

**Palm Sunday 2024**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**24 March 2024**  
**Philippians 2:5-11**

The Apostle Paul remind us of one of the best known hymns or songs about Christ in the early church. The hymn of chapter two preceded Paul, but he uses it to address issues of disunity in the beloved church of Philippi. Before we talk about the hymn, let us review what we know about this city. Philippi was founded by the Macedonian King Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great in 356 BC. From its inception, Philippi was an important city, but it became more of a symbol of power and strength for the Roman empire when the combined forces of Mark Anthony and Octavian defeated the forces of Julius Caesar's assassins, Brutus and Cassius, in 42 BC, two years after Caesar's assassination (44 BC).

When Octavian became Caesar in 27 BC, the city developed as a "small Rome" settled primarily by military officers who were veterans of the civil war. These veterans created a highly hierarchical system modelled after Rome. The city had a Roman-style forum at its center, complete with a prominent temple to the imperial family. The city was also the home of the famous Via Egnatia, which was Rome's primary highway to the east, facilitating the movement of troops and commerce throughout the empire. Another sign of the city's importance was the fact that the citizens of Philippi were also citizens of Rome, a right not given to all colonies. Military veterans were assigned land in accordance with their rank and merit and they owned most of the land, food supply, and wealth. This small minority had authority over the armies and city governments, and the majority of the population who were peasants, artisans, slaves, and those unable to work depended on their patronage and charity just to survive.

To the Philippian citizens the followers of Christ were a threat to their polytheistic practices. In fact, Paul and Silas' were arrested early on in the city for interfering with the business of a pagan temple, as we see in Acts 16:20-22. Yet, there is evidence that the Gospel of Jesus took hold of the Philippians rather early on and the church had grown since its founding, but the church is experiencing a great deal of stress and anxiety, which warrants Paul's letter. This anxiety is coming from various sources: (1) Paul's imprisonment; (2) Epaphroditus' illness; (3) The Probability of not seeing Paul again; (4) opposition from unknown agitators; and (5) some degree of disunity within the church.

At some point, the Church had sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to take care of Paul in prison. This was customary in those days. The caregiver brings enough supplies and even money with which to bribe jailers to gain access to the prisoners. Once regular access is obtained, the family member or caregiver then visits the prisoner frequently to bring food and supplies, clean the cave, keep the prisoner some company, etc. The Philippian church had been providing for Paul in his incarceration, but now Epaphroditus has fallen ill and Paul must send him back home to recover. He uses this opportunity to send the beloved church this letter.

Paul starts his letter by addressing some of these issues of conflict. There is an outside group, either of local people who are making the life of the church very difficult, or the already known Judaizers who are preaching the necessity of Judaism for the early Christian churches. It is unclear who the real threat are. But he also addresses the disunity within the Church. He says, "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." This beloved Church, which is Paul's pride and joy, seems to be somewhat divided, and power may be the problem: those who have it and those who want it. Paul says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." In other words, stop fighting for power and control and serve each other. Remember the words of Jesus that anyone who wants to lead must be a servant first. And to illustrate this point, Paul uses the hymn we have today.

He says, Christ Jesus, although he was God, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. He was born in human likeness, yet he chose to be obedient to the Father to the point of death on a cross. If God chooses to come to us in this much humility and love, then we, Christ's own disciples, must show humility and mutual affection to each other and to the world. The world outside of the Philippian church is filled with strong armed men competing for power and position. Military veterans constantly subjugating and exploiting the vast majority of the people to get more and more power, access to wealth, provisions, dominance, etc. The church has allowed the values of the secular world of the day to infiltrate their ranks and now there are internal conflicts about power and control. But the church must be an example to civil society. The church must behave in accordance to a different ethic. Mutual affection and love must be the standard by which church

members treat each other. Paul says, “treat each other with great humility, considering others as better than yourselves.”

We follow one who has been highly exalted by God and whose name is above every other name. At the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess that he is Lord. This is the work of the Church: to expand the reign of Christ and to bring all people to him because only in him can salvation be found. The work of bringing the world to Christ will be very difficult if the only thing the world sees is jealousy, power struggles, an inordinate love for earthly goods, a desire for wealth and status, partisanship, and division. If the world does not find a group of Christ servers who love each other and are working together for the common good, then the world will be repelled by the Church and its message. No newcomer wants to visit a divided church.

Today, as the crowds welcome Jesus as King and Lord into Jerusalem, let us also welcome him into this church and into our lives, and let's promise to work for the advancement of his kingdom here and now for the glory of his name and for the benefit of his people. Amen!