*MINDING UNITY*

Philippians 2:1-11

September 27, 2020

Bishop Azariah, the saintly evangelist of South India and the first Indian ever to become an Anglican bishop, tells of an interview he had with Dr. Ambedkar, leader of India’s untouchable millions, the *harijans*, the outcastes. It was back in 1935. Dr. Ambedkar was about to forsake Hinduism. “Hinduism is not a religion; it is a disease,” he said.

Bishop Azariah hoped he would bring his millions into the Christian faith. “Your people, deeply religious, cannot live without a religion,” said the bishop. “It is not enough to give up Hinduism. They must have something else.” He offered them Christianity.

Dr. Ambedkar replied: “I am well aware of all that the Christian church has done for the outcastes, but we *Harijans* are one community all over India, and our strength is in our unity. Can you in the Christian church offer us any unity comparable to that?” And the bishop was silent.

Paul said, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love . . . complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love.

Just what it was in Philippi that called for this appeal for unity we can only conjecture. It seems to have been some form of jealousy or personal ambition. He does say in 4:2, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” To check such lack of concord before it breaks into open schism, Paul writes this moving appeal for harmony. He bases his appeal on two great cornerstones.

First: *Union in Christ*. There is that important phrase, “in Christ.” “if there is any encouragement in Christ . . .” He begins with Christ and bases his whole appeal for unity on the actual union of the believer with the body of Christ. ‘Union with Christ,’ Paul is saying, ‘demands unity in Christian life.’ Appeals to church unity that begin anywhere else but with *union in Christ* are rootless and untenable.

And the second great cornerstone is love: “If there is any incentive of love . . .” The first appeal is objective, our union in Christ; the second is warmly subjective. It is an appeal to that surrounding and embracing love of the brethren which is characteristic of real Christians. Love is the best word to describe the Christian God. God is love. Love is the best word to describe the Christian faith; it is love of God. And love is the best word to describe the Christian way of life, too: it is love of our fellow human beings.

Given these two basics, the Christian way of life is to “live together in harmony and live together in love, as though they had only one mind and one spirit between them.” That’s Philippians 2:2 from J.B. Phillips.

But it’s easier said than done. How are Christians actually to work out such happy harmony? First, Paul says, be united. Second, if you want to be united, be humble. This is what the church should be like, a community where nothing is done in selfishness or thinking, ‘I have a better plan than you do,’ but where in harmony each thinks more of others than they do of themselves. “A marvelous community,” exclaims one commentator, ”in which no one is looked down upon, but every one is looked up to.”

Be humble. That’s all. That’s how to live together. Just be humble.

But again, easier said than done. We can’t go around muttering fiercely to ourselves, “Be humble. Be humble.” That’s just not the way it works. If humility is so necessary, if it really is the mark of discipleship and the secret of unity in the church, then what in the world is the secret of humility, ‘cause that’s is the secret we need.

Well, having told the Philippians what to do, Paul proceeds to tell them how to do it.

“Have this mind . . . that was in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped and held onto, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men . . . . He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

This is the secret of our unity, right? This great passage is the glory of this letter. It is a description of the humility that can be ours when we are in Christ, who is both the power and the example for our pursuit of humility. And the point of humility? Humility is what makes for unity among us. If we have this mind which was in Christ Jesus.

The usual interpretation of his verse is to take it as an appeal to the example of Jesus Christ. That sense is there, sure enough. But example is not enough. A theologian in India, an M. Hollis, writes, “Paul does not argue that a Christian can do something because Jesus has done it, in the sense that what one person does, another person can do.” Paul is more radical and dynamic than that. What Paul says over and over again is that Christians can do what was before *impossible* because they are *“in Christ,”* new man and new women in Christ. “The humanly impossible (humility or unity, for example) [what was previously impossible] is possible now because they are in Christ.”

The New English Bible captures it this way: “Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus.” In other words, let your mutual relationships be governed not by your natural minds, your old nature, but by the new nature, the new mind which is now yours as you are *in Christ*. The power is in Him. It becomes ours when we are in Him.

This may have been the very first Christian hymn. Every phrase is measured, every word exact and balanced. It’s more than a hymn, though. It is a three point sermon in itself on the person and work of Jesus Christ. First, Paul sweeps us back to the beginning of time for an exceedingly rare glimpse of Christ before He came to earth -- the preexistent Christ. Next he focuses on the hinge of history, the incarnation. Finally he moves on majestically to the end of time and Christ’s exaltation. Why all this just to teach humility?

Well, let’s take the three movements. *1) The preexistent Christ.* Paul begins with Christ before He came to earth because it is this that gives ethical meaning to the example. It is precisely because Christ WAS God that His becoming a man and a servant had meaning. There is no humility in a human being a human, or a servant being a servant. There is even less humility in a man becoming God as some modern heresies would have it.

Christ was God. Paul uses a precise Greek word for form of God here that expresses what a thing really is. JB Phillips translates it, “He who had always been God by nature.”

So we come to point 2: *the incarnate Christ*. He who had always been God . . . became human. The Lord of glory took the form of a servant. There are certain branches of the Coptic Church (an Orthodox branch of Christianity, living in Egypt) which believe that Jesus was not really a man, but was just God masquerading as a man. Those branches of Christianity which deny the real humanity of Christ have become isolated, introverted, superstitious, and selfish. They simply cease to be relevant. The deity of Christ makes the humiliation *ethical*; the incarnation makes it *relevant.*

Being found as a human being, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him.

Back in 1956 a committee of the World Presbyterian Alliance met in Prague, Czechoslovakia (behind the Iron Curtain, right?) Their theme would need to be as relevant to Christians on one side of the Curtain as on the other. They chose as their theme “The Servant Lord and His Servant People.”

What does it take to become a “servant people?” Will giving up our luxuries do it? Samuel Moffatt, a long-time missionary in China tells this story. When the Communists rolled over the Christians in Peking, knowing what propaganda use they made of our “capitalist affluence,” we tried to simplify our living standards. One of the most warm- hearted missionaries I have ever known outdid us all. He got rid of his furniture, his rugs; he ate the simplest of food, wore his oldest clothes. When the first Communist soldier came into the house, Hal welcomed him into the bare rooms. “We are here to serve, not to exploit,” he tried to indicate. The little soldier smiled and looked at his shoes. That was all; he just looked at Hal’s shoes. And Hall finally looked down at his shoes, too, and his heart sank. His were leather; the soldier was wearing frayed old canvas tennis shoes.

It’s not the things we give up (or don’t give up) that count for humility. Humility is in the heart. We need not argue too much therefore, about what it was that Christ emptied himself of in Phil 2:7. His glory? His omnipotence? Paul would brush all that aside as idle speculation.

“He emptied HIMSELF,” is what Paul says. He poured Himself out in utter self-sacrifice for you and me, as water is poured from a vase; and at the end He died for us.

The cross was the climax of humiliation. For the Philippians, the phrase “death on a cross” takes on a specially moving intensity. Paul was a Roman. The Philippians he was writing to were Romans (citizens of Imperial Rome, right?) Neither Paul nor the Philippians could ever be sentenced to death by crucifixion. It was too humiliating a death for a Roman. But not too humiliating for our Servant Lord.

What an example! He suffered for the Philippians a death they could never be asked to suffer for him. And what does he ask in return?

Humility. It’s as important as that. The mind that was in Christ Jesus, to be humble, even to a death He didn’t have to suffer, an emptying of self is the secret of our unity, people.

Thank God that in Christ, that can happen one for another.

Amen.