



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Palm Sunday, 28 March 2021

Readings: Mark 11.1-11; Isaiah 50.4-9a; Passion Narrative: Mark 15; Philippians 2.5-11

Approaching the most intense week of the church's year, we hear the passion narrative again, and maybe we wonder how to respond. It can all feel rather surreal, yet at the same time, if we are long in the Christian tooth, over familiar, too.

The so-called hymn in Philippians 2, which we just heard, might offer us a way to respond. It's not a hymn quite as you and I know them, with a Bach chorale, a Victorian tune, or a rhythmic chorus. Nor is it clear whether Paul wrote it himself, or borrowed it from an earlier Christian tradition. But, whatever its origin, it has become beloved of The Church for its characterisation of Jesus as one who 'did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited', rather becoming obedient to the point of death – death on a cross.

These words have long divided scholars as to what sort of response they are urging us to make.

Some think the Philippian Hymn is all about Jesus' final recognition, where he is enthroned as Lord with the name that is above all names. That's because, by his death on a cross, he has won for us a forgiveness and freedom to which we can only respond with lifelong worship and willing obedience.

Others think this Hymn is all about Jesus setting us an ethical example of self-emptying servanthood, emulating which we most effectively live his life today.

Why either/or? Could it not be both? Pondering that harrowing account of trial, crucifixion and burial doesn't leave many of us cold. On the one hand, might we not be so captivated by the outpouring of Jesus's total dedication to winning for us abundant life, that we acknowledge him as Lord of all that is, and as Lord of our lives? It's not about the unquestioning deference of the sycophantic, nor the frightened acquiescence of the powerless, cowering before a tyrant. Yielding to Jesus Christ as Lord is about the gratitude of those who see in him the ultimate expression of what Brian Wren calls God's 'caring and forgiving, till we're reconciled' – till we're put right with God and with each other.

On the other hand, *part* of confessing Jesus as Lord is walking in the way he has modelled. It's finding in his servanthood the ethically sound template for how to live, how to relate, how to pursue to the common good. That common good which is the hallmark of life within God's reign. That common good where abundant life is not just for some but for all. This servanthood is not about being *servile* and inferior, but about that faithful accompanying of one another into the place of wholeness and dignity. The place where all are cherished for who we are, and where none is content with having too much until all enough: enough material comfort, enough place at the table, enough confidence

that whatever our lived experience we are God's and God is ours. That's the thoroughly honourable servanthood by which we hold our heads up high as we kneel for the washing of one another's feet.

Acknowledging his Lordship, emulating his servanthood or might it be that nothing is a better response to Jesus at Calvary than awed silence? Because it could well be, I am going to stop there. We will have another minute of silence, and then listen to another ancient hymn. This one is from Peter Abelard in the twelfth century and concludes: 'Grant us with you to suffer, Lord, that, as we share this hour, your cross may bring us to your joy and resurrection power.'