

The Mind of Christ

Isaiah 50:4-9a *The Lord God has given me the tongue of one who is taught....*

Philippians 2:1-11 *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....*

Paul wrote to the Philippian community not to scold but to affirm and remind (Craddock, Philippians). Paul was not above scolding communities when he thought they were acting contrary to the spirit of Christ. Yet he saw in the Philippian community something of what one would expect of a community of followers of Christ. His message is essentially: The church is a community of persons who, within their life together, manifest the very spirit and life of Christ. When Paul writes if there is any encouragement in Christ, motivation of love, participation in the Spirit, affection and sympathy, he is not questioning the community or laying a guilt trip on them. The “if” has the meaning of “since.” Paul sees these qualities in the Philippian community to some degree. Maybe like us, they were working to embody these qualities of Christian community, sometimes doing it quite well, sometimes not so well. Paul is saying that since you have among yourselves some knowledge and practice of the life of Christ, expand on it, deepen it. Complete my joy.

Paul is not saying, “Do this for me” the way a parent might say to a child, “It would make me so happy if only you would not get a tattoo!” Paul is not manipulating; he is calling the community to its fullest potential. Paul identifies himself with the Gospel, with Christ and the church to such an extent that his joy is affected when a community really gets it, really lives as a community of Christ. His deepest pain comes when a community forgets itself, what it is called to be, and falls into hostilities or in-fighting or self-centeredness. That’s when he tends to scold, as in his letters to the Corinthian or the Galatian communities. Paul’s deepest happiness comes when a community reveals its knowledge and love of Christ by the character of its life.

Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. I don’t think Paul means agreeing about ideas or thoughts, or having the same religious insights or perspectives. Paul is not talking about conformity of thought. The peace of our community cannot depend upon everyone thinking alike on issues of religion and life.

I have known congregations that are dominantly conservative, you might say, in their religious and political views. They have ways of communicating that you really are not welcome if you are “liberal” in your views. I have experienced the opposite, progressive or liberal congregations inhospitable to those who may see things differently. Either way is wrong, Paul would say. That is not what he means by being of one mind. When communities become conformist and exclusive, the reality of Christ is eclipsed.

It is hard for us to learn to live within a plurality of thinking and not give into the impulse to conform or expect others to conform, to think as we do. I was fortunate in seminary to have the most brilliant teacher of theology I can imagine anywhere. Dr. William Barr, or Bill, as he liked to be called by his students, is a quiet, deeply reflective, caring teacher, now retired. He was always interested in what his students were thinking and their responses to what they read in his classes. He had an astounding knowledge and grasp of every theological movement, past and present. He introduced us to the emerging world of non-Western theologians from Japan, Indonesia, Central and South America, and Africa. The most valuable thing Bill taught me was how to be appreciative of each viewpoint without jumping on the bandwagon of any. Whenever we students would become enthusiastic about a book we were reading, eager to adopt it as the greatest thing we’d ever encountered, Bill in his quiet way would share his own appreciation of the author’s view. Then he would say something like, “But it seems to me there are some things we might question.” This always cooled the fever of enthusiasm and awakened our own reflective capacity. The emphasis was on really understanding what the particular writer was saying, and not getting caught in either total rejection or swallowing it whole. Bill helped us learn to think for ourselves, to know our own thoughts, and yet feel that we were part of a community of reflection, of, as he often said, loving God with our minds. He showed us the possibility of finding a deeper accord, to use Paul’s language, than agreement on ideas. This made me go deeper and showed me the danger of attaching to any one viewpoint.

Being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind for Paul means our sharing a way of looking at ourselves, others and life. Not a set of ideas we are attached to, but a viewpoint, a perspective, a common lens

through which we look at life. The “mind” Paul is talking about is something deeper and more at the core of our being than our heads, than our intellects, though that is included also. We are to be united in the way we approach life itself. The mind Paul means is one that shows itself in the way we live.

Paul will say in a moment what that mind is exactly. Now he notes some specific ways of acting within the community that reflect having this mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or arrogance. Regard others as better than yourselves. Those who have been told by society or religion that they are to regard others as their betters and have lived with oppression and deprivation have an understandably negative response to this. However, I do not believe that Paul means ignoring our own wellbeing or putting ourselves down. He means loving others as we love ourselves, with the same love, honor, respect. I was very touched by the practice of greeting in India. The joining of the palms just beneath the face, the slight bowing of the head, the Tamil greeting, “Vanakkam,” meaning “welcome,” but so much more. This is meeting the other person as a spiritual soul like myself, one who deserves my respect and honor. To me that is the right view. Regarding others as better than myself does not mean doing so from a position of personal weakness, out of self-despising or feelings of inferiority. It means that this other person is one who like me is created in God’s image and deserves my respect and honor. The wellbeing of the other person is of utmost concern to me. Paul also writes that we are to look to the interests of others and not our own. It could be said this way: “Look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others.” It is loving the neighbor as I love myself, in the same way that I regard my own life, in the same way I want to be treated.

Now Paul brings it home. “Have the same mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus.” The “you” is plural. Paul always is writing to a community, speaking of their life together. As a community, we are to cultivate the way of seeing ourselves, each other, and life that has been given to us in Jesus. Paul is reminding the community that it needs always to have the same reference point—Jesus Christ. Who we are, how we live together, the atmosphere and way of viewing life that exists among us are to be shaped and nourished by Christ. Whenever we find ourselves drifting into patterns that are harmful, tension-filled, or individualistic, we can be sure it is because we have forgotten to look to Christ. The mind of Christ is already our mind, it is given to us as a community. It is our work as a community to let it be our conscious mind.

What is this mind of Christ? What does it look like? How does it act? Paul now quotes what may be an early Christian hymn that expresses poetically the deepest truth and mystery of Christ. This is not to be read as a statement of doctrine. It is poetry. Its images speak of Jesus’ intimacy with God, such that he is full of God, on the same level as God. And yet Jesus does not cling to, or literally “snatch at”, that intimacy as a kind of status that gives him superiority. Instead, he relinquishes his status, gives it up, and empties himself. The Greek word here means “poured out.” Clinging to something is different from emptying, letting it go, not grasping. That is the way of Jesus, and it is the way of life for us. In his life which had the character of letting go and pouring out, Jesus experienced the fulfillment of his life and was elevated. He did not elevate himself, but was elevated through his willingness to offer his life in the service of life.

Here is the essence of the mind of Christ. It is life lived not as grasping or achieving or seeking status. It is life lived as emptying, letting go. True achievement in life is found on the path of non-achievement. True fullness of life is found not by grasping but by letting go, opening one’s hand and one’s life. True status as a human being is something bestowed upon us as we seek not status but the well-being of others, as we become servants of life. Jesus’ life embodied what he taught—those who seek to hold onto their lives will lose them; those who lose them for my sake and the sake of the good news of God will find them.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. During these days our attention is drawn to the suffering and death of Jesus, and the mystery that in this suffering is the key to fullness of life. It is the way downward, of not seeking status, of finding new life as we live our lives in the service of life. There is no greater need in the world today than to have persons and communities who live with this kind of mind, the mind that Paul says is already ours in Christ and that seeks to become more fully manifest in us and our life together.