

# The Mind of Christ

# Philippians 2:5-11

The apostle Paul exhorts those who would follow Christ to “adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus”, or as another translation puts it, “let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus”.

But what do we suppose was in Christ’s mind during that final week? The week that began with acclamation from the crowd and ended in a borrowed tomb. What thought process can cope with such a plummet from the heights to the depths?

If we try to imagine what it was like for Jesus to enter Jerusalem on that long-ago day, can we do it? Do you suppose he found the crowd’s adulation gratifying? Frightening? Irrelevant?

He accepts the attention of the multitudes who are thronged around him, spreading their cloaks on the road before him, filling the air with their cries of *Hosanna!*, but there is nothing in Luke’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem to tell us whether he is pleased or dismayed. It does seem clear that he is not distracted from his purpose in coming to Jerusalem, the place where he has told his disciples he will be betrayed and killed, the place where he will suffer the consequences of being fully human and fully loving in a world that does not value or reward or understand a vulnerable, indomitable love that puts self aside for the sake of the other.

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, welcomed by the boisterous shouts of the whole multitude of disciples, some Pharisees complain about the noise and the exuberance. The rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* depicts this event with clarity and power. The crowds surge around Jesus, enthusiastically singing their praise. The religious authorities, in raspy, annoyed tones, sing: *Tell the rabble to be quiet / we anticipate a riot / This common crowd / is much too loud*. Using words from the Gospel accounts of the day, Jesus tells them that the noise and the enthusiasm arising from recognition of Jesus and celebration of his power cannot be silenced. He informs them that the response to him is, in fact, greater and more far-reaching than the Pharisees realize, saying, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

This moment, I think -- this statement from Jesus that all nature has a role to play in recognizing and worshiping the divine -- tells us something about his mind and attitude. This moment tells us, I think, that the Sovereign God of the universe did not become flesh to hang out for a few years with a few marginalized people in an insignificant region of an oppressed country, and then retreat into heaven when the world resisted his message.

The sovereign God of the universe stepped into this world to save and restore and redeem and love this world -- all of it. Every creature within it and every part of creation. Even to the stones that have a place in the chorus of praise.

Jesus entered Jerusalem to the shouts of a welcoming crowd. But the shouts soon changed from acclamation to denunciation. Jesus had told his disciples that in Jerusalem he would suffer, die, and be raised again. Over the days following his triumphal arrival in the city, that is exactly what happens. The Sovereign God of the universe who has self-emptied of divinity to dwell among humanity now experiences the worst humanity can do.

In a commentary on the passage from Philippians, theologian Cindy Rigby draws a thread through Jesus' life, writing:

The God who self-empties in order to be "with us" during the happiest and most hopeful moments of Christmas is also the self-emptying God who is with us during the hardest moments of Passiontide, entering deeply into the turmoil of betrayal, despair, agony and death.

Rigby goes on:

Many Christians think of the cross as the singular site where the work of atonement was achieved through Jesus dying for our sins. ... The hymn of Philippians 2 helps us think in a different way about the significance of the cross, reminding us that the earliest Christians understood it in the context of Jesus' entire life of obedience rather than as a singular transaction necessary for delivering salvation. ... The One who humbled himself at Christmas surrounded by wondrous cries of "Gloria!" is not only the one who today rides a borrowed donkey into Jerusalem to the sound of our glad cries of "Hosanna!" but also the one who will, in the week just ahead, refuse to abandon us when we yell, "Crucify him!". The cross, seen alongside the manger and the donkey, is a symbol of the divine steadfastness.<sup>1</sup>

R. S. Thomas, an Anglican priest and poet, offers us another insight into that steadfastness He imagines the moment of Christ's choice to humble himself and become like human beings in a poem entitled "The Coming". Thomas writes:

And God held in his hand  
A small globe. Look, he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour. The light burned  
There; crusted buildings

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<sup>1</sup> Cindy Rigby; *Connections, Year C, Volume 2*; p. 124-125

Cast their shadows; a bright  
Serpent, a river  
Uncoiled itself, radiant  
With slime.

On a bare  
Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. Many people  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed  
Boughs. The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said.

And so the Son came into the world, emptying himself of equality with God and taking on the form of a human being. He humbled himself and was therefore exalted by God. And all of this -- all of it -- was an expression of divine love for us and for all of creation. All of it was a declaration that the Sovereign God of the universe will go to any lengths and any depths and any darkness to return creation and humanity to light and to restore creation and humanity to the fullness of life.

Today, we enter Holy Week - a time of emptying ourselves of all that stands between us and the stark reality that love and death are engaged in a fierce battle which only one can win. We will strip the sanctuary of adornment at the end of this service to remind us that Holy Week is austere and terrible. A time of darkness. A time of sorrow. A time when death looms over all that we have ever held or hoped.

We put aside the comfort of our symbols as an acknowledgement that we cannot rely on any human habit or hope, but can only trust solely in God.

The journey from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday into Holy Saturday is a wilderness in which we are bereft.

Let us not seek to avoid or diminish the terror and grief of this week. Let us step into its lostness, its depths and despair.

Let us step into death so that we will be ready to know the fullness of joy when God's vulnerable, indomitable love defeats death and brings resurrection. This week, let us empty ourselves of all but our trust in the steadfast God whose every act is love.

Amen.