

JESUS, OUR PERFECT EXAMPLE AND THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF STRENGTH

The inclination of our sinful human nature is not toward humility, love, and service, but toward selfishness, so triumph over self is the great necessity for those who truly desire to put their Christian faith into practice. In his Letter to the Church at Philippi, the apostle Paul points them, and all believers, to the Lord Jesus as both the perfect example and the ultimate source of strength for living lives of Christian humility and love.

The attitude that accompanies triumph over self and results in true harmony among Christians is found at perfection in Christ. The more thoroughly we come to know Christ, the more completely Christ and His love will fill our hearts. The more we are in Christ and Christ is in us, the more Christ-like and unselfish we will be in our attitudes and actions. So, by way of encouragement to adopt our Saviour's attitude as our own, Paul offers a magnificent description of the attitude of Christ, in Philippians 2:5-11, our Second Reading for today.

Paul's words are offered here as encouragement, but they are much more than that. Suddenly, perhaps surprisingly, they expand into a significant doctrinal statement, one of the great New Testament summaries of the humiliation and exaltation of our Saviour. With a loftiness and dignity of style that well suits the profound nature of his subject matter, Paul takes us by the hand and leads us to see the divine mysteries of the person of Christ and the work that brought about our salvation.

The apostle begins this significant section of his epistle with an unparalleled description of the humiliation of the God-man. In order to understand Jesus' humiliation, we must first understand that Jesus is "equal with God." From all eternity Jesus has been one with the Father, being truly God. His eternal existence as God is unshakable and unchangeable. Jesus' divine nature is not capable of experiencing humiliation, yet Jesus, while fully retaining His divine nature, took on a true human nature. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He who is true God from all eternity became a true man and dwelt among men. This we call the incarnation, and we accept it as one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith.

In Jesus' incarnation, the human nature that Jesus assumed shared in all the characteristics of His divine nature. The two natures are now perfectly united. After the incarnation the Bible speaks of one divine-human Christ, the God-man. Jesus possesses all the fullness of the divinity. Yet, because He is truly man as well as truly God, He could and did humble Himself for us. Because our human understanding of divine things is limited by sin, we cannot fully fathom this, but God clearly reveals these awe-inspiring truths to us in His Word. We humbly accept them in grateful faith.

Jesus is indeed true God, equal with the Father in power, authority, and majesty, and He possesses all the characteristics of God. This He clearly demonstrated during His earthly ministry. Here was a man who could read the hearts of men, feed multitudes, control the weather, cast out demons, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. Those who observed Him closest had to declare, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus was and is in very nature God.

Nevertheless, the Paul tells us, He "did not consider His equality with God as a prize to exploit." Jesus was well aware of the fact that He is God. He knew perfectly that He possessed all the majesty of God from all eternity and that He possessed it fully also during the days of His earthly ministry. But Jesus did not consider this something to be exhibited or displayed for His personal self-advancement and glory.

In Paul's day, victorious generals and other public figures would frequently honour themselves and their achievements by using their moment in the sun to erect monuments to themselves and their achievements. Today also the great men of the world frequently use the privileges and trappings of their offices to enhance their reputations, further their careers, and perhaps even line their pockets.

Jesus, though He was God in very nature, did not appear on earth to glorify Himself. He did not look for His own advantage. Nor did He arbitrarily use the divine privileges and powers He possessed to satisfy passing fancies or to gain earthly fame and power. If such had been the reasons for which He assumed his human nature, it

would have been useless for Him to assume it. The mission He received from the Father simply could not be combined with a gaudy display of divine majesty. So there was no such display. When He who is in very nature God came to this earth, He fully considered the mission and the work for which He had assumed His human nature. He considered us, and He humbled Himself.

In accomplishing His humiliation, the God-man “emptied Himself, took on the form of a slave, and became like other human beings.” Human language struggles to give adequate expression to the greatness of what Jesus did. Jesus, of course, did not empty Himself of the deity, as some wrongly teach. He was and always remained true God. At times, even in His state of humiliation, He clearly gave evidence of the divine characteristics and powers He still possessed. We think, for example, of the miracles, His transfiguration, or even the sudden display of His almighty power that He showed His enemies in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The divine nature was always there, and all that His deity bestowed on His human nature was always His as the God-man. But during His earthly life and ministry, Jesus emptied Himself of the *full and constant use* of all the prerogatives of His divinity. He laid aside the unlimited exercise of His power and did not always use or demand His rights as God. Instead, He took on “the form of a slave.” It was as if He covered the glory of His divine majesty with the tattered rags of a beggar. He became altogether lowly. He became like every other human being - lowlier, in fact, than most - in His earthly manner of living. Though He Himself was sinless, He assumed human nature in the weakened condition in which we have it, burdened with the consequences of sin. Although He is the Lord of the universe, He was born in a stable. He never possessed earthly property or wealth. He was despised by many of His contemporaries. He placed Himself under the demands of God’s law. He took on the nature of a servant while He retained, but did not always use, the full power and majesty of God.

Jesus’ emptying Himself of the full and constant use of His divine majesty and taking on a servant’s form was a necessary part of His office as our Redeemer. If He had lived on earth only as the disciples saw Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, His redemptive obedience to the law as our substitute as well as His rejection, suffering, and death would never have taken place, and our salvation never would have been won.

What a remarkable difference there is between the way earthly rulers or conquerors seek victories and the way Jesus gained the greatest victory of all for us. Earthly rulers seek victories through strength. They are forever building up weaponry, armies, and alliances to guarantee power for themselves. Jesus worked to gain His victory for us in the very opposite way. He deprived Himself of the full use of His power and became altogether lowly in order to become the Substitute for the sinful world and carry out the Father’s plan to save sinful mankind.