

What is your favourite hymn? If interviewed on “Songs of Praise”, which sacred song would you opt to have the choir and congregation sing? No doubt a good tune would be a major factor in your choice; but good, theologically sound and poetic words of inspiring resonance should also influence your selection.

One of my favourite hymns, I quote it often, has no tune, so far as I am aware, and some scholars question whether it is a hymn, or a poem, at all, though in print it often appears in the indented form of poetry and it is generally referred to as a hymn. I speak of the second part of today's second reading: Paul's 'hymn' from the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians. It is one of Paul's greatest gifts to the world.

Paul is encouraging his beloved flock of Philippi to become an ideal community where everyone thinks first of others. He will later give himself and Epaphroditus, who has come near to dying when bringing Paul aid from Philippi, as examples of such putting-others-first, but his main exemplar is Christ.

Paul may have written this passage himself; or he might have adapted a creedal-hymn which had been taught to him. Which ever way, this is a very early statement of the nature and purpose of Christ. The Church quickly expressed its belief as to who Christ was and what he achieved by his life, death and exaltation.

“Though he was in the form of God”, Paul begins. This appears to be an affirmation of the divinity of Christ, and so it might be. It could also be an allusion to Adam whom we are told in the Book of Genesis was made “in the image and likeness of God”. Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden, with Eve, as they had eaten the fruit which God had forbidden them to eat, tempted by the serpent who told them that it would make them “like gods”. So Adam desired to be like God. Jesus however, “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped”. Whereas Adam sought to be like God, and over-reaching himself, fell from grace into exile from Paradise and was cursed to till the unyielding earth, Jesus did not seek to be like God but took the way of humility, “emptying himself”. A downward-upward parabola is described. Jesus descends to become human, and the lowest form of humanity, a slave, and dies the lowest, most humiliating form of death that a slave could dread, the cruel and lengthy tortured dying of crucifixion. Jesus goes as low as it is possible for a human to sink. And then comes the upward movement which takes him as high as can be imagined: to the name which is “above every other name”; and that name, “*Kyrios*” in Greek, “Lord”, is the name of God. The sacred name revealed to Moses at the burning bush, could never be pronounced by mortal lips. When the sacred Scriptures were read, the name was passed over and the word “*Adonai*”, Lord, was spoken in its place. When the Scriptures were translated into Greek, the name of God was rendered as “*Kyrios*”. Jesus who refused to cling on to divinity, endures a horrible death in obedience and the Father bestows on him his own name.

Paul in other writings talks about the old Adam and the new Adam, so he might have had that opposition in mind here. But he also will have had in mind the suffering servant of whom Isaiah writes. This figure, it could be an individual, it could represent the nation as a whole, suffers mightily for the sake of others and by his wounds he brings healing and hope. The early Church quickly saw Jesus in this suffering servant. He was without beauty, without 'form', and poured himself out, emptied himself, and died as a sacrifice in obedience. God accepts his offering.

The movement that we see in this hymn: the giving up which takes the slave to the lowest possible point is followed as a consequence by the raising up to the heights; this movement is one which Jesus speaks of frequently. "Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life will keep it for the eternal life"(Jn. 12, 29); "There is no one who have given up house or brothers and sisters or father or mother or children or fields who will not receive a hundred fold now in this age and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk 10, 29-31). And Paul report Jesus saying, "It is more blessed to give rather than receive" (Acts, 20,35). It is a truism known to all religious that as you give away to the needy, to the point of desperation, then from out of the blue more comes to you. Give away in trust, and more comes back to you.

This is not coincidence. It is more a rule of the universe which follows from the nature of God expressed in this hymn. Jesus Christ, God made man, shows us in his humanity what God is in God's divinity. As the human Jesus empties himself, so God as God is a self-giving God. The more we give of ourselves in the name of God, the more we empty ourselves for others, the more we will be fulfilled.

A favourite hymn for many is the prayer of the little poor man, Francis of Assisi, "*Make me a Channel of your Peace*". There the man who gave up his wealth to pursue a life of utter poverty, said,  
"It is in giving to all that we receive,  
and in dying that we are born to eternal life."