

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday, Epistle, Year A

THE COMPETITIVE MIND AND THE MIND OF CHRIST

Philippians 2:5-11

Palm Sunday

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

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

DIAGNOSIS: The Competitive Mind

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Rivalry among Pauline Loyalists (cf. 1:15)

Compared to other congregations under Paul's watchful eye, Philippi is unique. It holds nothing but esteem for Paul (and vice versa) and appears to be in sync with his gospel (cf. 2:12). And yet, it is not without its troubles. The church in Philippi consists of numerous house churches and the leaders of two such house churches, Euodia and Syntyche, are "not of the same mind in the Lord" (4:2). We don't know the details of their disagreement, Paul does not side with one over the other, and he describes both as leaders who "have struggled beside [him] in the work of the gospel" (4:3). The most we can say is that they seem to be rivals for Paul's affections and want to be exalted/revered as his best disciple. Even so, in their apparent zeal to outdo one another as champions of Paul's gospel, they are endangering the unity of the church and undermining the credibility of the gospel to the surrounding community.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Competitive Minds
Probing deeper, the disagreement is technically not due to a difference in "academic" theology per se, but, ironically, to a shared "internal" disposition that, in modern parlance, might be called "the competitive mind." Paul variously describes this as "envy," "selfish ambition or conceit" (2:3), and looking out for their own self-interest (2:4). Such hearts and minds are set on gaining "earthly things" (3:19) and their "confidence [is] in the flesh" (3:2-6). Sadly, the Pauline gospel that they proclaim competitively has not won over their own hearts and minds. To be sure, Paul has run into this competitive mindset often throughout the course of his ministry (cf. 1:15-18). It is the malignant condition of the mind, the "original sin," that infects the whole world. But what makes this situation particularly painful for Paul is that the very people he is closest to, his partners in the gospel, are suffering from it.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Humiliating Destruction (3:19)

No one knew better than Paul the kind of stranglehold that the competitive mind has on the flesh. Compared to others, he was born with an especially privileged "flesh." You can read the list in 3:4-6. And for many years his competitive mind used it to his advantage, his self-interest, such that he advanced in Judaism beyond many of his own age (cf. Gal 1:14). Yet, by the grace of God, he had learned to count all that as "rubbish" (3:8). The competitive mind might give us a competitive edge over other human beings, but not over God. The competitive mind is by nature opposed to God and, ironically, has God—or, more precisely, God's law—as its chief competitor. Therefore, its end is humiliating destruction (3:19). For no one can compete with the demands of the Law and survive. Read Romans and Galatians. Compared to other human beings, one might look "blameless" with regard to "righteousness under law" (cf. 3:6), but those looks are deceiving.

PROGNOSIS: The Mind of Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Exaltation of Humble Mind of Christ

As Paul now comes to the help of these colleagues through this letter, he gently reminds them that Christ is of another mind from this competitive mind, and he does that by reciting what is probably a familiar hymn to the Philippian Church, our text for today. According to the hymn, it is true that Jesus Christ has every advantage over us. After all, he is divine, "in the form of God" (v. 6). And yet, he is of such a "humble mind" that he does not "exploit" that to his own advantage but ours. To that end, he "emptied" himself to the point of becoming a slave, God the servant, serving nothing but the will of the Father who sent him on our behalf. To that end, he was born in our human form and likeness so that, obedient to the Father, he could join us in our death, in our humiliating destruction. But there is much more, according to the hymn. This humble-minded Christ is

“exalted” by God. For God the Father raised him from the dead, and gave him the name, the status, that is above every name, the name through which salvation is given and the reconciliation between God and sinners is achieved.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Having Christ’s Humble Mind among Us

Paul is absolutely convinced that the “same mind” that is in Christ Jesus is in the Philippian Church. For just look at how they always obey him (for the sake of his gospel), not only when he is present, but much more now in his absence (cf. v. 12). They still faithfully bend the knee (v. 10) and confess with their tongue “that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (v. 11). The message he delivered to them, the message so clearly expressed in the hymnody of the Church, resides in their midst. The message is working, even though its work is not yet finished, as Paul himself acknowledges even concerning himself (cf. 3:12-16). Therefore, they simply need to let that message continue to “work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling,” that is, through the humbling process of repentance and self-examination, because, in truth, “it is God who is at work” in them, in this process, “enabling them both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (v. 13).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Look out for the Interest of Others

Even better, the humble mind of Christ is so at work in the Philippian Church that their particular interpersonal conflicts are being attended to in concrete and tangible ways. Take for example the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche. Right there in the midst of the congregation Paul asks some unnamed member of the community, identified as “my loyal companion” (4:3), to help them. Such help entails “looking not to [his/her] own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:4), in this case Euodia and Syntyche. This help entails the risk of taking

on the form of a slave for the sake of bringing reconciliation between these dear sisters in the faith. This help is part of the process by which Euodia and Syntyche will work out their salvation in their present disagreement with fear and trembling, repentance and self-evaluation, for through this help God is at work enabling them both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.