philippi

'Be of a single mind' (v.2) Are we therefore not to think for ourselves? Is this about conformity? Stephen Fowl: 'an ordered, harmonious diversity'. The 'right mind' is not a specific dictum, it is an attitude: humility, selflessness. We can agree on that without all being the same in how we live it out. *Imitating someone does not mean copying every detail. If I want to be 'like Mother Teresa' I don't need to wear blue and white or join the Missionaries of Charity.*

Humility: Gordon Fee – not self-focussed (making myself smaller) but other-focussed (the needs of others, not putting others on pedestals/making them bigger)

2:5 'Make your mind the mind of Christ' – repeat theme through Philippians of right thinking/attitude/thought/discernment. So here: COPY JESUS' ATTITUDE.

OR: Being in him, remember you have his mind? *Can also translate more like 'Be what you are: In Christ' – a reminder of the soil you are growing out of more than a command to copy an historical figure. Therefore: the events of the Christ Hymn are what made them who they are.*

Then comes Christ Hymn: *Paul is talking about how to be unified, how to live in suffering, and so refers back to where it comes from: Jesus.*

Remember status obsession of Philippi – If this is the life of Jesus, how much more is your own claim to status or power to be renounced/ignored/let go? God does not value you based on your achievements, power, employment, role, title, inheritance, property, social recognition. *Also affirmation of countercultural life of Philippian Christians – where civic virtue is expressed through the Emperor Cult, to be Christian is to be socially outcast, suspect, possibly even law-breaking (at least custom-breaking)*

Exaltation section not to be imitated (not a call to be exalting each other, or ourselves) rather a promise that God will honour those who serve. But more importantly: God's affirmation of Jesus' choices reveals the essential nature of God. If this is what God values above all, to lift higher than all else, then it tells us who God is: unselfish, committed to the well-being of others, disinterested in power for power's sake.

2:12-13 work out salvation with fear and trembling. Tricky, especially if 'salvation' only means 'avoiding hell after death' and the command to 'work it out' is read as individuals. Then plenty of 'fear and trembling': me on my own working at ensuring I don't go to hell. Ick.

BUT: it is all in the plural, addressed to a community that is being called to unity. And 'Salvation' is not (just) about the end of time. It is about healing and health also. Our 'salvation' is God drawing us into relationship (the work of Jesus); relationships are not fixed, they are something that moves through time. So 'working out' our salvation may mean, day to day, working at what it means that we are in loving relationship with God. AND we are not called to this alone, but addressed as a community:

Mt Hawthorn Community Church – work out together your ongoing SALVE, the ongoing healing and restoration God has worked in you (as a group) and is continuing to work in and through you (as a group).

'Growth in holiness' is not a personal thing: we grow more 'holy' – more like Christ – in the spaces between us, not in any one of us. Br Christopher Jamieson: We get to heaven together or not at all – because 'heaven' IS the together, not some personal end goal. Fear and trembling – not terror, but awe. Not brassy confidence in my right to be doing this, and my ability to succeed, but humility.

(v.13) it is GOD who both motivates you to act and empowers you to do it. Just because God is generous.

2:14 – Paul’s chief concern - grumbling. [*Limited listeners – Paul thinks this bit is important*] Doesn’t seem such a biggie. But enough to earn the Philippians a concerned letter from Paul. Clearly perceived as potentially hampering both their salvation-relationship work, and their witness to the community around.

My confession as a grumbler. This is a weakness of mine. I need to hear this caution. It is not just a bit of harmless complaining; it is a matter of church health and life. When I feel like bitching about someone, especially someone within our church family, how can I draw on the empowering Mind of Christ instead?

2:15-18 WHY (re all so far, but esp grumbling) (i) So you will be a light in the darkness of Philippi *both a light others look to, a beacon IN the dark, and also a light shining INTO the dark and therefore dispelling it* (ii) so Paul’s work will be fulfilled (much like a proud parent hoping their children will grow to adulthood and be a credit to their parenting)

v.16 – also 2:2 – to make Paul happy/fulfil his mission. To use this sounds a strange motivation, kind of dependent and a bit manipulative. Appears in his culture it was not. Leave it there. He’s not asking US to make him happy; he’s talking to his dear friends in Philippi nearly 2000 years ago.

2:19-30 Timothy & Epaphroditus – could be just practicalities and plans (this is a letter, not a theological treatise). Or could be further examples of the humility and service being urged. So we have:

1. Paul – suffering in prison for the gospel, seeing opportunities in his suffering to witness to the nature of Christ, the suffering servant (ch.1)
2. Christ – the ultimate example of humility, who could have been the thumping ruler and chose instead to be a nobody Galilean executed in a culturally shameful manner (2:5-11)
3. Timothy – who has learnt from Paul, companioned him, served alongside him, shares his heart. A man who also loves the Philippians (with Paul when Philippian church was founded); man who cares for THEIR well being above his own, who has proven to be selfless in his living out following Christ
4. Epaphroditus – came from Philippi to serve Paul, on behalf of Philippians; Fell ill (possibly on the way – and continuing on to reach Paul put his life in danger). Nearly died – only by a miracle of grace is he alive. Misses the Philippians terribly and is very concerned that they are worrying about him. Concerned with (1) the gospel (2) Paul (3) Philippians – maybe (4) himself? *Note: lauded as a servant of the Gospel – which for Paul is always about evangelism – but is not himself an evangelist. By supporting Paul’s work in practical ways he is praised. Affirms people who are not likely to tell others about Jesus: still acknowledged as workers in spreading the same good news by their support work, or simply by their modelling of the attitude of Christ, especially in suffering.*

Paul goes to great lengths to ensure Epaphroditus will get a warm welcome. Could read it straight, as Paul’s joy in his friend leading to words of praise. Or could read tension in Philippi about Epaphroditus’ mission: had he failed? Should he have stayed longer? Was Paul rejecting him? Lovely touch of humanity: Paul recognises Epaphroditus’ need to go home and affirms it. NOT all about humiliating oneself and burning oneself out being ‘selfless’ to the death. Possibly a coincidence. Or possibly a tacit corrective to (potential over-dogmatic allegiance to) the doctrine he has just expounded, about selflessness and the way of humility.

P2: Not just ‘here’s the example people, go and do likewise’. More ‘You (plural) are embedded into the upside-down trajectory of Jesus; this divine-human mind is at work in you (plural), enabling you; so live like it! Let others see the thing that attracted you in the first place – the astonishing emptying of Jesus to be a nobody, through whom God restored relationship with you (plural). Be united in thinking of the needs of others first. Sound too hard? Look to Timothy, Epaphroditus, Paul – we’re all in it together having a go. Look to Christ. Not only is he the ultimate example, he is the measure of what matters to God; and through our identity ‘in Christ’ God’s enabling strength makes this life of unity – humility - selflessness actually possible.