

The Passion of our Lord

WINNING BY LOSING

Philippians 2:1-11

The Passion of our Lord

analysis by Ed Schroeder

Sabbatarians,

Sunday a week hence (March 23) is Passion/Palm Sunday. Herewith a Crossings matrix on the second lesson for the day in the Revised Common Lectionary. I extended the pericope to include vv. 1-4, for reasons you'll see below. Key to Paul's theology here are the terms "empty" and "glory" and "equal/same" and "mind." So he puns right at the outset about "keno-doxia," [literally: empty-glory] translated (NRSV) as "conceit," which he contrasts in a few verses with Christ's own self-emptying ["kenosis"] and the real glory ["doxa"] linked to that.

The NRSV changes the translation of v.5 from what the (old) RSV gave us. In this case old is right, new is wrong. The issue in Philippi is not (as the NRSV proposes) that the Philippians have not yet received the mind of Christ, so Paul is commending it to them. Rather as people already Christian, already receivers of the mind of Christ, they are in danger of losing it. So he urges them to "let this mind operate in you, the mind you already have received in Christ Jesus." It's a great text.

Peace & Joy! Ed S.

THE BAD NEWS IN PHILIPPI

Stage 1

Symptoms of Sickness in the Philippian Congregation: Empty-Minded Self-Interest. Going for Empty Glory. Refusing to Lose for Others. The Philippian Christians are, sad to say, “minded” to do their own thing, to look after their own interests. No concern for others. Out after their own glory, bereft of humility. “Grasping” to be better than others, striving to get “equality” somewhere higher on the totem pole. (Maybe even pushing for “equality with God” as the tempter offered Adam and Eve?) No servant actions, no self-emptying. In short, winning by winning (over others.) Bad as it is for a Christian to get so trapped, it’s even worse than that

Stage 2

The Sickness underlying the Symptoms: Losing the Winning Lord. They no longer are operating with the “mind of Christ,” his “same mind” given when they became “partners in the Gospel.” To trade the “mind of Christ” for any “other” mind is to lose Christ as Lord. (Remember “Lord” in the Bible means “owner.”) They then become en-slaved again to alien lords, possessed by alien owners. Compared with Christ, such alien lords are all losers, and their devotees as well. But the problem is even worse than that

Stage 3

The Deadly Prognosis of this Sickness: Big Losers. Eternal Empties. In the end they lose everything, everything that counts, namely, “glory from God,” the “glow” arising from God reclaiming people as God’s own kids. Their self-generated glory turns out to be “empty-glory,” empty of any trace of God’s own “glow.” Thus they lose out “big”—in the ultimate, eternal dimension. This eternal emptiness, cosmic humiliation, means being a loser forever, forever “lost.”

GOOD NEWS FOR COPING WITH THE BAD NEWS IN PHILIPPI

Stage 4 (Good News for Stage 3)

Jesus the Christ Joins Us in Our Sickness, Brings a New Prognosis to Our Case: Filling the Empties by Emptying Himself. Jesus wins by losing—wins us by losing himself. The new active subject in the drama, he subjects himself to our “old” prognosis, death. Our humiliation, emptiness, phony-glory, he takes as his own. As the divine slave now carrying our burden he takes it obediently to the cross. And what does he get (“win”) for his troubles? Us, us as his “own.” He has owner’s rights to all eternally empty losers. In raising Jesus from the dead, God countersigns the transaction and “exalts” Jesus as The One who really is God’s “equal.” Jesus, this Winning Loser, is exactly what God is. The “glow” on God comes from God’s winning losers by being a loser for them.

Note: Throughout the church’s history there’s been some theological debate about v. 7, Christ’s self-emptying, the “kenosis” [Greek] of the second person of the Trinity. Was the kenosis before the incarnation when God’s Son, the “Logos,” was “asarkos,” not (yet) enfleshed? Yes, said one side. God’s Son left the divine perks in heaven before joining the human race. His becoming human required that the divine perks be left behind. You can’t put all of God’s God-ness into a human form. Not so, said the other side. Incarnation per se is neither humiliation, nor emptying. The perks came along to Bethlehem. The emptying occurred during Christ’s ministry among us as the Logos “ensarkos,” enfleshed. Luther opted for the latter, since that is good news for sinners, he said, while the former is not. For him Christ’s emptied himself in the words and actions of his ministry as he handed over his “divine perks” (righteousness, life, holiness, mercy, etc.) to sinners who had none.

Stage 5 (Good News for Stage 2)

New Health in Place of Old Sickness: Confessing Jesus Christ as Lord is Regaining the Mind of Christ. Trusting this Jesus as the Lord (=owner) to whom we belong puts our very lives, our biographies, “in Christ.” “Participation” Paul calls it, partnering with Christ’s Spirit, having a share in the new prognosis. Our tongues too now confess that Jesus, the Christ, is our Lord, that we are Christ’s “own.” We “have this same [Christ] mind among us.” This is the same-mindedness Paul is calling for, not just lateral agreement among fellow Christians, as v. 2 is often interpreted.

Stage 6 (Good News for Stage 1)

New Health Makes for New Symptoms: Winning by Losing in Daily Life. The Mind of Christ Active in the World. Paul urges the Philippians (us too) to go public with this “same mind, the mind of Christ.” Go back into the church-community, as well as into the secular world, and “let this mind be in you which you have in Christ.” Have it as our own mindset to go about winning by losing, to fill the world’s empties by emptying ourselves. Thus God’s own “glow” goes public. Verses 1-4 of Phil.2 spell out one set of “for instances” for this.