Humility

Philippians 2:1-13

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/ September 27, 2020

The ancient Temple of Apollo at Delphi, situated on Mount Parnassus in Greece, was considered the center of the world. Inscribed on a column of the pronaos or portico were three maxims: *Know thyself. Nothing in excess. Surety brings ruin*. This grand temple, built in the 6th century BC, was dedicated to the accumulated wisdom of the Greeks. These three sayings, along with 144 other proverbs, were known as the Delphic Canon, the summation of an ethical life. Here are several more: *Respect the gods. Control your temper. Pursue honor. Praise the good. Be grateful. Pursue harmony.* There's a lot of good advice in the list; some not so good, from our perspective today.[1] But there's one theme, one word that you won't find in the list: the word *humility*.

The Greeks, and later the Romans—because they borrowed (or *stole*) much from Greek culture, religion, and thought—didn't consider humility a virtue, but something shameful. *Tapeinos* in Greek, *humilitas* in Latin, meant something like "crushed" or debased." Humility was embarrassing. Honor, *philotimia,* on the other hand, was prized and valued above all else. Honor was celebrated and praised; humility was despised. Aristotle (385-382 BCE) believed that we should regularly reflect upon the importance of "honor," and fantasize about our "reputation," these notions should fill our thoughts and shape our steps. It was a society built upon praise. The more you achieve the more you should be praised.[2]

There was one kind of humility that was acceptable: humility before the gods. But that was a no-brainer because the gods could kill you, they weren't really on your side. They had a lot more power than you. The same was true for the emperor, who had all the power. In this stratified, hierarchical society, found throughout the Roman Empire (including Palestine), you knew where you stood in the pecking order and you made sure you remembered your place. The Romans warned about the dangers of *hubris*, about having a "big head," what psychologists call today inflation. The opposite of *hubris*, however, was not humility, but modesty (*modestia*), meaning restraint. Because honor was prized above all else, praise always flowed from lesser to greater. You never exercised humility before someone deemed equal or lesser than you. If you did relate to someone that way it would have been considered morally suspect, even immoral or unethical.

The Greeks and Romans loved to praise themselves in public and loved getting others to praise them too. The elite were in an endless upward-bound race for honors.[3] A wonderful example of this is an inscription on a bronze tablet placed on the front of the mausoleum belonging to Emperor Augustus (63 BCE – AD 14). Known as *The Achievements of the Divine Augustus* (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*)—and Augustus was considered divine and worshipped as such—it was written by Augustus himself and shared widely through the Empire, especially in Asia Minor and Palestine. In 2500 words, Augustus praises himself and celebrates thirty-five areas of accomplishments, topic by topic: military victories, public awards, gifts to the city at his own expense, building projects, civic games, making sure that we know of the "honor that up to the present day has been decreed to no one besides myself" and which had "been given me by

the senate and people of Rome on account of my courage, clemency, justice, and piety." It's a remarkable example of Roman imperial theology. It's also an extraordinary piece of propaganda or fake news, glossing over the defeats and failures of his life.[4] Still, we see what people with enormous power valued most: *honor*.

Slowly emerging from within the Hebrew experience we find the prophets offering an alternative theology, God's special concern for the *crushed* and *humiliated*, for those who have been humbled or brought low by oppression. Think of Isaiah 53's reference of God's suffering servant who was crushed and bruised, written in the 6th century BCE. Later, the sage and writer, Yeshua Ben Sira (b. 190 BCE) told his students, in second century BCE, "Humble your head before the great. Incline your ear to the poor and return their greeting in humility." Still, the idea was new. When Ben Sira's grandson translated his writings from Hebrew into Greek, around 132 BCE, he ran into a problem with the word "humility," because it was not a virtue in the Greek culture. So he changed the word to "gentleness."[5] Not exactly the same.

By the time we get to Jesus we find that humility comes to have a more prominent place within Judaism. Think of Jesus and we think humility. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;" Jesus says, "for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt. 11:29). Consider the way Jesus entered Jerusalem, "humble" and seated on a donkey (Mt. 21:5). In Luke we find Jesus saying, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Lk. 14:11; see also Lk. 18:14). But what we need to remember is that the Gospels came later, written between 70 and 90. So how did humility come to be prized within the Christian experience—and, in time, to the West?

The answer is perhaps embedded in Paul's letter to the Philippians, especially 2:6-11, which was likely a hymn or creed of the early church, known as the *Carmen Christi* (*Song of Christ*):

"Because [Christ Jesus] was in the form
of God,[6]
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to
death—
even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).

Paul uses this hymn or creed as an illustration of his hopes for the church in Philippi. "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit"—and here it comes—"but in humility regard others as better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:1-4). It might be easy to skip over this. Paul doesn't say be humble before those "higher" or "better" or

“richer” than you. Instead, there is an egalitarian spirit here, mutual love, support, sympathy, compassion. But then Paul goes radical says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). And what was that mind or attitude? The kind of mind or attitude that in the fullness of love one freely moves in and down into the world, into human life, into the places of suffering and brokenness and even humiliation—such as the humiliation of dying on a cross.

It’s the cross that accounts for this massive shift for Paul and the early Christians in their view of humility. The cross was shameful in the Greco-Roman and Jewish world. It’s not a place of honor. How can God be working through crucifixion, through an experience of humiliation and shame? How can someone thus condemned as an enemy of the state, of the empire, be both Savior and Lord? In fact, it could be argued that it’s precisely here—the cross—that humility becomes associated with the Christian life. It wasn’t necessarily Jesus’ life or teaching that conveyed humility, but rather his execution.[7] Jesus’s followers were then forced to come to grips with the meaning of such a death. They had to hold together their faith that God was at work in Jesus, that he was divine, and the experience of the cross and all its shame; they had to hold these experiences in tension. And what they discovered, as Paul here and other places makes clear, is the new yet old understanding of the nature and being of God.

Because Christ was in the form of God…and what did Christ do? Christ emptied himself, poured himself into humanity, suffered, died…because that’s what God does, that’s who God is, that’s what God desires, that’s what God embodies or incarnates in Christ, and through Christ in in us, through us. What we discover or see within God’s nature, through the cross, is God’s eternal delight in “downward mobility.”[8] This is God’s will. And Christ alive in us, moving in us, through us, in the church, replicating the pattern, the form. We know it’s true and feel it when we freely give our lives to others, when we honor the least of these among us.

And I don’t mean, here, that humility now becomes a virtue for us, something we *will* to do. We don’t add it to the list of “Christian” virtues that we want to live our lives by. Instead, reverse it: *humility is a sign that Christ is at work in us.*

What Paul is getting at here is revolutionary—scandalous. What was formerly a place of shame, a cross, has now become a place of honor. The one who was humiliated out of obedience to the divine will and desire to enter into places of weakness, of suffering, the one who emptied himself, gave himself for others, who took on human form, brought low, has been exalted by God (Phil. 2:9). The crucified one is Lord. The one who was humiliated is Lord. The one who was humiliated is the one honored by God. When we track the way Christ moved through his life, especially this emptying, we’re also tracking the way God moves in the world. We learn something crucial about the nature and being of God.

All of this, then, this image or view of God that we find in the cross places Caesar Augustus and his puffed-up piety in sharp relief. Paul is intentionally judging Roman imperial theology. Christ is set over the Roman emperor.[9] Don’t look at Caesar and everything that smacks of Caesar in the world. That’s not how a deity moves in the world, not with force and violence and fear, seeking, expecting, demanding praise and devotion. Look at the cross, look at Jesus of Nazareth on a cross, see God on a cross. *Humility is honored because it is holy, sacred. This* is the God at work within us, “enabling [us] both to will and to work God’s good pleasure”

(Phil. 2:13). Not self-exalting, not self-glorying, not self-praising, but serving, giving one's life to the other, through encouragement and sympathy, with humility, with high regard for one's neighbor, entering into the life, into the flesh of broken, vulnerable people, of traumatized, dispossessed, scared and marginalized people, oppressed, pressed down low.

Perhaps this is what Paul was getting at when he said that when this mind or attitude of Christ is at work in us, it will cause us to fear and tremble (Phil. 2:12), because we are coming up against the way of Caesar and all that he represents, and know just how odd and strange and difficult it is to really live this way in the world, and yet this is the way of Christ.

Contemporary theologian David Bentley Hart says it beautifully: "In a world that believes that at the end of the day the index of human value and of moral truth are degrees of privilege, power, pedigree, humility may be the singular greatest offence to the moral sensibility of the ancient world and to humans in general and the greatest revolution in our understanding of the moral good as a social and personal practice."[10]

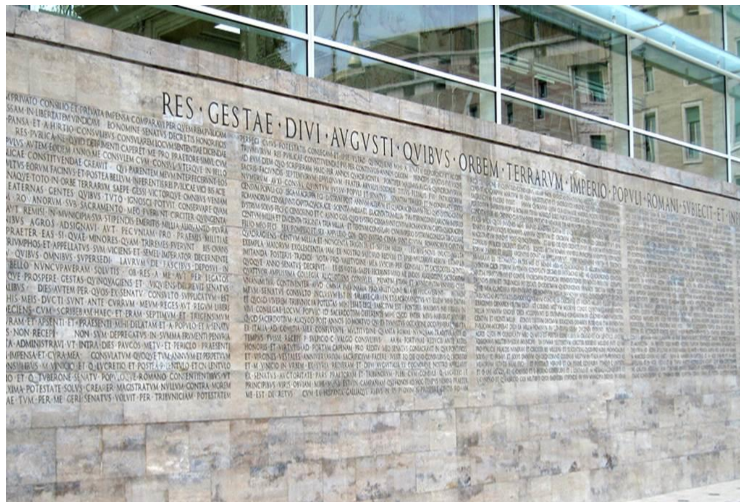
It was a revolution that destabilized the Roman Empire. Not long after Paul's letter to the Philippians we have the Gospel writers talking about Jesus' humility, about him being humble. You can see just how radical and subversive and destabilizing the gospel was—and remains!—whenever it's situated within a society where people value privilege power, praise, and prestige above all else, at the expense of those without power or deemed unworthy of praise and honor—whether that be in the church or empire or state.

In a letter from a Roman church official named Clement, writing to Christians in Corinth, in 96, we find this description of the early church: "You are all humble-minded, not boastful, yielding rather than domineering, happily giving rather than receiving."[11]

You are all humble-minded, not boastful,
yielding rather than domineering,
happily giving rather than receiving.

May the same be said of us.

Fragment of the Res Gestae*, Temple to Augustus and Rome, Ankara, Turkey.*



The *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* at the Ara Pacis Augustus (Temple to Peace), Rome, Italy.

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[1] For the complete list of maxims, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delphic_maxims.

[2] Throughout the sermon I rely heavily on the scholarship of John Dickson who has written on the attitudes toward humility in the Greco-Roman world. See "How Christian humility upended the world," ABC Religion and Life, 27 October 2011; as well as, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Zondervan, 2011).

[3] The Roman upward-bound race for honors was known as the *cursus honorum*. See Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 17.

[4] Gorman, 18.

[5] Dickson, "How Christian humility upended the world."

[6] The NRSV reads, "Although he was in the form of God…," however I follow Michael Gorman who suggests that the Greek can also be translated "because." See Gorman, 22-23.

[7] This is John Dickson's argument.

[8] In *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi:* Carmen Christi *as* Cursus Pudorum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Joseph Hellerman refers to this "downward mobility" as *cursus pudorum*, a succession of ignominies, constructed in contrast to Rome's *cursus honorum.* Cited in Gorman, 16-17.

[9] Gorman, 19.

[10] Cited in a conversation/podcast, "The Humility Revolution," 1 July 2018, https://www.publicchristianity.org/the-humility-revolution/, produced by the Australia-based Centre for Public Christianity.

[11] Cited in Dickson, "How Christian humility upended the world."