

The Humble Hero

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of January 2005.

The preacher is Carol Olverson. Her sermon is entitled The Humble Hero and is based on Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 18.

As we come to God's Word, let us just pray. Dear God, we thank you so much for revealing yourself through your Word and ultimately through Jesus Christ.

As we come to looking at your Word today, please guide us with wisdom, give us insights so that we not only hear your Word but we do it. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, learning by example is something that I think particularly as parents or teachers we're often told to do.

[1 : 06] We teach by example, we lead by example. American comedian Sam Levinson once recalled his overprotective mother who went with him on his first day to school and went up to talk to his teacher.

And amongst other things that she spoke to his teacher that first day about, his mother said to him that if Sam misbehaved, which she may have had this sense that he may well and truly have done, that she shouldn't punish him but the teacher should punish the child next to him.

And the astonished teacher said, why? And she said, my Sammy, he learns by example. Well, this morning we're continuing to look at Philippians chapter 2.

And in that last week, for those of you who are here, you may recall that Paul used examples of what he was going through in his own life, his suffering and imprisonment, to encourage the Philippians in their own suffering that they were going through.

So he used those examples, he used himself as a model and he also used Jesus. And particularly in this chapter, he more fully uses Jesus, points Jesus to the Philippians to help them understand more about how to endure what they were going through.

[2 : 27] And as often happens when we're in difficulties from outside, there can also be difficulties going on within. And within the church at Philippi, not only were they having persecution, some form of persecution or suffering from outside members of the church, but also from within, difficulties were starting to arise.

And so Paul's opening, he's making a passionate appeal to them. And in verse 2, he says, Paul says to them, Make my joy complete, being the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

He's really stressing a unity. So it appears that there may well have been a problem of disunity. And from verses 3 to 4, it comes through that selfish ambitions, selfish interests, conceit may well be the cause of the problems.

It seems that people were focusing their concerns more on their own issues than in looking at what would be best for the church there at Philippi on a whole.

And in verse 5, Paul calls them to be like-minded. He says that this group should be willing to show their love for one another by putting the interests of each individual person aside and together strive for what's of use for the church on the whole.

[3 : 59] And I must say that that's been one of my joys in ministering here at Doncaster over these past four years. It's something that I noticed fairly soon when I came here, and certainly I've become more and more aware of it.

And that's a commitment by many of you to put aside your own interests for the sake of others, and for the sake of Holy Trinity, for the sake of the Gospel, and for the sake of sharing the Gospel.

And I've seen this in particular in people's attitudes towards various changes, the changes that have occurred throughout these last few years. I remember hearing people say, well, it's not really what I'm used to, and probably not really what I want, but I know things have to change.

So if this means that it will help others come to know more about Jesus, if it means it will bring others who don't already come to church into the church, if it makes it more accessible, particularly for younger families, then I'm happy for those changes to occur.

In the wider church, unity is expressed by giving and in prayerful support of others. And I'm very encouraged, I was encouraged to see the large gathering, much larger than normal, just over a month ago for the persecuted church, when a large number of us here gathered to pray for those who were undergoing suffering and persecution in the wider church.

[5 : 19] And so I encourage you to continue to use those times of prayer, those monthly prayer sessions, to become as a united group to be praying together for not only here at Holy Trinity, but for the wider church.

In verse 5, Paul says, Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. And this leads to one of the greatest passages of the New Testament, and one that's certainly a firm favourite of mine.

It's a magnificent description of Jesus, from his existence before time began, equal with God, to his incarnation as a human being, to come as a lowly servant, as a slave, and to, ultimately, to his death on the cross, and then to be exalted to the highest place above heaven and earth, ultimately to be worshipped by all of creation.

It's a hymn that makes my heart want to sing with joy what a magnificent hero we have, Jesus Christ, Lord and King. Well, there's discussion in various commentaries as to whether verses 6 to 11 were actually an early Christian hymn that worshippers together met and sang, or whether, in fact, it's Paul's own writing.

And I don't think it makes a huge amount of difference, because what's important is what those verses say, and the context that it's in, and why Paul has used those verses here in this passage.

[6 : 52] You may notice in verse 5, if you're really, really attentive, that there's a little footnote there, and it says, Let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus.

And that footnote then indicates that you could read it as you have in Christ, not only as was in Christ Jesus, but also it could mean that you have in Christ Jesus. And there's various suggestions as to the interpretation of either, whichever way you choose to read it.

But I think it's particularly important to see that, in the context of how the passage is, in this whole overall chapter, that I think Jesus is using it very much as a model for his own, for their behaviour and for their thinking.

Jesus, who from the beginning of time existed in the form or very nature of God, and yet didn't regard this equality as something that he could exploit.

Jesus, his pre-existence, his privileged position, equal with God, was not something that he used to his advantage, or that he grasped on or held tightly to.

[8 : 04] And I think for many, I think it's very, very human desire that when we suddenly see that we're in a position of advantage to try and to take that position, when we're in a position of possible using it for our own gain, it's very easy to be tempted to use that, whether it's in whatever it is we're doing, even in sporting activities or work environments, many situations will tend to do that.

And of course, in those days, kings and emperors would certainly grasp hold of any opportunity to keep an advantage over what they've already got.

But Jesus didn't do this. He instead emptied himself, we're told. He gave up his position in heaven temporarily to take upon himself the form of a human being.

And it wasn't a wealthy, powerful, kingly human being either, but a lowly slave instead, as Tim's children's talk pointed out very clearly. Whilst I don't think the term he emptied himself can be taken literally to mean that he emptied himself of his divinity, because always Jesus remained fully God and fully human, but rather he emptied his rightful position in heaven, coming as a human being.

To die on the cross. I think the words to die on the cross or death on the cross can roll off our tongue very easily, without sometimes even terribly much thought.

[9 : 38] And yet, I think Mel Gibson's movie earlier this year, The Passion of Christ, was a really helpful reminder of just the horrors of crucifixion.

Since we've so far removed from those forms of death, from those forms of punishment, here in the 21st century in Australia, I think that film helped to remind us just what those words, death on a cross, would have meant to 1st century readers, to those who heard or read about Jesus' death.

Because dying on a cross is not something that would have even, the words entered into polite conversation, such was the horror of it all. But these days, unfortunately with the way that so many of our crosses are beautiful and gold and jewel-encrusted, we can tend to forget just how horrific that death on the cross really is.

In verse 9, Paul says that in response to Jesus' humility and obedience by his death on the cross, God acts by exalting him highly.

If Jesus was already highly exalted before he came to earth, if he was already there equal with God, it's hard to imagine how he could be exalted to an even higher position.

[11 : 04] And I think it probably doesn't mean that actually he, because if he's equal with God, he couldn't possibly be in a higher position. So I think his exaltation in verse 10 means that, or it means that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I think that is the exaltation that Paul has in mind here. And at present, Jesus' name is not exalted before all people. In fact, sadly, as many of you would be aware, that there's often, we hear of Jesus' name being used as some form of swearing or as a curse.

But a time will come when this will not be so, when all things will be changed in that great and final day when Jesus returns triumphantly to earth, when all will be raised, the living and the dead, and they will come before Jesus and they will acknowledge him as Lord and King.

His name will be highly exalted. This passage, or this picture of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing actually comes from a passage in Isaiah.

And the words reflect that prophecy. And in that passage in Isaiah, it actually says that not everyone will do that willingly, even on that last day. But nevertheless, they will do it, acknowledging Jesus' sovereignty over all.

[12 : 35] He will triumph over his enemies. And this would be encouraging for the Philippians, who may well have been, as I said, suffering for the fact that they have been not wanting to acknowledge the emperor's sovereignty, but acknowledging Jesus' sovereignty instead in place of over that.

And so they could take this as an encouragement that the person that they exalt to the highest will one day come triumphantly. I think in the light of last Sunday's devastation of the tsunami, there's been numerous debates in the paper, as Paul alluded to, on the role of natural disasters.

And one of the titles I saw was Is God to Blame? And it does raise the question, as Christians, how do we respond and how do we answer to these sorts of questions?

And in the many various writings that I read throughout the week, I think one writer really summed it up very well. He pointed to the fact that when Jesus stood outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus after he had died, Jesus wept.

The scenes on television and in our newspapers this week have certainly brought tears to my eyes, as I'm sure they've brought them to many. Our hearts have been heavy with that devastation, this total loss and pain and tragedy.

[14 : 05] And in the first few days, there's a sense of great hopelessness, or helplessness, not hopelessness, of helplessness really in what we could possibly be doing in the face of such staggering loss.

But after the numbness of the shock settled, they're welding people of great need to do something and to do it quickly to avoid further death and illness. And the generous support has been quite contagious, I think.

Many of the Christian aid organisations have been at the forefront of that help. And I think this is a right and appropriate and good response. And we do, as Paul said, we do need to respond generously.

But also from a biblical perspective, these things ought to be pointers to help us to recognise our need for God and for salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. Because we never know when our last day on earth may be.

As the sun rose that last Sunday morning, tens of thousands of people were going about their business of everyday life right across Central Asia. There were thousands of tourists in places such as Phuket enjoying well-earned and well-anticipated holidays, staying in places that travel brochures would call paradise so picturesque and idyllic, are they?

[15 : 25] How many would have ever thought that by the time the sun was high in the sky, such tragic disaster would have struck them? Unexpected deaths and disasters ought to be wake-up calls to remind us that our time is limited and that true certainty, stability and security is found in God alone.

When total towns and villages can be swept away when the infrastructure of homes, emergency services, even supplies of food and water can just get wiped out by a massive wave, we get a glimpse of the fragility of our own lives, of the tenuous hold that we have on them.

We need to remember that there is a rock who is always steadfast, one who we can cling to in the midst of all turmoil and trouble, and that rock is God, solid, unmovable, unchanging, fixed.

Throughout the world, the countries are mobilising themselves to send help to these countries in such desperate need, and salvation and rescue missions are in place with more starting each day.

And as the days and weeks unfold, I'm sure that we will hear stories about rescuers, helpers, and heroes, people who, in a selfless manner, have gone to seek some people, and already in the papers we've been reading about some people who've been doing that.

[16 : 59] Well, God inaugurated his salvation mission for the whole human race with Jesus 2,000 years ago. Jesus is the greatest of all heroes because not only was he willing to give up his equality with God in perfect heaven to come to live here on earth to seek out the lost, the devastated, the sick, the injured, the suffering, but then he gave his life for others.

He is the hero that not only can help us in our time of need, but he can save us from that final day of death and destruction because he gives us eternal life, a glorious inheritance, peace with God.

While still outside Lazarus' tomb, Jesus uttered the words, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet will they live.

When we see tragic and unexpected death, these things ought to be reminders that we do live in an imperfect world, that as beautiful and peaceful as a tropical island setting can be, there's no security in it.

The peace it offers is so superficial, it can be swept away in a brief moment. These unexpectedly awful times remind us that death can come like a thief in the night and of the need, as Paul said earlier, to be prepared for that day when all of creation shall kneel before Jesus Christ.

[18 : 40] As it says in Romans, for we will all stand before this judgment seat of God, and so then each of us will be accountable to God. It's Paul's hope here in the book of Philippians that he and his readers will stand before God pure and blameless on that day, as it is a hope for all of us here.

To his end, Paul urges the Philippians to live a life of obedience and to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. Now this phrase can sometimes jar people, but it doesn't actually mean that by living and working a good and useful life, people will be able to earn their own salvation.

Paul's other writings very, very clearly state that salvation is by grace alone through belief in Jesus Christ. But as believers, the Philippians are saved.

I think Paul's meaning they're saved, but they're to continue to work out their salvation. They already have, so they continue to work the way that they already are. Instead of fighting and squabbling amongst themselves, they're to be working for the benefit of God's people.

And the word salvation also means healing in Greek, and as the Philippians work for the spread of the gospel, together this will bring healing for their divisions as they continue to cooperate with each other.

[20 : 09] And when they do this, they'll discover that they've actually been cooperating with God, who is at work in them, giving them the will or the desire to do this. Verses 14 to 16, Paul gives them then a concrete example as to how to go about this.

They're to stop murmuring and complaining, and he uses language that's found in the Old Testament here, back in the book of Exodus when the people were in the desert and they started mumbling and complaining against Moses and ultimately against God.

Paul then goes on to call them to unity as God's people, and he reminds them again with references this time from Deuteronomy, the song of Moses, of the rebellion of the Israelites. and in that song it says, a faithful God without deceit is he, yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation.

And here in these verses, Paul is then in the opposite, calling them to the opposite, children of God without blemish, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

The Philippians by their obedience will shine like stars in the world, fulfilling what Israel was called to do to be a light to the nations and yet what they failed to be.

[21 : 26] A light to the Gentiles so that all the nations could find their salvation in God. By holding fast to the word of God, Paul rejoices because he is confident that his race will not have been in vain.

He knows that the Philippians will remain faithful to the end if that is what they do, if they continue to work out their salvation by obedience to God and holding fast to his word.

It's my cause for rejoicing that as I leave here at Doncaster that I too am confident that the good work God has begun in you he will bring to completion on the day of Jesus Christ. And it's also a great joy that we as believers have that certainty that one day we will all be reunited on that great and glorious day that Jesus returns.

Amen.