

Heavenly Disciples for Canterbury

Philippians 2:5-11

// I don't know about you, but I have a terrible weakness for comparing myself with others.

All too easily I find myself worrying that others are cleverer than me, funnier than me, taller than me, better at keeping things organised... the list goes on and on.

As an artist, it can sometimes be almost unbearable when I'm trying as hard as I can to improve in my work, when I'm painfully aware of the huge number of other artists I consider to be vastly superior to me.

Sometimes I am faced with the temptation to give up. To throw in the towel. To not even try any more. Why should I, when so many others are doing so much better than I am?

I would like to suggest that comparing ourselves with others drives us in one of two possible directions - self pity, or the pursuit of growth.

Our passage today from Paul's letter to the Philippians is a masterclass in being the best we can be, and paradoxically we find it's not about us at all.

Philippians 2 verses 5-11 is the perfect antidote to self pity, the pursuit of self-promotion, in fact it's the antidote to any kind of selfishness at all.

Verses 6-11 are written beautifully, like a poem, and they come almost packaged in this preceding phrase: "In your *relationships with one another*, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus".

Immediately we see that this is not about US, but about EACH OTHER, and how we reflect Christ together as His church. So, as we work through this passage, let's consider how the first sentence helps us each time to see how *we* are being asked to act.

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“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage”

Whenever I am struggling with feeling inadequate, or pride is rising up in me when I feel superior, *this* is the verse to call to mind. Jesus, the GOD-MAN, never once took His divinity for granted.

We are told He was tempted, but He never gave in. He spent every day on earth engaging with His humanity. When He did perform miracles, it was always according to the will of the Father and never for His own fame, never to pursue His own status.

Because of His humility, He was recognised as someone to follow.

Jesus is the perfect example for us, because although we are called to be *like* Him, we can never *compare* with Him.

In his book *The humanity of God*, the great theologian Karl Barth says:

“What expressions we used – in part taken over and in part newly invented! – above all, the famous ‘wholly other’ breaking in upon us ‘perpendicularly from above,’ the not less famous ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between God and man, the vacuum, the mathematical point, and the tangent in which alone they must meet.”

I know that’s not the most accessible of quotes, but isn’t it exciting, even if we don’t fully understand it? Barth’s phrase “wholly other” is a great way to think of God. It helps us to see that comparisons are futile, they fall apart immediately.

In God, concepts such as “good” and “bad” don’t even apply, at least not as we understand them.

Ludvig Wittgenstein once said: *“If a lion could speak, we could not understand him”*. It is *through* Christ, God’s self-revelation to us, that we are graciously given the opportunity to meet the personhood of God.

And so, while Jesus inspires us to be more like Him, we are invited to throw

off the self-created shackles of comparison and simply be ourselves, as He made us to be, in total, giddy, glorious freedom. How outrageous!

“Who can compare to the glory of the risen Lord?” NO ONE! That’s the point! Christ is risen and we are free!

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“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ...he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

As Christ serves us, so we are asked to serve each other. Serving requires a certain amount of understanding. Years ago I had an experience where I saw a homeless man sitting on the street. I decided I would do a good deed, and I went off to buy some food and drink for him. When I went back to give it to him, I was surprised to find that while he was grateful, he would have preferred something other than what I had gone to get. I realised that if I had engaged in a conversation first, I would have had a better understanding of how to serve him well.

Even giving to charity today can have a degree of disconnection, cynicism, or disillusion. We give our money, but from the moment we have handed it over, we don’t know very much about how it is going to be used.

Now, I’m not saying don’t give money to charity, but I think it’s good to stop and think from time to time how we can practically serve the needs of those around us. A good example is the Food Bank - we collect food here and it is collected and distributed to people who really need it. It’s easy to join in, too - next time you are shopping, buy two packets of pasta and donate the second.

Sometimes when we serve each other, it will come easily and joyfully. Other times, it may be more costly. For me, it’s often difficult to give up my time.

But I find that if I do give up some of my time to allow someone the opportunity to talk, or to be helped out with a job, I can see how important and meaningful it is.

Using the example of Christ, we see God breaking in to our own time to

become part of it. This is the God who created time itself, this is the God with all the time in the world, and yet chooses to limit himself within the parameters of time that we all experience.

Jesus gave up more than we ever could, or could even imagine.

Jesus wasn't just playing a role. Yes, when he washed the feet of the disciples He presented Himself as a servant, but this was to make a point during a specific moment in time for a specific group of people. Jesus isn't God dressed up as a servant - He *is* a servant. One commentator has noted that

“This was the true expression of His innermost nature. He was the God-Man, Deity and humanity united in one, and He came as a servant.”

3

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ...being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!”

We might read this as: ‘in your relationships, be prepared to make sacrifices.’ We live in a culture where not getting what you want is unthinkable for many. The United States declaration of independence protects “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”.

The idea of making sacrifices is not trendy or attractive, but by putting our own wants and needs before the needs of others we become counter-cultural. When Jesus gave Himself for us, He didn't do it to satisfy His own needs. God doesn't need us for anything, He is entirely self-sufficient.

Christ's sacrifice is entirely about *our* need to be ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven. It's entirely about grace, it's about God's desire to draw us back to Himself.

John Piper, in his book “Desiring God” says:

“The way to think about self-denial is to deny yourself only a lesser good for a greater good... In other words, Jesus wants us to think about sacrifice in a way that rules out all self-pity.”

This brings us back to an earlier point - that when we get hung up on

comparing ourselves with others, we spiral off into self-pity and hopelessness. But by willing to sacrifice something of ourselves, we find hope in the belief that maybe, just maybe, it's not all about us after all.

This isn't about running ourselves into the ground for His sake, or the giving up of every single thing the world might have for us. This is about remembering why we are prepared to suffer when we follow Him.

When Christ submitted Himself to the Father's will, He made the greatest achievement in all of history. As we humble ourselves and are obedient to Him, we join with Christ in His victory.

The sacrifice has been made on our behalf, and yet we live today in the knowledge and expectation that we may be asked to make sacrifices of our own, until He returns.

The preacher John Henry Jowett once said:

"Ministry that sacrifices nothing, accomplishes nothing."

These are wise words, and a reminder not to put the cart before the horse. Any form of Christian ministry exists to further the Kingdom of God. If ministry itself becomes some sort of sacred cow, untouchable, to be continued and maintained at all costs ... something has probably gone wrong somewhere.

Sometimes we need to take a step back and look at what we are doing, and prayerfully ask some questions:

"How is this going?"

What needs to change?"

Do we need to let go of anything?"

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"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ...God exalted Him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The goal is glory. Not our own, but God's.

So as we conclude, let's consider what these things might mean for us today...

How we are with each other matters. As individuals who make up the body of Christ, it's important that we put each other first for the sake of Christ, who is in us. If we are to have the mind of Christ, we are asked to put others ahead of ourselves, to be willing servants, to be prepared to make sacrifices, and to always be ready to give the glory back to God.

Let's not for a moment think that just because this is true, it must be easy. Far from it! But as we stand in Christ, He gives us all that we need to be able to live in this way. He is endlessly giving of Himself, and He has given us the Holy Spirit who empowers us to do what we otherwise could not.

This task, to live like Christ, is frankly impossible. But with God, all things are possible, and in Christ, we can be like Him!

This isn't about comparing ourselves, falling at the first hurdle, and getting depressed and discouraged. This is about casting off the burden of comparison, and stepping into the freedom that Jesus has bought for us.

Grace didn't come cheap, so let's not squander it or take it for granted. Let's be God's heavenly citizens, taking His grace with us wherever we go, so that we might see His kingdom come in some new way here in Canterbury, and beyond.

*So today,
may you know more of the grace given to you
to think of the needs of others each day,
to be willing to serve those around you,
to be ready to make a sacrifice when the time comes,
and as you do all of this, may you give God the glory He deserves.*

Chris Marsh // 24th November 2013