

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	27 September 2027
Service:	Eucharist, Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

If somebody asked you to choose one passage of the New Testament that sums up its entire message, today's second reading would be a good one to pick. St Paul wrote these words in a letter to the church in Philippi, in what is now the north of Greece, probably in the mid-50s AD, so around 20 years after Jesus' resurrection. They tell of Jesus Christ, sharing in God's divinity but humbling himself, taking the form of a servant and submitting to death on a cross. And they tell of his subsequent exaltation; his being given the name above all name above all names so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

I think it's easiest to understand this piece of writing if we imagine it like a 'U' shape and that Christ begins at the top of one of the sides of the U. The hymn says that Christ was 'in the form of God'; that he shares God's divinity. He starts at the highest point.

But, we are told, Christ emptied himself and took the form of a servant. The Greek word for emptying is a significant one: *kenosis*. To get an idea of what it means, imagine an athlete putting every single ounce of energy into running a race, or a musician putting their whole self into the performance of a piece of music, or an actor into their part in a play.

So Jesus, from an initially high point, empties himself and takes the form of a servant. As the four gospels tell us, he was born into poor circumstances, became a friend of tax-collectors and sinners; tells

his disciples that he 'came not to be served but to serve'. He goes as it were to a lower point halfway down one side of the U shape.

Half way down, because his journey is not complete. 'Being found in human form', St Paul continues, 'he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross'. Jesus travels to the very bottom of the U shape. He experiences the humiliation and grief as he cries on Maundy Thursday in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, if it is possible, take this cup away from me', and the self-emptying is complete when, from the cross on Good Friday, he cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

From this low point, right at the bottom of the U, Christ, as it were, comes back up the other side. 'Therefore God also highly exalted him'. Because Christ has humbled himself, he is exalted or raised up. We hear that God the Father raised him up to the highest glory, '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'.

This remarkable passage from the letter to the Philippians which seems to tell almost the whole story of Jesus within a few short lines has itself a remarkable history and makes it something very precious indeed.

You may have noticed that it is like a hymn or a poem. Indeed, the first hymn we sang today, At the Name of Jesus, is very closely modelled on it. So, this passage is often described as the 'Christological hymn': in other words a hymn or poem that is about Christ and who Christ is.

As I said, St Paul's letter to the Philippians was written in the mid-50s AD. It was one of the first books in the New Testament – quite possibly the first book to be written. But most biblical scholars think that Paul did not write the hymn himself, but that he is quoting in this passage a hymn that already existed. When those who read his

letter, or heard it read, listened to these words about Christ's U shaped journey of self-emptying from exaltation to humiliation and back to exaltation again, they would already have been familiar with them. So, the Christological hymn has a good claim to be the very earliest part of the New Testament: composed even before the New Testament started to be written down.

And then we can even take it one step further back when we look at the end of the hymn:

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.

So, a further thing that scholars have thought likely is that whoever originally wrote the Christological hymn included into it something that was well known even earlier. This was perhaps a very Christian statement of belief or what we would call a Creed: just the four words 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. This early Christian confession it seems has been inserted into the hymn: every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul introduces the Christological hymn with the words, 'let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus'. He encourages us therefore not just to look at Jesus' self-emptying and humility from afar, but to imitate it and pattern our lives upon it. Neither in ancient nor in modern times has humility been an especially popular virtue. Mostly human beings have thought that the prizes go to those who are able to assert their own importance. And, of course, when people fake humility, like Charles Dickens's character Uriah Heep, who is always saying how "umble" he is, it is often pretty repulsive.

But the root meaning of the word humility is staying near to the ground, being earthed; not being what St Paul calls 'puffed up' (cf. 1 Cor 8.1), or thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (cf. Rom 12.3). And the promise and trajectory of the Christological hymn is that if we share in Christ's humility, we will also share in his glory.