

The Kenotic Christ

Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11

People flock to Robstown, outside Corpus Christi in southeast Texas. A family there has a portrait of Jesus in their living room. Putting up a picture of Jesus in a home is common in that heavily Roman Catholic area. What sets this portrait apart is that sometimes it appears to weep. Hence the crowds coming to town. The Weeping Jesus does not always weep; just every now and then, at irregular intervals. A quick web search will yield endless postings about the Weeping Jesus of Texas. These posts fall into two distinct categories: testimonies to its authenticity, and rejections of it.

According to the Gospel of John, as Jesus entered Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday, he wept. Luke does not explain why, not explicitly. I think we, however can understand why Jesus felt such sorrow. For one thing, as a human being, fully sharing our emotions, the sight of the city where he would soon hang on the cross must have terrified him. He cried out of abject fear. For another thing, Jesus must no longer have been able to master his frustration at the depth of rejection he was experiencing. He cried out of exasperation. He had so many opponents: Pharisees, scribes, Jews of no distinction. He had taught God's truth with power. He had embraced his fellow Jews, Samaritans, Roman officials, men, women, children, rich, poor. He had performed *miracles*. But so many were rejecting him. Some believed

in Him as the Son of God, some did not. Some people believe the Weeping Jesus of Texas is a miracle, some reject it as a cheap fraud. What do **we** believe?

On this Palm Sunday ask yourself this question: do I accept or reject Jesus as the Son of God? Corpus Christi means Body of Christ in Latin. Just as he entered Jerusalem in order to sacrifice his body, allow Jesus to enter your heart.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Christian churches of the Greek city of Philippi tells us Jesus "emptied himself". The Greek word for this kind of emptying, kenosis, appears in chapter two, verses seven and eight. It means to deprive of power. Jesus, as God, voluntarily deprived himself of his divine power in order to accomplish the mission God—himself—assigned him—himself. Let us work through this passage to learn more. Paul wrote to churches he loved. Scholars call Philippians the "happy letter". It lacks the criticisms and admonitions present in all his other New Testament letters. Paul praises the Christians in Philippi. Perhaps he felt they could handle a calling deeper and harder than the other Christians to whom we know he wrote. Regardless, here in Philippians Paul urges them to have a Christlike attitude. He wants them to imitate Jesus, who, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

For Paul (and hopefully for us), Jesus *is* God. The word translated "form" means "in his inmost reality". Being in the "form of God" here means, "being God". But Jesus let go of that power. He emptied himself of his "godness". He took the form

not of a servant (as our translation reads) but of a slave. Though God, he accepted not just death, *but death on the cross*. We have spoken before of the pain of crucifixion. We may not, however, have spoken of its humiliation. The Romans adopted crucifixion from the Persians. They practiced it only in those parts of their empire that shared proximity with the old Persian Empire, headquartered in what we know as Iran. In Israel, they crucified only non-citizens of the lowest social rank. Jesus' crucifixion, while excruciating (literally) was also a calculated insult. It was a way of proclaiming the disdain the Roman and Jewish authorities had for him.

We have also spoken of how Psalms often have a twist. The one we read today, Psalm 31, has a twist. So does our passage from Philippians. It appears in verse nine: "Therefore God has highly exalted (Jesus)". *Because*, not despite but because, Jesus humbled himself and died in humiliation on the cross, God has exalted him. God has rewarded, God has lauded Jesus so greatly that "every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that (He) is Lord..." Jesus' tears have turned to triumph. He has passed through death to life. But on that Palm Sunday when he rode into Jerusalem, that lay yet in the future. His agony and his exaltation. The glory that Paul wrote of in his letter, the glory of God revealed in the plan of God coming true, was still just a plan, not a realization.

Which takes us back to how we react to this whole story. Even with the benefit of hindsight, of knowing the victory the Bible reports belonged to Jesus, we often struggle to believe it. Authors Jim Davis, Michael Graham and Ryan Burge wrote The

Great Dechurching. This book, brought to our attention by Alan Harder, uses cold, hard data to demonstrate a reality we have all noticed: fewer and fewer people feel the call to attend church. Published in 2023, among its many stark facts is this. Less than half of all Americans report having faith in *any* god. A substantial percentage of these folks call themselves agnostic, meaning they do not know whether a god exists. Another substantial percentage of them call themselves atheists, meaning they do not believe in any god.

Church attendance has fallen into the basement. We make this observation on the first Sunday of the High, Holiest day of the year in our community: Spring Break. As I typed these words last Thursday I knew full well our attendance today would drop even lower than it has dropped since the COVID pandemic began exactly four years ago. I mean no criticism of anybody in particular. When my children attended school Spring Break was a big deal for our family, as well. But I want to make a larger point. People are voting with their feet. Church attendance in the big picture has dropped largely because faith in God has dropped. Which takes us all the way around the circle to this: Jesus died for us. Jesus rose for us. Jesus reigns in power over us. Jesus prays for us. What do we do to honor him?

Jesus humbled himself. He lowered himself in order to meet us where we are. The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35: "Jesus wept". He wept at that time because his friend Lazarus had died. He had such humanity that the death of a loved one moved him to cry. How must we respond to such a God? We must respond by

weeping with those who weep and laughing with those who laugh. As Jesus does. Jesus emptied himself. He became one of us. He did so in order to join with us on the deepest level. Because he did, we can join with him eternally. Follow him. Follow him into kenosis, into emptying yourself, that you might become exalted. With him.