

St Mary Magdalen, Oxford

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Growing up in a vicarage can be a very ambiguous experience. People have strange ideas about what your home life is like and often unreasonable expectations of your behaviour. I well remember the occasion when I had just passed my driving test and the tester saw my home address was a vicarage and asked me what it was like being a vicar's child. I was already a bit miffed by him as he had asked if I was still at school and it was the very week I took my Cambridge degree. So I said rather grimly, "it depends on the vicar." Another hazard is that the family can move round a lot. I went to my 5<sup>th</sup> school aged 12. My parents had decided I must be stable for what were the O and A level preparatory years and so I went to a boarding school founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by pious Evangelical laypeople who wanted as good an education for their daughters as their sons – principally so that they could become good and sound Christian wives and mothers, and pillars of their local churches and communities. I am not sure what these founders would say about me or many of my contemporaries! It was a searing experience in many ways but I learned some important things quite apart from academic subjects. I learned to become an omnivore: to eat whatever was put before me or else I would have starved. More seriously weekly exposure to worship in the glorious late medieval abbey gave me a sense of the beauty of holiness and the importance of sacred places where prayer has been offered for centuries. So lovely was it that when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries the townsfolk bought it for themselves. And I learnt an awful lot of holy scripture by heart. We sang psalms at daily assembly much as choristers and lay clerks still do in our great college and cathedral choirs. We also had to learn what were called "scripture verses".

Having words of scripture embedded in the memory is profoundly important for a Christian's spirituality. Like some of our greatest hymns they become powerful resources, part of our spiritual furniture. They sink deep down into your heart and can surface in times of need to comfort and illuminate – and sometimes to warn. Our epistle for today (**Philippians 2: 1-11**) is just such a passage and I am sure many of us could quote it – not least because it forms the foundation for one of the best-loved

Anglican hymns, “At the name of Jesus”, by Caroline Noel another vicarage child, daughter of a Victorian vicar of Romsey Abbey.

Paul is writing to the Christians at Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia, which he had visited after a vision in the night when he had seen a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come and help them. **(Acts: 16)** At Philippi he and Silas had incurred the wrath of the owners of a fortune-telling slave girl, because they evicted the spirit which possessed her and so deprived her owners of their lucrative profits. They were thrown into prison on specious charges of disturbing the city, but were liberated by an earthquake. Their jailer was on the point of suicide because he feared all the prisoners had escaped, but Paul intervened and told him the prisoners were all there. The jailer and his whole household were subsequently baptised on hearing Paul’s preaching about Jesus. Now Paul writes to the believers in Philippi this letter or perhaps several which have been amalgamated by editors. He probably knew the end of his life was near and poured out his heart to his readers and hearers, exhorting them how to behave towards each other, and sharing with them his deepest theological convictions about the nature and meaning of the risen Jesus. It seems likely that the second half of our reading was a pre-existing Christian hymn which Paul wove into his theological exposition. “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God ...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name, so 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.”

Here within the life time of people who had known and seen Jesus is an amazing affirmation - about who He was and is, and what He had done. Although He was the very image of God, he emptied himself of all that meant, to identify with fallen humanity, and by dying and rising to call it back to its true nature. Where Adam had failed disastrously, the new Adam restored humanity to its true dignity and to its calling to be sons and daughters of God. Here Paul and the later writer of John’s gospel are at one – that the glory of Jesus and of God is demonstrated in utter self-

giving, the giving of a love which makes no human sense but transforms our human lives.

And surely that eternal self-emptying and self-giving go on in time as we experience it. The Lord continues to come in littleness and humility and love – in the human words of scripture, in so much later writing and speaking as Christians try to describe what God is doing, and of course in the sacraments, as his body on earth celebrates his presence. What could be more ordinary than bread and wine, water and oil, human touch and words of forgiveness and peace?

Paul does not stop there – in contemplation of the work of Christ. He writes to the Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” What does this mean?

First, as Paul spell out, it means transforming the way we naturally look at each other and behave towards each other. Having the mind of Christ means seeing others as Christ sees them – rather than through the lens of our own self-centredness and self-importance. It implies a gentle attitude of humility and care for others. He exhorts the Philippians to live in concord flowing from the love of Christ and a sharing in the Spirit. “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. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”. There are echoes here of the letter to the Galatians where Paul urged them not to become conceited, competitive and envious, but rather to be guided by the Spirit, the spirit of Christ himself – the Spirit whose fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. **(Galatians 5: 22-26)**

Second- in a rather more hidden way Christians are called to “have the mind of Christ” in lives which are increasingly empty of self in a spiritual sense - so that they may be filled with the fulness of God. Maybe here the most helpful images are those of Jesus in his earthly life wrestling with the temptations Satan threw at him after his baptism – temptations in part to spiritual status and achievement: or the agony in the

garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is seen as sweating blood as he seeks to put God's will in the centre of his human existence, even to the extent of accepting death on a cross. Many good and sincere Christians are so very busy in trying to construct lives of faith. But there can be no achievement in our relationship with God. The great spiritual teachers through the centuries have told us that ultimately we have to come to God in emptiness, in our sin and weakness and failure and in our lack of faith. Christ's own story of the Pharisee and the Publican surely says just this. **(Luke 18: 9-14)** Painfully we have to learn that – in the words of the BCP Collect for the second Sunday in Lent, “we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves”. It is only then that God's own life can flow into us, that the mind of Christ can be formed in us. This is who we are called to be, as people who carry his name.