

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

He Emptied Himself

He emptied himself of his equality with God. I think we should notice that phrase, as it comes us in the Sunday Lectionary this week. It's very central to our understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, and we should ask ourselves by what processes, by what realisations, it came to be written: what was its author thinking of, when he wrote it?

Who wrote it?

We don't know. We're pretty sure that the Letter to the Philippians was written by Paul, but the hymn he is quoting in today's passage is older than Paul. It would have formed part of the Liturgy known to the readers of the Letter; Paul is actually appealing to its authority for what he says about the Christian way of life. *Jesus*, says Paul, *let go of his equality with God.* This made him sharply different from Adam, created in God's image. Adam literally *made a grab* for becoming like God in the Genesis story. His hand closed around the forbidden fruit, and for this act of theft he was condemned. Jesus, by contrast, was ready to *let go* of the state of divinity which already belonged to him, in order to become what we are. He retains the likeness to God which belongs to humanity, but he emptied himself of divine glory, and this becomes the pattern of his whole life, inspiring him to ever more generous acts of humility. He made himself humbler yet, even to dying the death of a criminal. This journey was necessary, if Jesus was to go after Adam and Eve, and to be our redeemer.

His Mind Must Be In You

This creates an imperative for us, who bear the name of Christian. We must be exactly as submissive and selfless as Jesus. Here the Scripture has some comfort to offer us: it often stresses that Jesus' humility was created in him little by little. Rather than descending from the clouds fully formed, Jesus entered the world as we do, and we are told that he was *subject* to Joseph and Mary; the letter to the Hebrews tells us: *although he was Son (of God) he learned to obey through suffering: and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.* There's a great sense of *process* there; Jesus progressively learned obedience, until it was fulfilled, accomplished on the Cross. I see the little figure of a child in Nazareth: do you think his sinlessness meant he never got a good hiding from St Joseph, or was sent into the corner

by Mary? There's hope for all of us! But notice the words: *for all who obey him.* How, or why, does one *obey* a person who accepted total obedience for himself? What is the nature of his *lordship* of which we speak? He made himself total humility, total emptiness. Clearly, if that is lordship, it isn't expressed in tyranny. We *obey* Christ when we follow him into submission, into powerlessness.

We Don't Know Where You Are Going

Thus says Thomas to Jesus at the Last Supper; and where he goes, Thomas of all people seems unable to follow. But Jesus assures him that he already knows the way: *I am the Way.* When everything we *possess* has been stripped from us, all that is left is what we *are.* Jesus continues to choose emptiness over possession, evacuation over fulfilment. I don't know how our age, obsessed as it is with fulfilment, is ever going to receive this way to redemption! In truth we can say, with our whole heart, *we do not know where you are going.* What will Jesus answer us, as we tell him that in our prayer? Surely he will tell us what he told Thomas: know me, and you will know the way. Here is the purpose of our prayer: to know Christ, and to find our way through him.

Does This Make Sense?

When God privileges us to know the way of suffering, to accompany others through this fierce apprenticeship, or to bear the Cross in person, he is teaching us the way. Our part then is to accept the teaching, not through the filters of the mind, the jangling world of concepts and thoughts, but in the nerves and senses, where the words of Jesus become flesh: *This is my body, broken for you.* It doesn't matter if your cross comes to you from a treacherous friend, like Judas, or a corrupt priest, like Caiaphas, or a self-seeking ruler like Pilate, or just from the blind, blunt, cruel heartlessness that seems sometimes to rule the world. The way of Jesus was like that; but amidst all the senselessness, he taught us love. In this school, I am only a beginner. *Fr Philip*