

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but 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. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2.5-11)



Devotion by
Hon-Wai Wong
January 24, 2010

Some people call this text *Christ Hymn*, for simplicity I call it the Hymn. There is a debate on the Greek word *harpagmon* in the clause "[Christ] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited". I once read an article listing the alternatives and there were ten! My impression is that the best two options are to paraphrase as either "Christ is equal to God and *precisely because of this* does not see the nature of God as grasping or clinging", or "Christ already is equal to God but does not see this equality as something to be taken advantage of". Both options agree that Christ did not acquire equality with God: he already had it. However, there is a difference. The first suggests that the nature of God consists in self-giving even to the extent of losing one's own life and identity.

We now know the nature of God and since the world is made by God, its ultimate and controlling reality, we are privy to the secret of a successful and prosperous life. Yet what a life is proposed here: slave like condition and an ignominious death! This reading does not hinge solely on accepting the first translation option. The drift of the Hymn, the humiliation and the subsequent exaltation of Christ, points to the same pattern and logic that underlies another hard saying, "*those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life... will save it.*" (Mark 8.35).

This is disquieting. On a mundane level, we may not even want to walk out of our comfort zone to take on challenges in life, and we are not even approaching the kind of sacrifices that Christ has taken. The Hymn is unsettling in other ways. It challenges our unstated but firmly held values. It tells us that genuine human flourishing consists in self giving. It suggests that exercise of power and influence can take the form of self giving and suffering unmerited blows. I find the thought at times repugnant, but it is exactly what Paul means when he says "*we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those who are called... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" (1 Corinthians 1.23-24).

This repugnancy may be natural but what are we to do? I for one cannot yet see how I would become a slave and die on a cross. I would like to draw notice to the tight integration of the Hymn with the rest of the *Letters to the Philippians*. The Hymn flows naturally from Paul's call on the Philippians to live a Christ like common life. He asks them to be "of one mind" (2.2), and specifically, "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (2.5). It is no accident that the same Greek word is used. Paul is knitting this central thread of self-giving life to the fabric of life within the church. Indeed, Paul subtly uses similar words in the rest of the letter and this Hymn, for example, Paul asks the Philippians "in humility regard others as better than yourselves" (2.3), "in humility" is literally "humble minded", the word for "humble" is echoed, in Greek, in the clause "[Christ] humbled himself" (2.8), on the one hand, and the word "minded" is a variation of a word that we have already encountered, on the other. The Hymn is integrated not just to its immediate surrounding but also remoter parts of the Letter. A good example is Chapter 3, where Paul is setting himself, who sets aside the pride, self-identity, and privileges as a Pharisee, as a pattern of having this mind of Jesus.

So the first step to living this self giving life may not be so remote. We can start at the common life in the church or rooting one's own identity (whether as grounds for pride or self-loathing) not any more in class, race, wealth, family background, or education, but in Christ and for Christ.

O God, we sometimes prefer that you leave us alone-- to be like you is so hard and daunting. Yet you have better plans for us than that. Give us courage and strength to be like you as reflected in your Son who showed us a life worth living. Amen.