

Bishop's Easter Message 2019

As I pray and ruminate about Easter 2019, I am reminded of the great hymn in Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-11, below in the Common English Bible translation):

*Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:
Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus everyone
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Those first Christians would have understood this hymn as connecting Jesus with the images of "Wisdom" in the Old Testament and earlier Jewish literature. In the Apocrypha's "The Wisdom of Solomon" (7:25-26), the author writes:

Wisdom is the warm breath of God's power. She pours forth from the all-powerful one's pure glory. Therefore, nothing impure can enter her. She's the brightness that shines forth from eternal light. She's a mirror that flawlessly reflects God's activity. She's the perfect image of God's goodness.

They also would have immediately connected it with the "suffering servant" in the Prophet Isaiah (chapters 52:13-53:12). Certainly, Isaiah 52:13-25:

*Look, my servant will succeed.
He will be exalted and lifted very high.
Just as many were appalled by you,
he too appeared disfigured, inhuman,
his appearance unlike that of mortals.
But he will astonish many nations.
Kings will be silenced because of him,
because they will see what they haven't seen before;
what they haven't heard before, they will ponder.*

would give meaning to the concluding verses of the hymn:

*Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus everyone*

*in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

They would have also immediately understood the political significance of the passage. The description of one who “did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited” and as one who took “the form of a slave” would stand in contrast to Roman emperors, who were recognized as “equal to God” and exploited this status. The self-emptying of Jesus Christ is the very antithesis of a Hellenistic ruler, and the model of avarice, greed and self-assertion of the “Great Man” in the Roman Empire.

Easter is the reminder that in Jesus Christ all the world is transformed. We – individually as believers and collectively as the Church – are changed. In those wonderful words from the Prayer Book (in Eucharistic Prayer D, page 374):

Father, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation; to prisoners, freedom; to the sorrowful, joy. To fulfill your purpose he gave himself up to death; and, rising from the grave, destroyed death, and made the whole creation new. And, that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and rose for us, he sent the Holy Spirit, his own first gift for those who believe, to complete his work in the world, and to bring to fulfillment the sanctification of all.

When Paul calls us to “[a]dopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus,” he is calling us to an Easter life. We are called to a life that does not fear death, that celebrates sacrifice, that embodies humility, that speaks truth to power, and that denies triumph to greed. He calls us to life transformed.

My prayer for all of us is that we can dare to have the “attitude that was in Christ Jesus” and live into our Easter life:

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Yours faithfully,
+Bob

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