

Good Friday 2019 Sermon

John 18:1-19:42

Last Sunday, at the beginning of Holy Week, we read a passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-11) which some scholars believe is an ancient Christian hymn that pre-dates St. Paul. The hymn begins:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,
 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 the point of death— even death on a
 cross...

That hymn has been read at the beginning of Holy Week for over 1000 years; and appropriately so, for I believe it holds the key to interpreting not only the events of Holy Week, but of Jesus' whole life. And I think the interpretive key is to be found in two words: "emptied himself". It is in this sense of "emptying" that we can truly say that Jesus *sacrificed* himself. His sacrifice was not a **price** he paid for our sins; but simply, and more fundamentally, it was a last and final act of *emptying* himself.

"Though he was in the form of God..." The hymn begins with the pre-existent, universal Christ: God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, the "eternal Word of God," to use St. John's term from the beginning of his Gospel. In Jesus' conception and birth, that eternal Word is poured out into humanity; the Word becomes flesh (John 1:14). Nine months in the womb of his mother, like each one of us; pushed out of the womb into this earthly existence, like each one of us. The Eternal Christ, emptied into humanity, born in human likeness.

And not only was this Eternal Christ "born in human likeness," according to the hymn; he took the form of a *slave* – the very **lowest** status of human society – wrapping a slave's towel around him to wash his disciples' feet, as we experienced last night. In his healing, teaching, feeding in town after town, he poured himself out into others. Emptying, and then emptying some more, until all he had left to empty was his very life. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," as St. John wrote in last night's Gospel. (John 13:1-17)

And so we come to *this* day when we contemplate Jesus of Nazareth's *final* emptying.

Writing about this passage from Paul's letter, Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault notes that, "in this beautiful hymn, Paul recognizes that Jesus had only one 'operational mode.' Everything he did, he did by self-emptying... In whatever life circumstance, Jesus always responded with the same motion of self-emptying."¹

Commenting on this same hymn, Biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes: "[Christ's] decision to become human and to go all the way along the road ... yes, all the way to the cross—this decision was not a decision to *stop* being divine. It was a decision about *what it really meant to be divine*... As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love. ... Yes, says Paul; and **that's** 'the mind of Christ'..."² (unquote)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

As I said last night, Jesus does not die on the cross to "pay our debt" to God. That is a *marketplace* mindset, **not** the mind of Christ. I would suggest that we see Jesus' death on the cross from St. Paul's perspective – see in that death the final act in a *continuum* of self-emptying which began when the Son of God, not counting equality with God as something to be grasped, emptied himself into human form. And that self-emptying continued throughout Jesus' life.

Do you remember the incident where Jesus is in a crowd of people and a woman who had been suffering from bleeding for 12 years touches his robe? In Mark's Gospel, we read that when the woman touched his robe, Jesus was "immediately aware that power had gone out from him." *The Message* translation reads that Jesus "felt energy discharging from him". (Mark 25:5-30) Is this not Jesus *emptying* himself into another person, pouring himself out for the sake of another? And I have to believe that if "energy was discharged from" Jesus in **this** healing, certainly energy was discharged from him in every **one** of his healings! He was *forever* pouring life-energy into others, emptying his life-blood into others; and the cross is but the final, complete emptying. "It is finished," Jesus says in his last words in today's Gospel. It is in **this** sense that Jesus' life *and* death might be called a "sacrifice" – from the root meaning of the words, *sacer facere*, "to make holy," to fill with divine life and love.

What **is** the meaning of the cross? Obviously, I do not pretend to have **THE** answer to that question – if there even **is** a definitive answer (and I don't think there is). But I would suggest two things we **can** say about the cross.

First, the cross *reveals* to us in the most powerful way possible the true nature of God. As N.T. Wright said, "As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross, the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love."² Simply gazing on the cross and *knowing* that this **is** the nature of God can make all the difference in how we

approach life and interact with the world. The universe was created in, is sustained by, and is moving toward, self-giving, *forgiving* love; therefore, we can risk being open to **all** of it. Our mistakes do not condemn us. We need not fear reality, for the God revealed by the crucified Jesus is a God of self-emptying love.

Secondly, in emptying himself completely in death, Jesus enters into, and intensifies, a mysterious and infinitely powerful process which was embedded in the DNA of the universe at its creation. That process is summarized in four words: life comes from death.³ We see it all around us: We have life on this earth because the Sun is constantly burning itself out, constantly dying. The food we eat was once a living, breathing plant or animal that died in order that we might live. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus (or the narrator of the Gospel) says that Jesus' "**hour** has not yet come." (John 2:4; 7:6, 8; 7:30, 8:20) But then, shortly after his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus says: "The hour *has* come... Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who would save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will save it." (John 12:23-24. See also John 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:21; 17:1))

In letting go our tight grasp on life, we find greater life. The eternal Christ did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, even unto death on a cross. And in doing so, the Son of God entered into that mysterious power of life issuing forth from death in such a powerful way that he draws **us** into the flow.

What *is* that power of life-from-death which is found in the seed that dies and bears much fruit, which is built into the DNA of the universe? It defies analysis; but the Church, down through the centuries, has called it "the Paschal Mystery." Dr. Bourgeault, in all her articulate brilliance, can only call it "divine alchemy".⁴ It is what Aslan the Lion in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* calls "a deeper magic which goes back before the dawn of time," which not even the evil witch knows anything about. When that deeper magic is engaged, Aslan explains, a mysterious power is released which makes "Death itself start working backwards."⁵

Makes Death itself start working backwards.

Whatever that "deeper magic," that divine alchemy, that Paschal Mystery is, I am convinced that it emanates from a deep, profound, divine self-emptying; for this is the very nature and power of God. Jesus' cross *reveals* this deep magic most clearly. In "emptying himself... even unto death on a cross," Jesus enters fully into the mystery of dying-to-live, revealing to us the Way that we, too, must follow. And in that Paschal Mystery of death turning to life, Jesus becomes the catalyst enabling God's alchemy to do its work in us.

AMEN

- 1 Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Kindle Version, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2008 p. 64
- 2 N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, Philippians
- 3 for an engaging treatment of this principle, see Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, Chapter 5, “Dying to Live”
- 4 Bourgeault, *ibid.* pp. 72, 74
- 5 C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, copyright 1950, C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd.