

Stations of the Cross and Benediction

Wednesday 29th March 2006

Lord and Saviour Philippians, 2.5-11

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

'...every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord'.

This statement of Paul's, in his letter to the Philippians, appears to have been one of the earliest Christian confessions of faith. This wasn't just a title of admiration, but a potentially polemical declaration – if *Jesus* is Lord, then no one else is, and that would certainly have been rather contentious at the time.

But ascribing the title 'Lord' to Jesus is even more significant than ranking Christ above earthly rulers; the term has very powerful theological associations, too.

As you'll know, it was regarded as improper within Judaism to pronounce the name of God, those four Hebrew letters known as the Tetragrammaton. So an alternative word was used: *adonai*. In the Septuagint, this is translated as *kyrios*, 'Lord' ... so 'Lord' came to represent God's ineffable name.

As God incarnate, it is only right that Jesus should be called 'Lord'. But it is an unmistakably bold statement. It speaks of tremendous glory and power.

But its greatest significance for **us**, called to imitate him in our own lives, is when we consider how his power manifested itself: how did he inhabit his titles, his role? What *kind* of Lord is Jesus?

As Paul writes, he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.'

And, crucially, he was constantly attentive to his Father, who was at the very centre of every thought, word and deed.

Because Jesus is only interested in having and using power for God's work he can discern when to hold it and use it, and when simply to give it away. And as we know, it is through Christ's total self-emptying, his weakness, nailed to the cross, that God achieves his greatest work of power – our salvation.

Jesus is *both* our glorious Lord and humble Saviour: they are but two sides of the same coin.

We've been thinking in this series of the titles we give to Jesus. But let's reflect for a moment on the titles *we* have – or, indeed, the titles we crave from others. How do *we* inhabit those titles, or our roles? Are we really living them out in the pattern and manner of Christ? Or are we, perhaps, more preoccupied with how others perceive and use those titles, and the impact that has on us?

While it can be tempting to enjoy such badges of worldly honour, unfortunately, like the Philippians, we are called to humility. To self-emptying, rather than that addictive cocktail of vanity and public opinion which is worldly prestige. To think more highly of others than ourselves. To put other people first. Truly to respect the dignity and integrity of everyone we meet.

And lest we think this is harder for us now than it was for those first century Christians, we should bear in mind that this central message of humility was one of the great paradoxes of early Christianity. It would have made as little, if not less, sense to them as it does to our status-conscious society today.

In fact, 'humility' was a word very rarely used in secular Greek and, when it was, it was used to denote obsequious grovelling or servile weakness. The Hebrew Scriptures, however, are much more positive about humility – remember, Moses was singled out because of this particular virtue – and *real* humility is anything but feigned or sanctimonious. Instead, it is a mark of moral strength and integrity.

If we are even to begin to try to imitate our Lord and Saviour, we must, with him, turn earthly understandings of power and glory on their head, taking the lead from the one who, above all others, realised that true humility is the single-minded abandonment of oneself to God.

And this is why what we do here, in church, is so important. When we are focussing on genuine worship and trying to see God for who God is - that's when we see ourselves as what *we* really are, how we truly stand in relation to God. As creature and creator.

We are then able to catch a glimpse of the natural and right order of things. As William Temple observes: '*...it is in worship, worship given to God because he is God, that humanity will most learn the secret of real humility.*'

And so, as we prepare to worship our Lord and Saviour in the blessed sacrament, let us give humble thanks that he is exalted above all others, and gladly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. **Amen.**