

Sermon: “Attitude”: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Introduction

Today is the final Sunday in the Season of Creation. During this season we worship the Creator, and we are reminded of our responsibilities in caring for His creation, which includes us. Genesis 1:26-27 tells us: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; ... So God created humankind in his image, ... male and female he created them.’” (NRSV) The “Let us make” followed by “our” are plural and denotes that we are created in the image of the Triune God (the Divine Community). We are created as relational beings, highlighting the importance of community and our corporate life.

What does it mean to be created in God’s image, and what is our view of this? There will be many perspectives to consider: e.g., community; the role of human culture (not just fine arts); and the creative gifts that God has given us. This begs the question – what is our attitude (our mindset¹) towards creation, considering we ourselves are created beings? With that in mind, how do we approach related issues, such as, worship and creative gifts, community and culture, and how we relate to each other?

Turning to today’s Philippians reading, which talks about unity and those things that assist and hinder our unity. The standout part for me was the Philippian’s attitude – their mindset. We read in verse 5 that the Philippians (and us by extension) are to have the same mindset as Jesus. But before we come to the matter of having the mindset of Jesus, some questions: What are some the things that assist unity? What are the things that can hinder unity?

¹ Google (using the Cambridge Dictionary) attitude is “a settled way of thinking, feeling, or behaving toward a person, object, or situation.”; continuing with “Mindset and Outlook: A mental stance or emotional disposition, which can be positive, neutral, or negative.” (e.g., a positive attitude to tasks).

Philippians 2:1-13

Here Paul ties our unity with each other to our relationship with Jesus (being “in Christ”) – i.e., “being united with” Him, we receive “comfort from his love”, “common sharing in the Spirit” (or the fellowship/unity the Spirit provides), and “tenderness and compassion” (v.1). We are “encouraged”, or exhorted², from our relationship with Jesus to be “like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (NIV) or as the NRSV says “be of the same mind, having the same love, being of full accord and of one mind” (v.2).

What does it mean to be like minded, or of one mind? It’s all about attitude, particularly, having a common attitude. It does not mean conformity nor intellectual thought. Attitudes are important, because they can lead to thoughts and behaviours that either assist or hinder unity. From verses 3-4 we are told not to act from the attitudes of “selfish ambition” and “vain conceit”, which can hinder unity more than anything. But rather have the attitude of humility – to “value others above” ourselves and look to the “interests of others” ahead of our own.

What kind of attitude of humility are we to have? Verse 5 tells us that: “In our relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (NIV), or as the NRSV says: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” The following verses (6-11) are what some commentators call “the Hymn”. It describes the attitude and manner of humility that Jesus had which we are to follow as an example, because we are “in Christ”.

In short, it states that Jesus is fully God (v.6) – “being in very nature God” (NIV) or “was in the form of God” (NRSV) – and fully human (v.7) “being made

² The Greek word “*paraklesis*” means “encouraged”. It also means “comfort” and “appeal/exhort”.

in human likeness ... being found in the appearance as a man” (NIV) or “being born in human form ... being found in human form” (NRSV). And while never losing His divinity in coming to earth (human form), His humility is revealed in that He “did not regard (consider) equality with God as something to be exploited (to be used to his own advantage) but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave (very nature of a servant), being born in human likeness. And being found in human form (in appearance as a man), he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross.” (v.6-8; NRSV/NIV).

The Greek word “*Kenoo/Kenosis*” means to “self-empty”. Here, being God, Jesus already had equality with God in His incarnation. He chose not to take advantage, or to exploit, that equality while here. Instead, He “emptied himself (or “made himself nothing” [NIV]), taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (NRSV). Jesus did not lose the status of being God, He chose not to claim His right to the privileges of equality. His taking on “the form of a slave” and “in human form” means He can and does completely identify with our humanity. As such in His self-emptying and humility we see what God is like and the example we are to follow. Paul challenges his readers (and us) to unity based on humility – to follow the example of the Jesus.

From verses 9-11, we see that as a result of His self-emptying, voluntary humility and obedience – to the point of death on the cross – God “highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,” and at His name “every knee should bend, 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.”

As a result of Jesus’ humbling Himself and obedience, and the consequential exaltation by God the Father, in verse 12 Paul calls Philippians to obedience. He

tells them to “work out your own salvation in fear and trembling”. It has always puzzled me what this actually meant. In preparing for this sermon, I found out that the “fear and trembling” is not about any uncertainty about our salvation, but to have an appropriate attitude of “awe” in God’s presence. The “work out” *does not* refer to work *for* one’s salvation, but to *live out* the work God has already done within the Philippians and us – that is, we are *to be what we are*, what God has made us, people who are “in Christ” and behave accordingly. Of interest, the word “your” in Greek is plural. “Work[ing] out” is not only an individual matter; it is also a corporate matter – it applies to the entire group/congregation/church – because we are also corporately “in Christ”. Paul does not prescribe definite rules around what he means by “work out your own salvation” other than general statements of unity, humility, concern for others, and no grumbling nor arguing (2:14). Because there is no one right way to do these things. We are to sort these out in our own time, place and circumstances.

In the Parable of The Two Sons, today’s Gospel Reading, we see that it is all very well to have an appropriate mindset, and state obedience with all the best intentions, but in the end actions count. Jesus is fully God, fully human. He died on the cross for us and is highly exalted. Through Jesus’ actions, not our own actions, we have been made “in Christ”. We are to obey, which is, to both individually and corporately, be what we are made to be – people “in Christ” who are “work[ing] out” our individual and collective “salvation in fear and trembling”.

Conclusion/Reflections

On reflection, as part of our care for creation, including for each other as created beings:

1. We give thanks and praise for our Lord Jesus, who is fully divine and fully human. He humbled Himself by coming human and dying on the cross. As a result, He is highly exalted and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess He is Lord. Further, in becoming fully human He identifies with our humanity. The difference is that He humbled Himself and was obedient. Through His humility and obedience, we are reconciled to God and the relationship is restored.
2. How many of us model our behaviour on Jesus' self-giving? How many of us seek and come to a common mind with others instead of being concerned with speaking our opinions? How many of us forget that true honour comes from making ourselves nothing instead of seeking power and position, or other things like recognition or personal self-gratification? The Christian life includes more than enjoying the benefits of Jesus death on the cross and resurrection, we also need and must have the same attitude as Jesus (humility and obedience) – to live out our salvation.
3. Therefore, we are obliged, both individually and corporately, to live obediently to Him because we are “in Christ” due to what He has done in and for us. Further, we are “one” in Jesus, so unity is not optional – it is a “must”. Thus, we should consider others better than ourselves and place other's interest ahead of our own, not acting out of “selfish ambition or conceit”.
4. Finally: (a) our obedience is a response to God's grace, rather than a set of rules; (b) the response we are to make is the response Jesus made Himself; (c) because we are in Jesus, we are enabled to make that response; (d) in Jesus we are one community, relationships within the community are to be grounded in love, selflessness, and concern for others; and (e) the outcome of our response of obedience will be a powerful witness to others.