

Humble unto Death Philippians 2:5-11

“Christ by highest Heaven adored, Christ the Everlasting Lord! Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of the virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity, Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.” That’s what Charles Wesley wrote about Jesus in his immortal hymn, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” That’s the great truth we celebrate during this season of the year. And that’s the same truth on which Paul meditates in this passage.

Yes, the Messiah, the promised Son of David, existed in the form of God from all eternity. Jesus of Nazareth, the flesh-and-blood man who walked and ate with His disciples, was at the same time equal with God the Father as His Divine Son.

But as the second verse of “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” says, “God of God and Light of Light, begotten, Lo, He abhors not the virgin’s womb.” Just so, Paul tells us that this Son of God emptied Himself of all the rights He had, all the comforts of Heaven that He had enjoyed for all eternity, and entered into His creation that we have spoiled by our sin, truly becoming a man, and sharing in all the sufferings our rebellion against Him has brought upon us.

Moreover, as that wonderful spiritual, “Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” reminds us, it was “Down in a lowly manger our humble Christ was born.” And in today’s passage, Paul confirms for us that Jesus came in the form of a servant. He was not born in a royal palace, but in a stable. And He grew up to be not a respected religious leader, but just a wandering rabbi, hated by the kings and priests of His day, and eventually crucified by the Romans at their behest.

No, none of this is shocking to us New Testament Christians. We are no longer amazed by the notion that the man Jesus could be God, or that the Eternal God could become a man. We don’t even find it strange that God could be Father and Son and Holy Spirit at the same time. No, we’ve sung these truths to one another all our lives: “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing; O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!”

But as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table today, we need to remember why all of this is so important. For in order for Jesus to set this table for us, what all those Christmas carols and what today’s passage says about Him had to be true. In order for Him to give Himself as a sacrifice for us, He had to be both God and Man at the same time.

Why is that? Well, of course, Jesus had to be a man in order to die in our place. After all, that’s the central meaning of all those Old Testament sacrifices. When those animals died, it proved that only death could atone for the guilt of sin. But at the same time, the fact that those sacrifices had to be repeated over and over proved that no mere animal could truly atone for the sins of man. Only a man, made in the image of God, could adequately pay the death penalty due to every man’s sin.

But since all of us have been born sinful, none of us could possibly be pure enough to pay for the sins of another. And none of our lives could have enough value to pay for more than one person’s sins. And let’s face it – no mere man could possibly atone for the sins of all the people of God throughout space and time. No, only God Himself could offer up a sacrifice that is so pure and so valuable. But at the same time, only a man could offer an adequate substitute for other human beings.

And so only Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, Immanuel, can set this table before us today. Only the Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing, only the Incarnate Deity can offer true forgiveness of sins. That’s why Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” That’s not a statement of pride. It’s a statement of fact.

But knowing that Jesus is in fact the Son of God and the Son of Man makes the sacrifice that He offered for us all the more amazing. For remember: Jesus was not only a man. He was also a perfect man. At the time of His death, He had never done a bad deed, or thought a wrong thought or even felt an impure emotion. He was perfectly in fellowship with the Father – no sin had ever clouded their relationship.

And yet, it was this perfectly spotless Jesus, this holy and righteous and almighty God Who chose to humble Himself. He humbled Himself to the will of His Father, Who desired that all His people might be saved. But even more amazingly, Jesus humbled Himself before those who called themselves the people of God, the very people who picked up stones to throw at Him, the very people who abandoned Him in His hour of need, the very people whose sins were so numerous and so wicked that they required the death of God Himself to wash them away.

In fact, Jesus humbled Himself before sinners like us. And that's why, before anyone comes to this table, he or she must first make a public confession of sin and a public profession of faith in Christ. And that's why we'll confess our sins together before we take the bread and the cup. For unless we understand and acknowledge our need of a Savior, nothing on this table will do us any good.

But however clearly we may see our sins, the amazing truth is that on the day that Jesus died for us, He knew every one of them with greater clarity, and saw every one of them with greater disgust. In His perfect holiness, He saw our sin, our selfishness, our rebellion against God for the treason it truly is. And yet He stretched out His arms on the cross, and allowed Himself to die and to be laid in a tomb because His love for us was greater than any desire He might have had to save Himself. It is this Jesus, in all His Divinity, in all His Humanity, in all His humility who welcomes us to this table today.

But the reason that He can welcome us is because He didn't stay in that tomb. No, today's passage tells us that it was precisely because He was willing to humble Himself to the point of death that He was raised from the dead, that He ascended into Heaven, and now sits at the right hand of the Father in glory. It was because He was willing to humble Himself to death that He now possesses all authority in Heaven and on Earth.

For it is the Slain Lamb before whom every knee shall bend. It is the King Who holds the scepter with nail-pierced hands whom every tongue will confess as Lord. And it is by reigning in such a humble way that the King of Kings will bring glory to the Father before whom He humbled Himself to death.

So, how can we respond to this Jesus, this One Who reigns in humility, this one Who is exalted through dying? We can join all the saints throughout all the ages, bowing our knees before Him, confessing in our sins our need of a Savior, confessing in our weakness our need of a redeemer, confessing in our humility our need of a Lord and King to rule over us. For it is such confession and humility that is required before we can come to this table.

For what does Jesus offer us here but Himself? And if through this sacrament we would experience union with Christ in this world, we must also experience this world the way He did, not clinging to our rights, but by emptying ourselves in love and service of others, by humbling ourselves to do the will of the Father.

So, if you truly repent of your sins, if you are in love and charity with your neighbors, and if you intend to follow the commandments of God, and to walk in His holy ways, draw near with faith. Take this holy Sacrament to your comfort and strength, making your humble confession to Almighty God.