

Triumph: Part One

Essay 7 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Turning again to Paul’s Ode to Joy, his letter to the Philippians, we come to one of the great classic texts of Scripture, Philippians 2:5-11, a soaring tribute to Jesus Christ that reaches its climax with:

“Therefore God exalted him
to the highest place
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

Powerful! Triumphant! Transcendent! Worthy of being set to music by Bach or Beethoven! And, in fact, many scholars suppose that we have here an early Christian hymn that begins with:

“Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross!”

And then its great coda!

Maybe, they suggest it was a hymn sung at Christian baptism. I’m not so sure. In any case, it is great poetry.

And it has a number of interesting features. One is its challenge to the Roman Empire. We forget that much of the New Testament takes shapes partly in response to life under an empire. It’s about powers and authorities, about government forcing its ways on its subjects who have little or no voice in how they are governed. Much of it is written in the context of empire. Certainly Philippians is, and Colossians. In fact, much of the New Testament is. For sure, Revelation is. But so is Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount is written in response to life under an empire. As is the Gospel of Luke which takes pains to locate the Christ story in the reigns of the emperors Augustus and Tiberius. I’m not

sure why I, why we, didn't see this before – except for the fact that until recently biblical scholarship was written by loyal citizens of empires! Only now are we beginning to see how large the issue of empire is. Even in America. Maybe especially in America as we continue to struggle between our calling as a republic and the seduction of empire.

So Scripture says a lot about empire. Empires by their very nature try to control everything. They are built upon centralized power. They are run by gender, race and class hierarchies. They are sustained by economic and military control. They are legitimated by powerful cultural myths. And they indoctrinate their subjects by innumerable images that capture the public imagination. In Paul's day, images of Caesar were everywhere: in the market, the city square, the public baths, the theater, the gymnasium and the temples, on the coins, even in affluent households, in the atrium, on jewelry, on utensils, even on paintings on the wall. The whole rhythm of life was shaped by the empire, by its feasts and festivals, by its athletic games and gladiatorial fights, by its triumphal processions.

Now it is in this context that Paul tells of a Lord who made himself nothing, emptied himself, took on the very nature of a servant, humbled himself, even as far as death on a cross! And then says: God exalts him. God gives him the name that is above every name. At his name every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Every tongue will confess Jesus Christ as Lord, not Caesar though "Lord" was one of his titles, not Caesar, instead a Lord who empties himself and takes the very nature of a servant.

But this text goes on and on hitting one high note after another. It proclaims a powerful Christology. It describes Christ Jesus as being in very nature God but not considering equality with God something to be grasped, something to be held on to, but emptying himself. So we are reminded that in Christ we see God, definitively, clearly – that he is the image of the invisible God, that in him all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form (Colossians 1:15; 2:9). which is an amazing thought.

And then we have the triumphant picture of where we're all headed – to a time when every knee bows at the name of Jesus, every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The text now draws on Isaiah 45:23 where these things are said of Yahweh. But now what's said of Yahweh is said of Jesus. With this we are back to the great vision of John in Revelation 7:9 of a great multitude praising the Lamb, a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language.

This, however, is not how many Christians see the future. Many Christians see only a few saved and the vast multitudes consigned by God to the fires of Hell, to excruciating pain, blistering, broiling, baking, for ever and ever and ever, torture beyond belief. Paul somehow didn't get the memo on this. Every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord which back in 1 Corinthians 12:3 Paul says no one can do except by the Holy Spirit.

Part Two (of two) next week.

