

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, October 15, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Philippians 2:1-11
“Mind of Christ”

After 40 years of ordained ministry, I am still amazed at what an awesome thing it is to be a preacher.

We spend years studying, reading, researching, preparing for the day when we can call ourselves ministers of Word and Sacrament. We don our preaching gowns and make our way up the steps into the pulpit. When we get there, we declare with the prophets, “Thus says the Lord,” or “Hear the Word of God,” or “This is the Word of the Lord.” And we hold forth.

What an awesome thing that is. What a tremendous privilege to be given. What a weighty responsibility to shoulder. We are tasked with saying something about the Word that was in the beginning, the Word that was with God and was God; the Word through whom all things came into being; the Word in whom was life and the light of all people; the Word that became flesh and lived among us; the Word that revealed God’s glory, full of grace and truth.

As if that Word needs us to say something before that Word can be heard and received and understood and incorporated into the lives of our hearers!

Oh, yes, there are some verses that challenge us, and make us feel uncomfortable, and make us think long and hard about what we believe and how we live. And there are times when we need to hear God’s Word proclaimed so that God’s faithful people may be comforted, or rebuked, or edified, or so that the world outside the walls of the church may hear truth spoken to power, justice spoken to injustice, peace spoken to war, love spoken to hate. Of course, there is and there will always be a place for preachers of the Word in the church and the world.

But I can’t help thinking that there are Scripture passages of such sublime perfection that they need nothing said about them. Passages where the worst thing we could do is try to drag a meaning out of them, or think that our minds must fully grasp them, or turn them into object lessons or morality lessons. Passages where rather than preaching on them, we would do far better simply to listen to the poetry and rhythm of the language, and allow the beauty of the language and its imagery to wash over us until it seeps into our consciousness and is absorbed into our very souls.

Passages like the creation stories in Genesis, like any number of the Psalms, like Ecclesiastes 3, like Isaiah 40 and 55, like Job 38, like 1 Corinthians 15, like Revelation 21 and 22, like so many more. Passages like those need no words from us preachers – not that that has ever kept us preachers from holding forth about them.

I chose our text for today because, in my not so humble opinion, there is no passage in Scripture more sublimely perfect than Philippians 2:1-11. In fact, I once made a vow, which I confess I have since broken more than once – and I suppose I am breaking it again right now – never again to preach on that passage. Nothing that I can say can ever add to it; anything that I might say is far more likely to take away from it.

Scholars agree that St Paul was quoting something in verses 5-11 that his readers would have been familiar with. It may have been a creed, a statement of what the church believed. Or, given the structure and shape of the language, it may more likely have been a hymn.

Whatever it was, and we may never know for sure, verses 5-11 span the earthly life of Jesus from beginning to end: *he 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.*

In fact, it starts before his earthly life, and ends after it: *though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited . . . Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name . . .*

It doesn't even end there, for it goes on to his final triumph in the establishment of God's kingdom, when *at the name of Jesus every knee (shall) bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

But that's enough from me. I said a few minutes ago that we should simply listen to the poetry and rhythm of the language, and allow the beauty of the language and its imagery to wash over us until it seeps into our consciousness and is absorbed into our very souls.

So, I invite you to do just that. Take a moment to get yourself into a quiet frame of mind. Take a few deep breaths. Relax. Find a comfortable seating position, or as comfortable as you can on an unpadded pew. Close your eyes if you wish. I will read the passage one more time, then allow a few moments of silence before we sing our next hymn.

Philippians 2:1-11

¹*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,*

²*make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

³*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*

⁴*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*

⁵*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

⁶*who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,*

⁷*but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,*

⁸*he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

⁹*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰*so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

¹¹*and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*