

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button
Occasion: 17 Pentecost
Date: October 5, 2014
Theme: "A Different Course"
Text: Philippians 2:1-13

^{NRS} Philippians 2

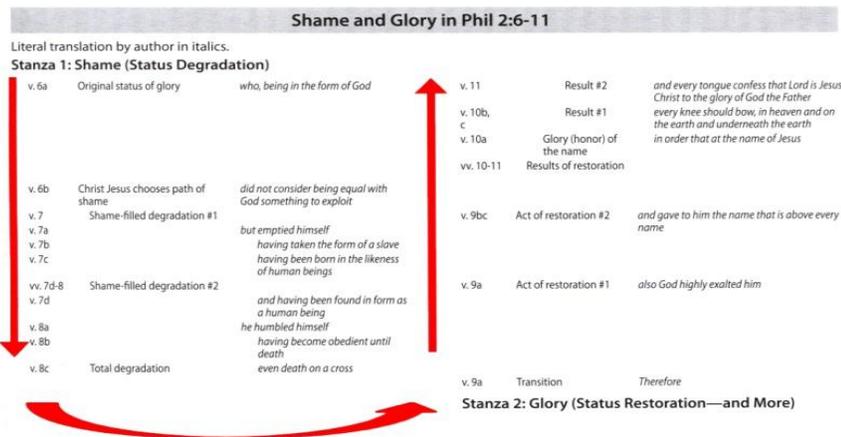
If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Beloved in the Lord, may the God of all hope keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.

Some of the most famous, important words ever written by the Apostle Paul were in all likelihood not actually written by the Apostle Paul.

Many scholars believe that in verses 6-11 of today's Second Lesson Paul is quoting from an early Christian hymn on the death and resurrection of Christ. In ancient Greek there is no such thing as quotation marks, but these verses have a poetic feel about them consistent with a hymn. The words and phrases tend to overlap and repeat, creating a kind of rhythm. In the New Revised Standard Version reprinted in your bulletins you can see how the translators break the text into stanzas, heightening a sense of flow to the verse. Students of the New Testament typically refer to this text as simply "the Christ hymn," and here's how Walter Taylor diagrams it.



Beginning at the top left, the hymn begins by extolling Jesus as in the form of God, equal with God, but not taking advantage of his exalted status, Jesus descends to earth. He empties himself; he takes the form of a slave; he humbles himself; he becomes obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. But exactly at the nadir of Christ's descent, the hymn shifts to the ascent of Christ. God exalts him; God gives him the name above every name; God raises him so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, in Greek *kyrios*, a name otherwise exclusively reserved for – not Batman, not Spiderman, not the Guardians of the Galaxy, but -- the Roman emperor. The hymn exactly follows what the church has come to call the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ, from heaven to earth, from earth to cross, from cross to grave, from grave to sky, "Lord, I lift your name on high!"

Maybe Philippians 2:6-11 is Paul's own original composition, but given what Paul is asking the Philippians to do, it would make sense for him to draw on the church's earliest liturgy as a way of bringing them back to the core of Christian faith. Paul is asking the Philippians to make Paul's own joy complete by being of the same mind as was in Christ Jesus himself.



He's asking them to put aside conceit and selfish ambition, and rather than seek their own interests, to put the interest of others ahead of themselves. He's reminding them that just as Christ's own resurrection came by way of humbling himself, even to the point of death on a cross, so our own exaltation is not to be found in pushing and shoving our way to the top. Rather, we are to follow Jesus in paths of humble service and faithful obedience. Without ever directly quoting Jesus, Paul is effectively saying what Jesus repeatedly reminded his own listeners and disciples.



If you would be first and best, make yourself the last and least. If you want to be the greatest of all, become the servant of all. If you're hoping to be invited up to a place at the head table, then take a seat in the back of the room.

Paul's invocation of the Christ hymn is consistent with the overall theme of Philippians, which he clearly states in verse 28 of chapter 1: "Only live your life in a manner worthy of Christ." Remember, Paul has no particular beef with the church in Philippi; on the contrary, he has nothing if not the warmest regard for the people there. Paul is, however, deeply concerned that the Philippians are living in an environment intrinsically hostile to the way of Christ. Let me explain.

Philippi was a Roman colony, which is to say, whatever town that had previously existed there, the Romans took it over in the latter half of the first century b.c., and thereupon built a smaller version of Rome with actual road patterns and architecture modeled on the capitol city.



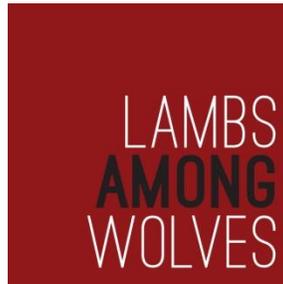
The Philippians affectionately nicknamed their home town “little Rome,” *parva Roma*. Among its first settlers were Roman veterans, who in Rome’s version of the GI Bill, received free land there in return for their faithful service. What’s more, Philippi was specifically chartered to be governed under Roman law, and further, it was religiously anchored in the cult of the emperor. Located on the *Via Egnatia*, the main road linking Rome to its eastern territories, Philippi was as Roman as you could get outside of Italy.

Now whatever you may have learned about Rome either in school or at the movies, Roman culture was all about honor and shame.



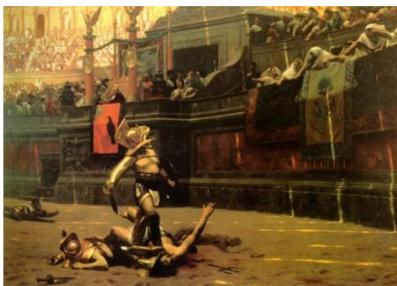
In the Roman view, the whole point of life was to get honor, and you got honor by besting your peers in, say, courage, or generosity, or love of country. On the other hand, you lost honor by being shamed by your peers. Let’s say, in honor of the Emperor you throw a party in which you set out a pretty nice spread. Good food, good wine, good entertainment, and as your guests leave they tell you what a nice event this was and what a good time they had. But then your social equal in the villa next door holds a celebration for, say, the founders of Rome, and this guy spares no expense. He puts out the best food, the best wine, the best entertainment, he practically goes broke throwing this bash, and as his guests leave they tell him, “Wow, what a party! Not like that pathetic little shindig your cheapskate neighbor threw last month.” Whatever honor might have accrued to you for your very tasteful, totally respectable dinner party you’ve now lost to your neighbor’s all-out whoop-de-do. This was not just the Roman mindset per se, but actually the worldview that pervaded all Mediterranean culture. It was not so much a culture of keeping up with the Joneses as it was a culture of dominating the Joneses. The assumption was that there was only so much honor to go around, and to get more honor you had to take it from someone else. And this mindset applied not just socially, but in all human endeavor, whether athletics or academics, business or the arts, public life or military service. Rome was more than capable of making great, ostentatious shows of charity and benevolence, but at heart, the culture was dog eat dog. Period.

I hope this puts in perspective for you Paul's concern for his little band of saints in Philippi. They were like lambs in a pack of wolves.



Paul was telling them to follow Christ, emulate his example of selfless service, and trust God to raise them exactly as Christ was raised from total death and degradation. But these Christians were living in a culture that blared a 24/7 message of self-assertion, self-aggrandizement, reaching, reaching, reaching. So in a battle of Christ versus culture, who do you think wins the hearts and minds of these believers? How can the mind of Christ stand a chance against a mentality that shouts at the top of its lungs, "Get all you can whenever you can however you can. Just do it." That's why Paul calls them back to the center of their faith by holding before them the paschal mystery of Christ's own death and resurrection.

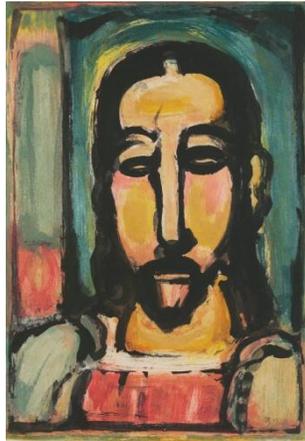
Now assuming that I haven't lost you altogether with my little excursus on honor-shame culture, you may be thinking, "I know where he's going. He's going to say that we live in the same world with the same ethics and morals of the Roman Empire," and you would be wrong. We are not living in the Roman Empire. There's a world of difference between now and then, plus the past 2,000 years of Christian teaching and preaching have had some real impact. Just not that much. Don't tell me that you didn't recognize elements of our own culture in that description of Roman life?



Don't tell me that our sports fields don't flow with at least some of the same spirit of blood sport that informed the games at the Coliseum? Didn't the financial collapse of 2008 reveal to us levels of greed in the highest reaches of the American economy worthy of Rome's most corrupt Senators? Aren't our newspapers and TV screens awash with images of flawlessly coiffed lean, hungry faces desperate to out-do, out-climb, out-show even the most ambitious of Roman matrons?

No, we're not Rome. Rome had only the mores of family and class to spread its culture of acquisitiveness. We, on the other hand, now have media that invades practically every nook and cranny of our existence with the incessant message, "Get, get more, then get what's left over."

Leave nothing on the table. Don't be a chump." And what chance does the mind of Christ stand against that mentality?



If Christ himself were today to stand before the world's titans of business and captains of industry and deliver to them the Sermon on the Mount, what do you think would happen? Would the world of commerce and economics be revolutionized? Would there be a sudden rush to sell off mansions and lake houses and townhomes and give the proceeds to the poor?

We stand between Christ and culture.



Into one ear Christ is whispering, "Give." But into the other ear our culture screams, "Take. Keep. Don't be a chump." To whom shall we listen? To whom shall we conform our lives? As my alcoholic friends remind me, "It's always a day at a time, and it's always a struggle."

In the Name of the Father,

and of the + Son,

and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

