

Jesus' Refusal to Seek Glory for Himself

Jesus, while a Man on earth, never used His divine power for His own needs or for His own safety. Although He could have used His power to provide food when He was hungry, He chose to rely on the Father to provide everything by which a human being lives. In Gethsemane, He could have summoned twelve legions of angels to protect Him, but He did not do so. Several times, His enemies wanted to kill Him, but could not do so, because His hour had not yet come. When those who came to Gethsemane to arrest Him said they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, and He told them, "I am He", they went backwards, and fell to the ground. He could have kept on causing that to happen until they ran off in fear, but He did not. His only concern was the safety of His disciples. The same was true about seeking honour. He had earlier told the Jews, "I am also not trying to glorify Myself. There is One who wants Me to have glory, and He is the Judge" (Jn 8:50).

Do the events of Palm Sunday fit this picture? Jesus sent two disciples to get a donkey and her colt for His entry into Jerusalem. He wanted the crowds to acclaim Him as King. When some of the Pharisees in the crowd told Him, "Teacher, order Your disciples to be quiet!" He answered them, "I tell you, if these keep quiet, the stones will cry out." Was He seeking honour for Himself? There is little honour or dignity in riding a donkey. Unless the rider keeps his feet up, they touch the ground! A majestic horse would have been different. Jesus' interest was in fulfilling prophecy about Himself. The prophet Zechariah had predicted this about Him. Matthew wrote, "This happened so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled: 'Tell the daughter of Zion: "Look! Your King is coming to you, meeek, and riding on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden'" (Mt 21:4) The apostle John also saw the meaning of what happened in the prophecy, and wrote, "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but, when Jesus had been glorified, they remembered that these things had been written about Him, and that they had done these things to Him" (Jn 12:16). In the prophecy, "meeek and riding on a donkey" pointed away from grandeur and magnificence. Besides, Jesus knew that His coming as a King and the acclamations of the crowd would be a trigger, not for acclamation and honour, but for His passion and death, and honour for those who would receive salvation through His cross. He would be acknowledged as King by those who saw the deeper meaning of the title "King of the Jews" over His cross. What He did was not for His own personal benefit, but for ours.

There is particular irony in the taunt of the people at Jesus' cross, "If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" (Mt 27:40). He could have come down from the cross and destroyed those who were taunting Him. However, His mission on earth was to be "lifted up" (Jn 3:14; 8:28), in order that people might believe in Him for salvation. That was the way in which He would draw all people to Himself (Jn 12:32).

It is no accident that the Epistle for Palm Sunday is Philippians 2:5-11. Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death, even the death of the cross. A number of translations misconstrue this passage. Paul is not speaking about the condescension of the pre-existent Son in becoming a human being. His words "Jesus Christ" (v.5) already refer to Him as the incarnate Son. Although He had equality with God, He did not use that equality as a prize to exploit for His personal honour. It was not, as one translation puts it, that He "did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God". That would contradict Paul's previous statement that He was "in the form of God." He already was equal with God. If the subject of these verses had been the pre-existent Son, then Paul's statement that He emptied Himself would have meant that He gave up all His nature and power as God. He still had them. The important point was the majesty of Jesus' human nature. As one Person with two natures, many divine qualities were given to Jesus' human nature that human nature does not otherwise have. Scripture often says, about the Messiah, that He is given eternal dominion, the authority to forgive sin, the authority to raise the dead and to judge the world, all authority in heaven and earth, and glory. As the pre-existent Son, He always had such attributes. To say that He was given them as God the Son would wrongly imply that He had not had them before. It is a useful rule that, whenever anything divine is said to be given to Jesus, it is given to Him as a human being. Furthermore, the point is that, as a human being who possessed divine majesty, He declined to use the divine majesty that was communicated to His human nature for His own benefit. It was for our benefit that He declined to use it. It was as the incarnate Son with divine majesty that He humbled Himself.

We can say the same about the statement by Jesus that He did not know the time or the hour of the end of the world. "No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13:32). He could have used His divine ability to know all things, but for our sake He chose not to use it while in His state of humiliation. That is of one piece with His whole mission on earth. He was born of a poor mother, and put in a manger. He went through the whole course of human development, as He not only grew physically bigger and stronger, but grew wiser, and developed socially, and came to know God, His Father, better (Lk 2:52). Although He performed miracles, His life was not one grand royal tour. Many people rejected Him. He was misunderstood, criticised, and mocked. Finally, He was scourged, and executed in public as one of the worst of criminals. Now, in exaltation, He fully uses the divine majesty that he possesses as a human being.

Sinful human beings have to be reminded again and again that their hope of eternal life is not a reward, because they cannot earn God's favour through their good works. God must receive all the honour and glory. Those who think of their efforts as means of reward have resigned from the kingdom of heaven. It was different for Jesus. The Father loved Him and highly honoured Him for His self-abasement, which achieved our salvation. He earned His Father's love. Jesus said, "The reason why the Father loves Me is that I lay down My life, in order that I may take it back again" (Jn 10:17). Similarly, after referring to the depths of Jesus' self-emptying, Paul wrote, "That is why God also has very highly exalted Him, and given Him the name that is above every other name" (the name of Lord Plp 2:9). His exaltation was great reward for His atoning degradation. He received little acclaim on earth for what He was enduring. He had His eyes on the goal, that those who

believed in Him might share the glory that He had had from eternity as the pre-existent Son. During His humiliation, Jesus had in view the glory that would follow. “For the sake of the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hb 12:2). He was seeking the Father’s glory. In His prayer on the night when His passion began, He prayed, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, so that Your Son may glorify You” (Jn 17:2), and in the part where He prayed for those who would believe in Him through His apostles’ Word, “Father, I desire that those also whom You have given to Me may be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory, which You have given to Me, because You have loved Me before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17:24).

Notice how the *Formula of Concord* uses the word “majesty” for Jesus in the following: “According to the personal union He always possessed this majesty, and yet dispensed with it in the state of his humiliation. For this reason He grew in stature, wisdom, and grace before God and other people [Luke 2:52]. Therefore, He did not reveal His majesty at all times but only when it pleased him, until He completely laid aside the form of a servant [Plp 2:7] (but not His human nature) after his resurrection. Then He was again invested with the full use, revelation, and demonstration of His divine majesty and entered into His glory, in such a way that He knows everything, is able to do everything, is present for all His creatures, and has under His feet and in His hands all that is in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, not only as God but also as human creature, as He himself testifies, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me’ [Mt. 28:18], and St. Paul writes: He ascended ‘above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things’ [Eph 4:10]. As present everywhere, He can exercise this power of His, He can do everything, and He knows all things” (*Epitome* VIII, 16).