

## Bible Notes: Philippians 2

**Note for your diary: 7.30pm Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May in the Breakspear Room - how are you getting on with Philippians?**

### Overview

In Chapter 1, we saw Paul thinking in terms of the life of Christ not just as something from the past to be remembered and imitated, but as somehow a living power within the life of the Christians. In this chapter, especially in verses 5-11, he goes on to spell out exactly what that looks like in terms of humility and service. If you know who Jesus is, if He is alive within you, your life will be cross-shaped: defined by the same 'self-emptying' that marks His from all eternity. Verses 5-11 are just some of the most famous all Pauline texts, though many scholars believe that he is actually here quoting a hymn the Philippians might have used regularly. If that's right, then it is evidence that the identification of Jesus with God goes back even before this letter was written – back, in other words, to the very earliest days of the Christian movement. That comes as some surprise to those who are used to thinking in terms like 'once there was a simple belief about a good teacher called Jesus, and then lots of philosophical / intellectual /mystical types came and made it into a mythology about God becoming human.'

### Things to think about

2:5-11: is at once the most profound bit of theology and the most challenging bit of ethics. Paul is saying that the life of Jesus was actually the life of God translated into human form – and when translated, that life is one poured out in sacrifice for others. There is no egotism in God: nothing but seeking the good of others. This is the life which now wells up in the Philippians, showing itself in the behaviour of vv.2-3 '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.' The theology and the life go together for Paul: our character and behaviour changes because we are immersed in the life of God. Think of the Prayer of Humble Access at the Eucharist: '...that he may live in us, and we might live in him...'. This is what it is all about!

2:10-11: Paul, or the hymn he is quoting, has Isaiah 45:20-23 in mind at this point. That is one of the most emphatically monotheistic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, utterly denying the reality of any pagan gods. However, stunningly for a first century Jew, Paul uses Isaiah's language to describe *Jesus* – where Isaiah puts a very clear line between God and every created thing, Paul has the same line but puts Jesus on the God-side of it. It's as if the word 'God' now designates a relationship rather than a solitary Person: the relationship between Jesus and his Father. It's not quite a doctrine of the Trinity (that will come later!) but certainly what some scholars have called 'binitarian monotheism'. In other words, there's a 'two-ness' in God, a distinction within divine unity.

### **Things to pray about**

Letting the 'same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus' is perhaps the most basic kind of daily Christian prayer. Why not sit looking at a Cross for a while? Try to absorb what it means, and the kind of life that led Jesus there. Ask that life to take root within you – and come to communion where it is promised!

Think of the various dimensions of your life: your family relationships, your use of money, your role at work, in the church and in the wider community. Are there ways in which the life of Jesus is nudging you from within to act differently in them? (And if not ... why do you think that is?)

### **Questions to ponder**

Paul thinks that when someone becomes a Christian their character changes – whether instantly or over time. Their deepest motive changes from one of self-seeking, to one of service. Do you think he is right? If so, how do you make sense of Christians in whom either moral instinct or moral power seems absent?

2:13 says that the life of God within not only supplies the moral power to do what is right, but actually helps us to will it in the first place – in other words, to recognise what is good and want it. Do you think being Christian has changed your moral instincts / perceptions in any way: are there things you would not have considered morally significant before that you now do?