

27th September 2020 6pm The Last will be First

Sermon by Andrew Attwood

This transcript is only of the readings and the sermon.

First Reading: Philippians 2:1-13

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Second Reading: Matthew 21:23-32

The authority of Jesus questioned

23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ they asked. ‘And who gave you this authority?’

24 Jesus replied, ‘I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 25 John’s baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?’

They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will ask, “Then why didn’t you believe him?”’ 26 But if we say, “Of human origin”— we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.’

27 So they answered Jesus, ‘We don’t know.’

Then he said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

The parable of the two sons

28 ‘What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.”

29 “I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

30 ‘Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir,” but he did not go.

31 ‘Which of the two did what his father wanted?’

‘The first,’ they answered.

Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

[Andrew Attwood:]

Thank you so much, Gill for reading, thank you too for Val and Geoff.

Lord, thank You, Lord, for these people of good character helping us with all that we need for the services that we're doing online. Thank You, Lord, for that, and we pray now, Lord Jesus, for the words of my mouth to capture something of the meaning of these texts, so that we might hear Your guiding for us at this time. In Jesus' Name,
Amen.

Okay, so here we are, as autumn begins to draw in. It's been a really lovely day. But the leaves are beginning to turn and you can feel the changing climate.

Today we're going to be focusing on this particular aspect of Jesus' personal quality and His seeking of it in other people: this question to do with humility. And I'm going to begin, though, with this particular exchange Jesus has in the passage in Matthew, Matthew 21 if you want to follow it through. One of the things that is sometimes a kind-of a misunderstanding about Jesus is that He's always standing with His arms open wide, ready to accept and approve of everyone who wanders His way. It is very clear in this particular exchange with these religious leaders that Jesus is not like that at all. In fact, you can track this in the stories of all the four gospels, whenever Jesus draws near to the end of His ministry and gets closer and closer to Jerusalem, He gets a little bit more pointed in how He relates particularly to those people who were supposedly carrying responsibility or supposedly having authority. In this instance, ironically, these religious people come to Jesus Himself and question,

"How can you speak like you do? On what authority are you speaking?" I don't know how you might react if someone was questioning the veracity or the validity of who you are or what you're saying. But Jesus responds with extraordinary wisdom and calm, and He bounces the matter back to them. He says, "I'm not going to answer that until you've answered me a question." And He sets before them this significant political issue, a religious, political issue to do with John the Baptist, and He says to them, "So was he from God, or was he from men?" Did God send John the Baptist or was he just a human person, like a kind-of zealot rising up with a bit of support. And these people, supposedly of good character, these people who are supposedly people of good reputation scuttle off to have a bit of a conversation about how they might reply. And it's very clear that they're cautious of replying because they're frightened of the outcome of their reply. They say, "Well, if we answer this way, he'll say 'Well, why didn't you believe him if you think he's from God?' And if we say 'No we don't', we'll get in trouble with the crowds." So basically they come back to Jesus and they fudge an answer. They don't speak plainly. "We don't know where he came from," they say. And here we see Jesus basically replying to them and saying, "I'm not going to be straight with you either." And He walks away effectively. He's going to tell them another story that's even more pointed, but He's kind-of turning His back on them, because of their attitude. They're not being transparent, they're not being honest.

Jesus Christ is very responsive to people who are honest about how things really are. And that's why later in His little parable He says to the same people, He says "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are making their way in to the Kingdom of Heaven faster than you. Why? because they're being transparent and honest about who they are and what they need." That is the raw material that Jesus loves to work with: people who are honest about how things really are, instead of people who are pretending.

We're very familiar in these COVID times with the whole business of wearing masks. And in this context, in these days, masks are really important and good, but in terms of relationships, in terms of how we are with each other, masks are terrible: pretence is terrible, hiding is nothing but divisive. And so Jesus rebuts and rebukes people who are evasive of being honest. What Jesus is looking for is people who are going to be straight up, straightforward, so He can deal with what is in front of Him. He never wants to deal with people who are hiding and pretending. And so it is, we see in the life of Jesus Himself, this complete beautiful exhibition of a life of transparency, and as a result, a life of what we would now call humility.

Just a tiny little side-note: the history of humility as a public virtue, as a recognisable virtue: it originates from Jesus! Did you know that prior to the Christian faith in Grecian culture and Roman culture, the idea of being humble was seen as a weakness. It was seen as something that was a character flaw. It was something that you shouldn't be proud of at all, you should resist the inclination to be humble before anyone, to think of others instead of yourself. What they prided themselves on in those empires, in the Grecian empire and in the Roman empire, was people who could press themselves forward and make their mark in the world, and stand strong. The idea of humility was a kind-of a self-defeating thing, a shameful, dishonourable thing. It is only with the coming of Jesus Christ that we see humility as something to be treasured and nurtured.

And so we have this extraordinary line from Paul in the Philippians passage: we have this passage. It is very familiar to us but just as a preface to it, remember Paul is writing to the Philippian Christians, and he's saying, "I want you to work together well. I want you to have one mind so that you can have the same mindset as Jesus." Paul is actually wanting Christians to copy, to emulate, to replicate this attitude, this virtue that Jesus Himself did. Let me read it to you again, just those key lines, so we can remember what it is that we're talking about:

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

This is Paul lifting up the example of Jesus to us and saying, This is what true humanity looks like, and it comes from the example of the Son of God Himself. Again, just a little bit of detail into this for us. The idea of Jesus emptying Himself, if you were to read slightly more traditional translations, it doesn't talk about "...God, did not consider equality as something to be used for His own advantage; rather He made Himself nothing." 'He emptied Himself' is another translation. He completely poured Himself out, He emptied Himself of His status, of His identity as the Son of God, in terms of some of His capacity and ability, so that He could be a servant. There's a particular Greek word that we get from this called kenosis [κένωσις]. Kenosis basically means emptying or the self-emptying of Jesus Christ, kenosis, and there's a whole stream of interesting theology that is developed from this. One of the things that people have worked on, that scholars have worked on over many, many decades and decades, is the idea that Jesus' self-emptying is not something He sort-of put up with for a period of time, it's not like He was the Son of God in all glory and kind-of went, "Oh, well I'll try and be human for a bit, just so I can work out their problems and then I'll go back." The self-emptying of Jesus is in fact embodying His very nature. There is something in Jesus Himself, there is something in the Godhead Himself that relinquishes power, that lays down control for the sake of serving and loving others. It's in Christ's very nature to do this, He's not trying hard to do it. It's natural to Him to do it, to take the nature of a servant. And so when He became a human being like we are, He closed Himself in that willingly, happily, delighting in the idea that He was going to do it. And then it says even further, "He humbled Himself to death, even death on a cross." The ultimate emptying of control. Think about it, what He's letting go of – He's let go of omnipotence, ultimate power. He's let go of omniscience, knowing everything. And now He's nailed to a piece of wood and dying in agony while people are mocking Him and shouting at Him. It is the most extraordinary example of humility and self-emptying, especially considering where He has come from to do this, and Paul sets this before us as an example. It's what Jesus looked for in others, it's what Jesus demonstrated through His life. So for Jesus kenosis, self-emptying, is letting go of His goodness and His greatness as God, even though He retained His identity as the Son of God, some of His qualities he let go of. He was still God all the way through. But He was letting go of even good things. What Paul is asking us to do there is to also self-empty. He's saying "You be humble too." You see, humility is the quality of kenosis. Humility is the attitude that says, "I will not hold on to control. I will not hold on to my own status."

In a few weeks' time, a couple of weeks' time, Lindsey and I are hoping, depending on what happens with lockdown plans, to get away for a few days. We're heading down south to see if we can just have a few days to celebrate, belatedly, Lindsey's 50th birthday, and we're just really hoping we can still go: we don't know what's going to happen with all the changes that occur week by week. But one of the things we got through by email recently was the instructions with regards to the place we're going to, which is going to be cleaned in a different kind of way because of COVID, which means we have to arrive slightly later, to allow a little bit more period of time between the previous people who were staying and us arriving. In other words, it's got to be emptied and cleaned completely and left, so that it is pristine and free of any possible virus. This idea of self-emptying is to make room for something else to come and fill it. I was even grabbing hold of my rubbish bin from my study. It's

under my desk here. And I noticed I haven't emptied my bin recently. I don't know if you ever do this, where you kind-of just keep cramming things in and you never get around to properly emptying? I was thinking there's all kinds of rubbish here: masking tape, here is even a bit off our letterbox that fell off the other day. There's a whole heap of rubbish in there that I need to get rid of. The bin doesn't function if it's full. And in the same way, the place that Lindsey and I are going to go to needs to be emptied to be made ready for what comes (us), as the bin needs to be emptied so it can function properly and be filled. How willing are you and I to empty ourselves of the things that need to go? Kenosis costs. It cost Jesus to empty Himself. And inevitably it costs us.

There is something to do with attitude and character in this. Just pause for a moment and have a think of the people that you would regard as good examples of humility: people who don't 'big' themselves up, people who are happy to simply serve with no spotlight, people who are there in the background, doing good things that nobody else draws attention to and they certainly don't for themselves. That's the kind of model that Paul is encouraging us towards ourselves. At this time, at this time when so much is changing, when so much constraint has been put on us, this is a moment to review our character. Jesus Christ is portrayed as the one we should emulate. And Paul says, empty yourselves like Jesus did. Let go of the things that you hold on to. I wonder what they would be for you at the moment? We know for a fact that COVID has compelled us as a church to stop some things. This wasn't our choice. This wasn't something we freely volunteered up for. It would be worth reviewing what is it that God is saying, "Empty yourselves so I can do something different. Open your heart, so I can move in with something that will fill you in a different way." To what extent are you open to the possibility of change? The ultimate measure of humility is a willingness to let go of control, to not hold on, to serve God and others as the top priority. So let me just finish with a word of prayer, and then I'll hand over to Val again. Let me pray.

Lord Jesus, what do we know, what do we humans know compared to You? Lord Jesus, when we look at Your amazing life, Your amazing attitude towards arrest, and then death, You are simply utterly the best. You are incredibly humble. You are the ultimate example of what it is to live for others selflessly. Lord, in a moment of quiet, would You allow us to be honest with ourselves in Your presence, so that we might begin to lay down control and be open to what it is You want to fill us with? Come Holy Spirit in a moment of quiet.

[pause]

And I just pray now in Jesus' Name that we would be set free from the things that hold us and that we would choose humility as a virtue, to develop on purpose.

I ask this in Jesus' precious Name.
Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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