

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

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[0 : 00] Well, now that you know what the word hark means, we all get to hark for the next 20 minutes or so, what it is that God has to say to us through me, but more importantly, His Word.

So, if you would please pick up the Bible. I know they're not enough, given that there are so many people here this morning. It's lovely. And turn to page 980 to chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

I feel that this sermon, in many respects, is what we've been saying this whole Advent season with the collect for the first Sunday of Advent, where we read that in which your Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in great humility, that in the last day, when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.

And what a glorious day that will be. Well, recently I watched a film, a British film, called Goodbye, Christopher Robin. Don't confuse that with the Hollywood film called Christopher Robin.

The story of A.A. Milne, Christopher Robin, and Winnie the Pooh is told in this film. The story of Milne, his wife and son, is a complicated one. The life of the Milne's and rise of Winnie the Pooh comes between, you probably know, World War I and World War II.

[1 : 26] And there were positive consequences, but negative ones as well, for the family with the popularity and fame that Winnie the Pooh brought. Christopher Robin was adversely affected by this story, and the author's son came to hate the story of Winnie the Pooh and the father's writing and poetry.

And while A.A. Milne's purpose was to end all wars, having participated in the first one with his writing, he wanted people to see what war did to people, Christopher Robin's purpose was to die in World War II.

Until that is, of course, Christopher Robin heard his father's poetry being quoted by memory from the soldiers in the trenches. At the worst of time, Christopher Robin saw the difference his father's writing made to soldiers.

And the recitation of the poetry lifted men's hearts and saw them through the horrors of war. Well, now today we come to a hymn and a poem.

A hymn written by Charles Wesley, a preacher and a pastor, a poem quoted by Paul, an apostle and a prisoner. This hymn and poem serve a similar purpose as Milne's, but Wesley's and Paul's are exceedingly greater.

[2 : 42] Wesley and Paul tell a unique story, a different story that grips and guides the will, a better story that shapes and forms the mind, a greater story that inhabits and inspires the heart, but a bold story that convicts us of our sin, convinces us that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, converts our whole life over to surrender and His glorification, and compels us to complete the race that He has set before us.

The story of the gospel of Jesus Christ makes a big change in our lives. And the change begins in our minds, but it doesn't just change our mind.

The gospel gives us a new mind and a way of thinking about God, ourselves, and the whole world in which we live. In fact, there's a powerful promise in today's reading.

You can look down at that now if you wish. In chapter 2, verse 5, as Paul says these words, have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

It's an amazing promise. Paul is promising that we have the mind of Christ. Wesley's hymn is suited for this day, but you know that there are probably other ones as well, like may the mind of Christ our Savior.

[4 : 01] And the promise of this reading is thinking like Jesus, having the mind of Christ because He in is us, and we are in Him. And we are not one and the same, but we are united with Him

because He's in us.

Well, after Paul makes this great promise, you might actually think that he would give 10 steps to thinking like Christ, or given that the goal of this is humility, that he might give us 10 steps to being humble.

Remember, Paul isn't promoting a program, and that it is having the mind of Christ come by magic, or mystery, or even a method. Having the mind of Christ comes by theology.

And what we think about God and Jesus is vital to having the mind of Christ. So Paul quotes this poem, and instead of giving a plan or a program, what do you think he gives us?

He gives us a person. The person Jesus Christ. And he is showing us who Jesus Christ is. He is revealing us the mind of Jesus Christ.

[5 : 06] And this is the way to having our Lord's mind. So what does Paul say about the mind of Christ? Well, one key to having the mind of Christ is actually thinking about ourselves less, and the other key is thinking about God more.

So, ourselves less and God more. Those are just the two points today. Let's start with thinking of ourselves less by thinking about the condition and the conduct of our Lord.

Our Lord's condition was very different than ours right from the beginning. We know that, especially this time of the year, we are reminded of our Lord's miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit.

Some of us here today might find that hard to believe. And I admit, I don't know how you can find good reason other than revelation to believe it. But this poem is making a really big claim.

The claim is that Jesus Christ is God. But the poem is clear that Christians don't think that Jesus became God. That's why we read he came in the form of God.

[6 : 11] The poem could have stated that Jesus was God, or though he was God. Of course, in the Roman Greco world, there were gods.

Alexander, Caesar. But in that case, it was men who became gods. Christians believe that Jesus Christ from the beginning was, is, and always will be God.

God, the poem claims that the very nature, the essence of Jesus, is God. One and the same, without difference. Not the image of God like you and I.

We bear the image of God as created beings. But uniquely God was Jesus Christ. But despite Jesus' uniqueness, he doesn't use his privilege as other gods did.

Or use his privilege as powerful people in the developed world do. Or use his privilege to take advantage of others and dominate them. No, Jesus doesn't force himself on the world to see things or do things according to his will.

[7 : 19] That's what Paul is saying when he says, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. Why is that? The key word here, as you read this, is actually though.

Other translations, even though. It might even better yet be translated because. Though our Lord could have grasped his equality with God, he didn't.

Because he is God. The very nature of God is not to grasp onto or to prove that he is God. Jesus didn't have to make a great show of his divinity.

And so as Wesley puts it, Jesus' divinity is concealed. Veiled in flesh and Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity. This is uniquely Christian and like no other religions then or now or ever will be.

Unique because grasping onto godness is the mindset of devils, demons, sinful human beings, and yes, even dragons.

[8 : 25] You know the show Dragons Den got that name for a good reason. Well, that's our Lord's condition. Jesus is God, sinless and perfect in his nature.

Our nature is contrasted with our Lord's. Which is what makes the next two verses really shocking. The poem moves from our Lord's condition to his conduct.

The Lord of heaven and earth emptied himself. He humbled himself. And Wesley in his hymn, and you need to know that we sung three verses today, but there are actually seven verses.

I don't know if you're happy or sad with that. But it's an amazing hymn. Here are some other verses from that hymn, which come like this by way of imitation. Come, desire of nations, come.

Come to Jesus. Fix in us thy humble home. Rise, the woman's conquering seed. Bruise in us the serpent's head.

[9 : 25] This is completely opposite of the Greco-Roman world. Those gods filled and promoted themselves. And people do that today, don't they?

Bragging and puffing up. And as we come to the end of this year, our world will grant awards and already have that are coveted by the best in their fields and professions.

But Jesus isn't like that. He emptied himself. He humbled himself. Becoming like us, in us, and for us. And so the poem tells us why God did this.

The whole purpose of God and Jesus emptying and humbling himself was to, as Wesley says again, reconcile us to God. God had a great plan and good news for us.

God came to be born and to die. And as Paul tells us and Wesley writes for us, God fixes in us his humble home.

[10 : 24] And he does this by conquering Satan, sin, death. And he does it all on the cross. That's why he came. That's how he does it.

And this changes the way that we think and the way that we act about everything that we do. Jesus never grasped. He emptied. He humbled himself.

Just think through the New Testament when he might have done that. Let me give you some ideas. When he was tempted by Satan. When he was standing before Pilate.

What did he grasp onto? When he hung on the cross and was mocked by a sinner who tempted him, saying, he saved others. Can he not save himself?

So with Jesus in us, we are invited to empty, to humble ourselves. Shapes everything in our life.

[11 : 21] Our relationships. As parents. As spouses. As friends. As colleagues. Jesus in us transforms the way that we relate to anyone.

Just think of the last conflict that you were in. And what your response was that? Your temptation to defend yourself. Put yourself right. Or put someone else right in that conflict.

Jesus never grasped onto his godliness. But humbled himself and became obedient to death. C.S. Lewis puts it like this. Humility is not thinking less of yourself.

It is thinking of yourself less. So when it's to think less of ourselves. We are created in the image of God. But thinking of ourselves less. It helps us on the way to humility and having the mind of Christ.

So we think of ourselves less. Well, as vital as it is to think of ourselves less, that's not enough. If we want to know the mind of Christ, we need something more.

[12 : 24] We need to think more of God and think more about God. And so the next three verses will show us, though, that not even that is actually enough. Earlier today, we sang, At the Name of Jesus, that's based on these three verses.

The carol, Angels We Have Heard on High, which we won't sing, are based on these same three verses. And the final line reads like this. A door on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King. And you know how it was then. Gloria in excelsis Deo. Gloria in excelsis Deo. The mind of Christ in us isn't merely giving assent to true claims about Jesus.

I used to subscribe to a magazine. Don't tell anyone outside of this room. It's called The Nation. The subtitle of our motto was, Where Intellectual Assent is Not Enough.

The editors understood that armchair political and social action isn't generated just by giving intellectual assent. And Christianity knows something more than the ideology of this magazine.

[13 : 35] What we believe is important. How we behave is important too. But belonging to Jesus Christ is absolutely vital. And these second three verses show us that if we want to have the mind of Christ, then we need to know to whom we belong.

Belonging will move us from what is in the mind to what actually comes out of the mouth. So how does this happen? What God's doing only by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Having the mind through humility comes when we receive God's revelation about Jesus. And God is the one who reveals himself to us and then gives us the best thoughts about God.

And God does this, as the text tells us, by exalting and lifting up Jesus Christ, who laid aside his glory when he came and took on human flesh.

And he not only exalts and magnifies himself through some, but he gives a special picture of himself to us through the name of Jesus. So Paul writes, And he bestowed on the name that is above every name.

[14 : 47] That at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Naming is a way of establishing relationship.

A relationship means that we belong to God. So knowing God's name leads to a relationship, which means that we actually belong to him. Let me give you just an example of this. David, on a regular basis, will greet me by saying, James, James, Morrison, Morrison.

Do you know this? Yes. That's an amen poem. And he goes on, right? That's only something that someone could do in relationship with somebody else, right?

Which means that we belong together. The greater way that we belong together is actually, though, because of Jesus and his name, under whom we live and serve and have our being. The name tells a story, though, doesn't it?

A family relationship. And we're told in this poem that our Lord is given a unique name. This name reveals our Lord's position. It's a position of preeminence.

[15:49] He's not just prominent in the world, but preeminent, a position that he alone has. And his name, which means God saves, means that he has this preeminence in our life.

And only he can do that. Above everyone else, Jesus is the only name and by whom we can be saved. So that's our Lord's position. The last two verses of the poem reveal the trajectory of the mind of Christ, though, in us.

The purpose of God for us is to worship him. Worship a God of bowing the knee and the confessing of the time. And in this is revealed our mind transformed and converted.

So that we give absolute honor to the Lord. Now in the world in which we live in, we no longer bow. Ancient worlds bow to show loyalty, honor, and respect.

And loyalty is no longer extended to anything, maybe because we live in a market-driven economy. Their relationships, ours, have suffered for that, though, with spouses and children and friends and country.

[16:58] This outward sign of bowing the knee and showing worship and honor. Bowing the knee to Jesus and not the emperor was a great risk to Paul and the early church.

It may not be the same kind of risk for us in North America today. But let's be clear, it was deadly for Paul and the early church.

And we no longer confess in our world. We have longer confessions, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, but Jesus Christ as Lord was enough for the early church. It was enough for them to express the mind of Christ through their mouths, which cost them their lives.

But it expressed their belief in who it was that they were belonged to. And it wasn't to Caesar that they belonged to, but it was the Lord of heaven and earth. Well, this poem is inviting the world and Christians to express what the Christ followers experienced.

Experiencing the grace of God for salvation, then shows itself into the praise and glory of God. The glory initially concealed, but later revealed in Jesus through his death and resurrection.

[18:08] And this is cause for praise. So, the carol helps us express this exuberantly in these words. Hark! The herald angels sing glory to the newborn king.

Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of our skies. In this, we get an expression of what it means for the church to have the mind of Christ in relationship with one another.

You may not know. We now know actually what hark means. But the first line when Wesley wrote this isn't the one that we sing anymore. Here's another word you may not know. Wesley penned it like this. Hark!

How all the welkin ring. Glory to the king of kings. His friend George Whitefield came along and actually changed the first line of that because he didn't think that we would actually get what welkin means.

But this is an expression of the church in worship, glorifying the Lord, coming together, having his mind, expressing it in ways that praises God. Well, on this final Sunday before Christmas, we have both a traditional carol and a biblical poem.

[19:14] And while the latter is called by some a hymn to Christ, it almost was definitely not a hymn, at least not the kind of our Christmas carols.

But a poem, and unfortunately not as popular to us, I think, as Wesley's hymn. This poem in Paul's letter is probably, though, I think, the greatest in all the Bible.

It is a brilliant synthesis of the gospel. I know that there are others, like Ephesians 2, verse 8, which says that we are saved by grace through faith, or maybe even 1 Corinthians 15, verse 3, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried on the third day, raised again in accordance with the Scriptures.

But I think this poem that we're looking at today is the greatest one in all of Scripture, at least until we maybe have a sermon series on Ephesians or 1 Corinthians.

I don't know how high a value you place on Scripture memory, but if you were to memorize this Scripture before the end of the year or for the beginning of the next year you were to memorize it, you could do no better.

[20 : 25] This poem of Jesus Christ has left a really big impact on hymn writers and reformers. I looked at an evangelical hymnal this week, and out of 750 hymns, 50 of them were based on these seven verses.

That's 1 15th of this hymnal. These seven verses are not 1 15th of the Bible. That's not to say all the other ones that are based on this text that weren't even in that hymnal.

But not only were the hymn writers impacted by these verses, but Protestant reformers too. Martin Luther may have found that it was Romans that inspired him to write his 95 theses.

But listen to the words that he wrote actually about this poem in his church in Postal, Germany. It's three lines. Oh, the significance of the words Paul uses here, such words as he uses in no other place.

He must certainly have burned with joy and cheer to gain such a glimpse of God. And with what power, what delicious sweetness, the Father allures.

[21 : 37] Let me create a false dichotomy for you, which is better than false humility. This Christmas, would you rather feast on the sweetness of these seven verses?

Or would you rather feast on the sweetness of Christmas dessert? We don't have to sacrifice our salvation if we choose both rather than one or the other.

But we will surely be more satisfied and peaceful, happier and humble if we memorize and meditate on these seven verses. This Christmas and for the rest of our life.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.