

## Sermon: St Andrew's Corbridge Proper 21 Trinity 17 2026

*May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

This morning's New Testament lesson is one of the great passages of the New Testament. It includes the amazing words that begins, 'Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God' and ending with those great words 'that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'. Most scholars agree that here St Paul is quoting from a very early Christian hymn, to illustrate his practical teaching about internal relationships within the church.

The letter to the Philippians is one of Paul's most positive and joyful letters. Written from prison, Paul evidently took great delight in the fledgling Church there, which he founded, not least because the reports he had received reassured him that the Philippians were continuing to be faithful to Christ and to Paul's apostolic teaching.

But it's not that all was peace and quiet. Paul speaks of opponents and of the Philippians' suffering. Clearly, there were some from a Jewish background who strongly opposed Paul's message, requiring that the Philippian Gentiles accepted circumcision and complete submission to the Jewish law. In somewhat colourful language, Paul later refers to them as 'dogs', and 'workers of evil', so no love lost there. The division was fundamental; for Paul, what puts us right with God is faith not outward conformity to the Jewish law. The basis of Christian holiness is not keeping a set of rules and regulations, but by submitting our will to the in-dwelling Spirit of holiness and in the imitation of Jesus. So, there was a struggle going on for the soul of the church. Moreover, the church was set in an alien culture. And as with most human communities there were petty and sometimes not so petty squabbles and quarrels.

Hence, today's reading is a heart-felt appeal to the church to give attention to its internal relationships.

And I want you to notice that Paul locates the plea for unity, in the objectivity of what God in Christ and through the Spirit has already achieved. So, today's passage begins with a series of 'ifs': 'If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation from love, if there is any sharing or fellowship in the Spirit, if there is any compassion and sympathy'. Encouragement, consolation, sharing or fellowship, compassion, or sympathy, these are not merely human graces – they are divine gifts – they flow from the internal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's similar in thought to what we call the grace: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all', as Paul concludes

2 Corinthians. Those divine attributes are to be experienced in the life of the Church. *If* we as Christians are partakers of the divine encouragement, love and fellowship – then how do we reflect those graces in our common life?

Well, Paul gives his answer to those ‘ifs’: positively, it is about protecting and nurturing our unity, being of the same love and the same mind; negatively it is by avoiding and banishing selfish ambition and conceit, and in humility regarding others as better than ourselves. And then turning from the corporate to the individual, it is about looking, each of us, not to our own interests, but to the interests of others.

Now this sounds very worthy, perhaps idealistic, but then Paul relates it to Christ as our exemplar. And here to illustrate this series of heart-felt pleas, Paul quotes the words of a hymn, used in the context of Christian worship. Whether the Philippians knew and used the hymn in their own worship we can’t tell, but it is an example of the type of credal hymn that sets out the early church’s understanding the heart of our salvation.

The reason why Paul quoted this hymn is because it illustrates the humility of Jesus. Fascinatingly, it is one of the earliest texts to express an understanding of Christ’s pre-existence; in other words, of One who always existed in the form of God, but chose to empty himself of that divine pre-eminence by being born in our human likeness. The language seems to be influenced by the Genesis narrative. Adam, a human being, desired to become like God – he sought to grasp equality with God by taking the fruit of the forbidden tree. Christ Jesus, by contrast, was already in the form of God, but chose to set aside that equality by becoming human. And it didn’t stop there, because in becoming human, he did not adopt a position of human power, status, or dignity, but accepted the non-status of a slave. Nor did it stop there; in becoming human, in accepting the non-status of a slave, and therefore of one under absolute obedience, he accepted the divine will that he should die, and not merely any old death, but the humiliation, stigma, and curse of death on a cross. The hymn begins with the heights and goes progressively goes, down, down, down to the lowest, lowest depths. That was the ‘mind’, we might say the mind-set of Christ.

The hymn, of course, does not stop there. Because of his total obedience, therefore, God has highly exalted him, given him the highest name *Jesus*, and the pre-eminent place, literally God has *super*-exalted him – so that every knee – in heaven, on earth, and in the depths, will bow down, and he has been given the highest title so that every tongue will confess – *Kurios* – ‘Lord is Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father’. Here a title traditional used of God alone by Jews is used for Jesus, and yet, the Lordship of Christ is a manifestation of the glory of God the Father. As Paul states in another passage, in his culture there were many ‘lords’, but for us there is

one Lord – Jesus Christ, a sentiment we echo in the Creed. So, the hymn goes up, up, up, to the very heights.

And so, in response, Paul says to the Philippians – It that was the mind of Christ, then work it out. What are the implications of having this mind that was in Christ Jesus? How do we reflect his obedience and humility in our daily discipleship? And how do we work out the implications for how we relate to one another in the life of the Church? ‘Work it out’, says Paul. ‘Work out your salvation in fear and trembling’. In other words, in utter humility let the example of Christ inform your attitudes one to another. But even then, there is a higher reality, because God is also at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure. We’re not on our own here.

So how do we do it? Well, Paul helps us:

*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.*

Now humility is a virtue that sometimes is in short supply. I admit that I can struggle to regard others as better than myself. Because often we place ‘I’ or ‘me’ at the centre - what I want, what I like, what suits me. And sometimes we can judge each other – I’m a far better, more spiritual Christian than you are – even if we don’t say it, we can think it. But that is not the mind, the mind-set, of Christ Jesus.

During my eight years here, I have jealously tried to guard the unity of this Church, and I’ve been very alert to attitudes that might undermine it. As Paul says to the Romans, ‘Accept one another as God in Christ has accepted you.’ I hope that in the coming vacancy and when the Church comes under new leadership we will write this on our hearts, and imitate the mind, the mind-set, of Christ Jesus in humility, respect and care for one another. Let that be part of my legacy among you.

So may this early Christian hymn from Philippians 2, that states so eloquently the mind that was in Christ Jesus, may it inform our relationships one with another, so that the graces that stand at the very heart of God in Trinity may be reflected and lived in our common life, today and every day.