

Philippians 2:1-13 The Christ Hymn

Several years ago my son Samuel learned how to whistle. I was unable to impart that particular skill to him because I never learned it myself. It is a lost cause, don't try and help me. Actually his girlfriend taught him. For a while he whistled all the time. If he was awake, he was whistling. He was driving us crazy and I teased her that it was her fault.

Some of the songs I didn't know. Once I asked him what he was whistling and he said it was Rage Against the Machine, which is a popular band in certain certain circles.

Another time he was whistling, "Ode to Joy." I asked him if he knew what it was and he said *he* didn't know. I told him that he had learned it at church as the well-known hymn, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,"

Joyful, joyful we adore thee,
God of glory, Lord of love
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
opening to the sun above

Melt the clouds of sin and sadness
Drive the dark of doubt away
Giver of immortal gladness
Fill us with the light of day

It started me singing it, kind of got stuck in my head.

Music and Theology

With some theology, we do well to let music help us get it stuck in our head. We each are being given the opportunity to suggest our favorite hymns for upcoming services. Some will suggest songs because of the music itself, like the Ode to Joy, the rhythms and melodies that internalize the realities of faith and grace and community that sustain and energize our lives. Others will select hymns that have a meaningful message. We will agree that music helps communicate the power and meaning of the faith.

I am sure that this relationship between music and theology is part of the reason why the Psalms of Israel, is one of the beloved books in the Bible. And even at the very beginning when Christian theology was in its infancy, songwriters were able to express the wonder and beauty of the gospel in ways that, at the least, were powerful enough to make their way into the text of the New Testament.

The Hymn

Last week the text was from the first chapter of Philippians where Paul wrote of his convictions that for him, "to live is Christ and to die is gain." Now we come to the second chapter where again Paul's expressions of the gospel are memorable. It is no real surprise that he makes use of, what most agree is, an early Christian hymn.

It is a text about Christian humility and he does his best to say it straight out,

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ,

Be like-minded
Have the same love
Be one in spirit and purpose

Avoid selfish ambition and vain conceit
In humility, consider others better than yourselves
Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have the attitude of Christ,” and then he transitions to the language of a hymn, “who,

Being in very nature God
Did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing
Taking the very nature of a servant
Being made in human likeness

And, being found in appearance as a man
He humbled himself and became obedient to death
Even death on a cross.”

And then the doxology;

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow

in heaven and on earth and under the earth
And every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord
To the glory of God the Father.

Part of what the hymn expresses is an early version of the Doctrine of the Incarnation, the humanity and divinity of Jesus, emphasizing his selflessness and humility, encouraging the development of that same humility in the lives of all believers. They spoke it, to be sure, and if the interpreters are right, they also sang it, planting it deep in their souls.

Needless to say, this humility is a mark of Christian maturity that is not easily attained. It involves persistent effort over time, effort to wean out more common and more selfish attitudes and character traits. It takes daily prayer, study of the scriptures, conscientious efforts to forgive, to love, to serve, and it takes time. A tune to whistle doesn't hurt either.

Work

It is also no surprise that at the end of the hymn Paul exhorts his readers to work at it, “work out your salvations with fear and trembling,” which by itself sounds like a bit of works righteousness, but then Paul adds, “for it is God who works in you, to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

One is aware that the Christian faith teaches the universality and inescapability of sin, that we are

unable to achieve for ourselves a salvation, but can only hope and depend on God's grace and mercy; and at the same time we are told to seek God, to pursue, righteousness, to work out our salvation.

Actually, there is no contradiction here. Salvation is a coming together of God's grace and human faith, meeting in a way that affirms both without diminishing either. It is a bit of a mystery.

Paul writes in Galatians, (2:20)

"I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me."

Or in 1 Corinthians he uses similar language, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. 1 Cor. 15:10

Humility

Here we make efforts to nurture humility in the hope and in the faith that God will nurture humility in us. We nurture a selfless concern for others (which is love, by the way) in the hope and faith that God will build in us a selfless concern for others. No matter how we say it, I could just put it in the words of Paul about the fruit of the Spirit. We seek love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

control, in the hope and faith that God will produce in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

It is we who work, but in a way that leads us to say with Paul, "yet not I," but God working in us, this beautiful theology worthy our devotion, and our hymnody, singing it out in lives lived after the example of Christ.

The example of Christ is the point, of course, lest we forget, Christ obedient even to death, even to the cross. Let that image stick in your mind. It is God's judgment against us. It is God's judgment for us.

Prayer

The Letter to the Philippians is framed in joy. I reminds me of the song my son whistled that one day several years ago. So let us sing it as our hymn of dedication, and as we prepare our hearts for communion.

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