

April 1, 2012 / Palm Sunday / David L. Edwards

The Mind of Christ

Philippians 2:1-11 *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 exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*

About ten years ago I visited for the first time the American Southwest, Santa Fe, New Mexico, in particular. I was leading music for a conference, but my duties left me time for sightseeing. One day I walked to a hill in the city which had been made into a monument to some Franciscan priests killed in the Pueblo uprising of 1680. I had just finished reading a history of Native American people, and was deeply interested in, and disturbed by, the role of Christianity in the oppression and destruction of Indian life and culture. Beginning in 1539, Spanish soldiers, priests, and settlers from Mexico moved into what is now New Mexico. They found native people living peacefully and productively in villages, for which they came to be called—Pueblos.

What followed was the killing, enslavement, and forced conversions of the Pueblos by the Spanish invaders. The cross marched alongside the sword and the flag. The Pueblos had finally mounted a campaign to expel the Spanish from the territory. Their freedom lasted for twelve years, when they were again overpowered.

As I climbed the hill, reading the plaques that told the story of the Franciscans, I felt only slight sadness for these so-called martyrs, and no sympathy whatsoever for their cause. Why were they there in the first place? Why had they complied with forces of violence and conquest in order to gain what they saw as spiritual mission? What is it in Christianity that so readily yields to nationalistic and militaristic causes, adopting violence to further its causes? It has nothing to do with the life, teachings, and spirit of Jesus. All of that has to be set aside in favor of conquest.

When I returned home, the lectionary reading for the week was the same Philippians passage as today. These are not words about exerting power or claiming status, but about self-pouring-out, about servanthood and humility. They are not words of claiming God's power in order to have power over others. They are words about giving up power, becoming powerless so that the greater power of God's love can

live in and through us. Paul quotes what scholars believe to be an ancient Christian hymn current in Paul's day among the churches:

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 exploited, 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.

Then the words turn triumphant:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The problem is that Christianity has latched onto the second part without understanding that the exaltation of Jesus Christ is rooted the first part, Jesus' utter humility and servanthood. And if it is true for Jesus, it has to be true in the lives of his followers. The old spiritual puts it simply and clearly: "If you can't bear the cross, then you can't wear the crown." It is for that reason, writes Paul, that God exalted him. Jesus, who was full of God, did not exploit, literally "snatch at", his relationship with God. He neither sought nor claimed privilege or status. His life flowed downward, entering the lowest places of human life as a servant, bringing compassion. He "emptied himself" (*kenosis*) to the point of his own death. It was this downward movement of Jesus' life that opened to the power of resurrection, of new life. That is what makes him worthy of being honored and followed. Knees bend in acknowledgment of Jesus' holiness, not because they are forced to but because in this life of authentic, humble servanthood is seen the very life of God.

Paul used this hymn to remind the Christian community at Philippi what their life was to be like. He assumes that the love, sharing, compassion and sympathy of Christ already dwell within that community, and encourages them to continue to let it be so and to deepen it. He appeals to them to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Then he sums it all up by saying, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." "Mind" means not just

the way we think but our whole attitude and disposition toward life. Belonging to the community of faith means working at a deep level with our own inner motivations and attitudes, letting Jesus' spirit transform our inner life so that together our outer life takes on the nature of Jesus himself, which is our own true nature.

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth used a German word to show the opposite of what Paul was talking about. The word is *rechthaberisch*. It means the person who is always right. As we would say, a “know-it-all.” Being Christian is not about being right. It is about being transformed by the life of Christ so that we live differently in the world, with one another and with all people. Being Christian is not about pushing one's own program or insisting on one's view of things. It is about discovering the freedom and joy of looking out for the well-being of others, as God in Christ has looked out for our well-being.

The Japanese Methodist theologian Kosuke Koyama grew up in the Buddhist tradition, from which he draws much insight into Christian faith. He reflects on the way Christianity has conducted itself in his culture. Christianity, he writes, suffers from a “teacher complex.” Christians, especially Western Christians, speak but cannot listen. In our arrogance, we assume others have nothing to offer. Koyama says the antidote to the “teacher complex” is the “crucified mind,” the mind that reflects the humility of Christ. How we relate to others—not just other Christians—must express this humble, servant mind. Not domination, but servanthood. Not disregarding others and what they may have to offer, but being persons and communities of faith who witness to Jesus' lordship by living out his self-emptying love.

Paul's words about Christ could describe as well the Buddhist figure of the *bodhisattva*. A *bodhisattva* is one who is on the path to enlightenment, what we might mean by eternal life or salvation. The *bodhisattva*, however, forgoes his or her own final attainment in order to help others along the path of salvation. We might call this the “stooping down” mind, much like the crucified mind. Here I think of Harriet Tubman, who crossed the Ohio River to escape from slavery, and yet returned again and again to bring others out of oppression.

We still see today how destructive an already destructive world becomes when Christianity is employed in the service of domination and violence. God's name is called upon to bless our wars and warriors, our causes and conflicts. God is invoked by each side to justify the violence and killing. These days, Christians use their faith to cast suspicion upon and condemn those of other religious traditions. Our need to be

right—*rechthaberisch*—gets mixed up with religious fervor, and the result is always the increase of suffering in the world. On this Palm Sunday, we must remember that Jesus entered Jerusalem, not on a warhorse but a colt, not as a political and military messiah, which many wanted, but as the Prince of Peace who would give his life for all, even his enemies.

Paul saw in Jesus' life the pattern of our own lives as his followers. We, too, have equality with God, a deep and lasting union with God because of God's unbounded love for us. It is the great gift of God's grace. Out of the joy and ultimate security of this love, we can then freely give of ourselves for others, not afraid to empty ourselves for the sake of the world. We choose not to claim any privilege or status, but turn toward others in loving service and to enter into community with them. This is the life that is shaped and filled by the mind of Christ, the crucified mind that expresses the power of God that comes from the crucified Christ. It is this life, this mind only that gives faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

Back to Santa Fe. My last day there I visited the Institute of American Indian Art Museum, which supports, nurtures, and exhibits the work of native artists. In an exhibit of native Hawaiian artists, one piece especially drew my attention. It stood in the center of the exhibit room. There was a cross, and on the cross was a Hawaiian figure, called a *ki'i*, a physical manifestation of God. Here was represented the crucifixion of Hawaiian people and their culture by the powers of economic greed, military domination, and religious arrogance. The sculpture clarified my Christian faith and gave rise to hope once again. Where is God? There, on the cross, crucified. Where is Jesus? Wherever people suffer the political, economic, and religious powers that seek to control or dominate. God is in us and all who seek to have the mind of Christ, a crucified mind that becomes, by God's spirit and power, a risen and exalted mind, a mind fully awake to God's love.