

March 29, 2015 / 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....*

In the early 1990s, I visited for the first time our country's southwest, Santa Fe, New Mexico, in particular. I was leading music for a conference, but I had time for some sightseeing. One day I walked to a hill in the city that had become 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. The Pueblos mounted a campaign to expel the Spanish from the territory. Their freedom lasted for twelve years, when they were again overpowered. It was yet another story of the cross marching alongside the sword, gun, and flag.

Here I recall a visit to Lynchburg in the 1980s by Eberhard Bethge, closest friend and biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and his wife Renate, who is Bonhoeffer's niece. Out of curiosity, Eberhard visited worship at a nationally-famous church, which is only representative of many such churches throughout the country. His comment, afterward witnessing the blending of Christianity and nationalism, was that whenever the cross is put alongside the flag, the cross always loses. He said this, of course, out of having lived through the horrors of Hitler's Germany, when the church allowed itself to be "Nazified", and the meaning of the cross was lost.

As I climbed that hill in Santa Fe, reading the plaques that told the story of the Franciscans, I found that I felt no sympathy whatsoever for their cause or their deaths. Why were they there in the first place? Why had they complied with forces of violence and conquest in order to further some spiritual mission? What is it in Christianity—or, indeed, any religion--that so readily yields to nationalism and militarism, adopting violence to further its causes? It has nothing to do with the life, teachings, and spirit of Jesus. That has to be set aside in order to adopt a conquest mentality.

When I returned home from my visit, the lectionary reading for the week was the same Philippians passage as today. Here is the direct opposite of exerting power or claiming status.

The words are about self-pouring-out, about servanthood and humility. They are about not 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 Christians have too often latched onto the second part without understanding that the exaltation of Jesus 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 and outward, entering the lowest places of human life to bring 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. And in this life, we recognize who we are created to be, our true humanity.

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 Jesus already dwell in some degree 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 [only] 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 only the way we think, but also our whole attitude and disposition toward life. Belonging to the community of faith means working with our own inner motivations and attitudes, letting Jesus’ spirit transform us so that together we manifest 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 Jesus 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.

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, the servanthood, of Jesus. 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 have to offer, but being persons and communities of faith who bear witness to Jesus by living out his self-emptying love. Note, by the way, the reading from Isaiah 50. It is about the hoped-for servant of God who would bring liberation, peace, justice to Israel and even the world. Look how it begins: “The Lord God has given me [the servant] the tongue of one who is taught”. It could possibly be translated the “tongue of a teacher”, but that does not fit the whole passage. The servant can speak comfortingly to those who are in need because the servant listens to God morning by morning. Not the know-it-all, but the one who is always listening. Not the one who leaps out of bed eager to conquer the day, to implement his or her will on life and others, but the one who begins the day with listening inwardly, open to being led and receiving insight and wisdom. Not, “How can I achieve what I want today?” but, “How can I serve life this day?”

Paul’s words about Jesus are similar to the Buddhist figure of the *bodhisattva*. A *bodhisattva* is one who is on the path to enlightenment, what we might mean by salvation, but who always helps others along the path. We might call this the “stooping down” mind,

much like the crucified mind. There are so many examples of such persons throughout history and today. They are the ones who truly bring life to the world. I always think of Harriet Tubman, who crossed the Ohio River to escape from slavery, but did not stay there in safety. She returned again and again to bring others out of oppression.

We still see today how destructive an already destructive world becomes when Christianity, or any religion, 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, our greed and our wealth. Christians use their faith to cast suspicion upon and condemn those of other religious traditions, and, unbelievably, to gain the right to discriminate against others. 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 see very clearly that Jesus entered Jerusalem, not on a warhorse, not as a political and military messiah, which many wanted, including some of his disciples. He entered the city on a colt, the symbol of humility, 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. 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. 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, servant Christ. It is this life, this mind only that gives faithful witness to Jesus.

Back to Santa Fe: My last day there, I visited the Institute of American Indian Art Museum, which supports 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. Feeling despondent at that point about my own religious tradition, wondering why I continue to see myself as a Christian, I felt the sculpture clarify my faith and give 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.