



THE SELF-EMPTYING OF JESUS

Reflexion by Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, S.J.

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In the coming weeks, the Sunday liturgy offers selections from Paul's letter to the Philippians, a community he founded. The likely date for Paul's arrival in the Imperial Roman city was the year 50 or twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It marked the first incursion of the Christian faith in Europe.

Paul seems to have made other visits to Philippi when he passed through Macedonia on his third missionary voyage (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:5 and 2 Corinthians 2:13) and when he changed travel plans because of plots by his enemies, embarking for Jerusalem from Macedonia rather than southern Greece (Acts 20:1-6). This was a time of great inner turmoil and conflict for Paul ("we were afflicted in every way—disputes without and fears within" 2 Corinthians 7:5), but also a time when God blessed him with consolation.

This mixture of divine consolation when he suffered from so many travails, led Paul to boast about the courage and generosity of these churches he had founded. In the case of the Christians of Philippi, he modified the principle of supporting himself by his own labour, accepting money from them ("no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once" [Philippians 4:15-16]).

Paul's warmth for the Philippians is manifest in his opening prayer, which often sets the tone of a letter: "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (1:3-5).

With other Pauline communications (Colossians 4:18, Ephesians 4:1 and Philemon 9), the letter to the Philippians is designated a "captivity epistle, mentioning several times Paul's status as a prisoner (1:7, 13, 16). Acts refers to Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea (23:23-26:32) and Rome (28:16-31), but the letters themselves do not indicate the location from which Paul writes.

From the epistle, it seems possible that Paul may have been imprisoned not far away from Philippi, perhaps in Ephesus. Mention of the "Imperial Guard" (1:13) and the "emperor's household" (4:22) would fit Caesarea and Rome, but equally cities of the Roman Empire—such as Ephesus—where the praetorian squadron had barracks.

Paul's considers the possibility of death as the outcome of his imprisonment. He muses on the advantage of dying—going to join Christ—but concludes that remaining here below offered greater advantages to churches dependent on him: "to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me.... I am

hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (1:21-24).

Taking on the mind of Christ harkens back to his encounter with the Risen Lord and how this transformed his way of looking at all he treasured earlier. Paul surrendered everything—including the righteousness he had acquired by following the Law irreproachably— because of the supreme advantage of knowing his Lord. All that interests him now is being seized by Christ’s risen life (“the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” [3:14]) and letting that dominate every fibre of his being:

“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him ... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (3:7-10).

This selflessness of Paul shows the impact on him of his teaching about the self-emptying of Christ Jesus that he holds out as model for all disciples (2:6-11). Unlike Adam who grasped at equality with God, Paul says the Son of God took on the condition of a slave by embracing the human condition.

Then he summed up this spoliation of self by becoming obedient to God unto death, “even death on a cross” (2:8). This ancient Christian hymn, perhaps quoted by Paul (if not written by him), paints an extraordinary teaching on Our Lord who was exalted by God for his self-offering and therefore has been given the divine name “the Lord”.

This disposition of Jesus is a model for Christians in every age. When this is so, Christians in every age can readily take up Paul’s closing exhortation in this epistle: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (4:4).

Next month: First Thessalonians and Christ’s Coming in Glory