

**Grace and Necessity (Philippians 2. 5-11)**

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*‘Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again’ (Mark 8.31).*

At the heart of the narratives about Jesus is a paradox. On the one hand, he is portrayed as having exercised human agency with unusual freedom and power. He chooses the company he keeps with little regard for convention or social expectation. He chooses where he goes and when he acts. Early in Mark’s gospel, for example, when his disciples report that everyone is searching for him, Jesus chooses to move on: ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do’ (Mark 1. 38). And this theme of Jesus’ freedom from external constraint and expectation is raised to an art form in the gospel of John, which depicts him time and again explicitly ‘choosing his hour’, consistently refusing to act or show or yield himself when people demanded ‘because his hour had not yet come’. Even in relation to his death, John’s Jesus claims his freedom: ‘No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again’ (John 10.18).

At the same time, the gospels depict someone wholly constituted by his sense of vocation and his destiny. There comes a moment in his public ministry when he ‘sets his face’ to go Jerusalem (Luke 9.51); he tells his disciples he ‘must be on his way’ (Luke 13.33), that he ‘must work the works of him who sent me’ (John 9.4). He speaks of having ‘a baptism to be baptised with’ and of ‘how I am straitened until it be accomplished!’ (Luke 12.50). Three times, he tells his disciples, ‘I must undergo great suffering’, must be rejected, be killed and on the third day rise again. In other words, the whole story of Jesus’ life, culminating in his journey to Jerusalem and the

cross, depicts him living simultaneously out of radical freedom and profound obedience, acting out of grace and necessity.

All Lent, we've been exploring the theme of atonement. We've been seeking to deepen our understanding of how the events of Easter shift possibilities for human being, how they enable the gift of at-one-ment, the reconciliation of all things. I hope to have shown that Jesus' death need not (even must not) be conceived as a sacrifice *to* God, in the sense of being a death required to placate an angry deity or to satisfy some supposed wound to divine honour. Rather, Jesus' life and his death are about God coming towards us, God's Beloved undergoing our violence, suffering and fear so as to liberate us from their power over us.

In all this, so our tradition proclaims, Jesus is revealing the nature of God. Jesus' freedom in giving himself reflects or incarnates God's freedom in relation to the world. Nothing has forced God to create anything and nothing created determines how God will be. At the same time, God will not abandon what God has made. God's faithfulness to his own Word means that God (so to speak) will not – cannot – leave us orphaned. It's the same paradox of grace and necessity. In Jesus, what is revealed is the eternal nature of God who freely expends God's self to give life. What is revealed is the nature of God as love.

And this begins to make sense of some of the more obscure insights of the New Testament literature. For example, the image in the Revelation to St John of the 'Lamb slain before the foundation of the world' (Rev. 13.8), before ever there were people to redeem! As one theologian put it, 'There was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted on the green hill outside Jerusalem'.<sup>1</sup> I think what's expressed here is that the whole pattern of divine life is self-giving, 'a pouring out of life towards the Other' so that the Other might be. Rowan Williams writes of the humanity of Jesus 'as the perfect human "translation" of the relationship of the

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<sup>1</sup> The words are from C.S. Dinsmore, cited by Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2003), p.84.

eternal Son to the eternal Father'.<sup>2</sup> In the Trinitarian life of God, such unrestricted love poured out and returned multiplies joy. But in our life, 'in the kind of world that you and I inhabit ... make or collude with', the shape of such love outpoured is all too often cruciform.<sup>3</sup>

On this account, the glory of God – which is to say the reputation and honour of God, the worthiness of God to be praised – consists not in God's power over the world or in some gilded overweening pomp, but in God's unstinting self-giving for the sake of the world. This is a key theme in the gospel of John, where Jesus speaks of his death as the final movement in his work of glorifying God: 'I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed' (John 17.4-5). This same subversive truth is celebrated in the passage we heard from Philippians which speaks of Jesus emptying himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Phil. 2.7-8). This isn't Jesus being a doormat. It's his complete identification with God's refusal to act coercively, his knowledge that only by drawing us into his freedom from fear –of death, shame, failure – only then, may we too become truly free. So it's precisely his willingness to enter this movement of self-emptying and self-giving that testifies to his divinity and brings glory to God. Thus the humiliated Jesus will be given 'the name that is above every name' because in and through him the true glory of God is embodied and made known.

We are about to enter Holy Week. We've spent six weeks reflecting on the meaning of the paschal mystery, the many images and metaphors by means of which Jesus' disciples have sought to communicate their encounter with it. But at this point we get to the end of words. St Paul exhorts his hearers to 'Let the same mind be in

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Address to the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith', Rome, October 2012, s.5.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.88.

you that was in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 4.5). But to share Jesus' intelligence, to know God as he knew God, isn't about having a bunch of clever ideas. It's about being as he was – drawn into the movement of God's self-giving into Life so that we, like him, may be communicators of Life. In the Christian community, the great sacrament of Jesus' self-giving is the Eucharist. In the last days of his life on earth, Jesus handed himself over freely to his disciples in bread and wine. He gave himself to them that they might be drawn into one, into communion, by sharing in him; that they might live empowered by his Spirit and fed by the energy of his presence, his body and blood. This is a symbol and more than a symbol; it's a participation by grace in his giving life. So come, let us share what he has given.