

Power and Weakness 2 Philippians 2:1-11

I think it would be hard to argue with the fact that, today, Christmas has been pretty much secularised. Instead of it being a feast remembering the incarnation, for the vast majority of people it's become a feast to consumerism and commercialism – and I don't mean that in a judgmental way, but as an observation. And so the question is, does the incarnation, the birth of Christ 2000 years ago have anything to say, that's worth hearing, about all the seasonal noise and busyness of shopping and partying? Does this idea of Power and Weakness – of the supreme power, God, humbling him and becoming a vulnerable baby – the very picture of weakness – have anything to say to us that's relevant, or is it just a relic of long lost Christendom?

The Spirit of Christmas

In Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the main character Ebenezer Scrooge is visited on Christmas Eve by his nephew Fred. And these two men could not be more different. To Scrooge, Christmas is a time to be mocked and ignored, because all it can do is leave you poorer. And Scrooge says to Fred, "What's Christmas to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in them through a round dozen of months presented dead against you?" But his nephew sees things differently, and in particular Fred sees through the finances of Christmas to something deeper: "I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round... as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

Now, when Fred says that, did you notice that he's echoing the apostle Paul in our reading from Philippians? Because there Paul says that Christians should be marked by an attitude of loving common-mindedness: v2, 'being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.' That an attitude that puts others first should pervade our lives: v3, 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.'

And that's exactly what Fred's talking about. That Christmas is a time when we should view those below us as our fellows; that we be kind, and forgiving, and open up our shut-up hearts freely. Now, is to think like that to be frozen in some kind of 19th Century, Dickensian, Victorian time-warp? Well, no. Recently we received some vouchers from Ikea, and on the back was an advert for their Christmas campaign – 'No Empty Chairs at Christmas'. And their aim is that everyone should be able to find a place at a table at Christmas, that no-one should have to spend Christmas alone.

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But why is that a good thing? Why do you and I feel instinctively that Fred and Ikea are right, and Scrooge is wrong, that the Spirit of Christmas is right? And the reason I ask that is because once you've let go of the Judeo-Christian heritage of society, and are left with the dog-eat-dog, survival-of-the-fittest, philosophy of a purely materialistic universe, you have very little to base such attitudes on. Because in that kind of world, Scrooge is right – you've just got to keep ahead of everyone else.

But what's remarkable about what Paul is saying is that this other-centered attitude isn't just a Christmas thing, it's an all year round thing. And again, we agree with him, don't we? Or at least we like the sound of it - that we would much rather be like Nephew Fred all year round, than an all-year-round Scrooge. Until, that is, looking out for the interests of others, and counting others more significant than ourselves, hits the wall of our self-centredness and self-absorption. Because whilst we love the sound of humility, and putting others first, and doing nothing from selfish ambition, in truth we struggle to do that on Christmas Day, let alone everyday.

I remember someone once saying that you know how much of a servant heart you have, when someone treats you like a servant. Because then, when someone speaks down to you, or bosses you around, or expects you to do something for them, and fails to thank you, you can feel this anger and resentment rising up inside you, can't you? And so we like the sound of servant heartedness, and preferring others, provided it's me who's being served and it's me who's being preferred!

So, what can change us? What can make us more like Fred and less like Scrooge? What can help us live as Paul calls us to live? What can deal with our self-centredness that has this ability to ruin not just Christmas, but our marriages, and families, and friendships?

Well, when I read that quote from Nephew Fred, I missed a bit out. And what Fred says is that it's impossible to live the kind of life Christmas calls us to live, without the *why* of Christmas in the first place. Listen to Fred again in full: 'I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round – *apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it, can be apart from that* – as a good time.' In other words, there is something that lies behind the spirit of Christmas. There is something that can cause us to look with love and grace and forgiveness on others, and serve them, even when it costs us. And Fred says it's the origins of Christmas. And the apostle Paul says he's exactly right.

The Example of Christ

Now, if you're diagnosed with some medical condition, your doctor can be of some help, can't he? He can tell you all about the condition, and the treatment options, and about outcomes, and life expectancy, and side effects. But no matter

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how good your doctor is, there's nothing like sitting down and talking to someone who has actually had that condition as well, is there? Because the doctor can give you the theory, but this other person, they *really* know what you're going through.

And in Hebrews chapter 2, the writer says it's because God became a man, it's because Christ was born in Bethlehem, that he is able to comfort you, and help you in what you face in life. Heb 2:18, 'For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.'

So the wonder of Christ becoming a man that first Christmas, is that he knows what it is to be you: he's been there. Jesus knows what it is to be tempted, to feel lonely and betrayed, to experience injustice and pain and suffering, and death. And in that death Jesus knows what it is to feel abandoned by God – that when you most need him, you can't feel him. And it's precisely because Jesus knows by experience what it is to be human that he can comfort you, and tell you 'you can come from this'.

But Paul also says that it's through Christ becoming a man that he can help us in our struggles with pride – with our self-centredness and self-absorption and that desire to be served rather than serve. Philippians 2:5-8, 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.'

Now, just think of the contrast between God being born as a baby, and the things we tend to value today. You see today, we're told to promote ourselves, and push ourselves forward, and pursue our dreams, to be true to ourselves and make much of ourselves, and not let anyone else stand in our way. But the Son of God empties himself, Paul says, Jesus leaves behind and turns his back on everything that we would value – status, praise, position, wealth - and he takes the lowest position, and he's born into poverty to a teenage, single mum, out of wedlock, with all the shame and social stigma that went with that.

And so whilst our self-centredness fights this attitude of sacrificial service, Christ didn't fight it. He humbled himself, Paul says. And as an example of that, just think for a moment about your own family tree. Because for many of us they're not that special are they? In fact some of our families are pretty messed up. There's uncle Ed, the black sheep of the family, and there's that sister of your mother's who no one ever speaks of. But however bad ours are, Jesus has a family tree to match anything we might have. It's the kind of family tree a politician or media star would try and hush up. And if you look at the genealogy of Jesus at the beginning of Matthew's nativity account, you'll see what I mean, and the scale to which God has lowered himself. Because whilst there are some

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good, law abiding Jews in his line, there are also Gentiles, and prostitutes, and murderers, and adulterers. And yet God comes and enters that family tree, and is born of people like that, people like us. And he doesn't come to the wealthy or the well-connected. He doesn't come among the A-list personalities. He doesn't come to those with an extensive network of LinkedIn contacts. The king of the universe comes to the poor and the outcasts and the homeless and the sinful. He came as the lowest, and he came to serve.

And ultimately, Paul says, he came to serve us by going to the cross, v8, 'even death on a cross' (v8). Why the 'even' there? Because the cross was the lowest of deaths. To the Romans, crucifixion was how you executed runaway slaves – no Roman citizen could ever be crucified, it was far too shameful. And for the Jews, crucifixion was a sign you were cursed by God. And yet that's the place Jesus takes, your place and my place, at the cross. That's how low he goes for us.

So how can you and I have that kind of sacrificial servant attitude? Well, look what Paul says in v5, 'Have this mind among yourselves, *which is yours in Christ Jesus*'. It's as we are united with Christ by faith, as we put our trust in him and look to him, as we allow his Spirit to transform us, that his mind, his way of seeing things, his way of sacrificial service and humility can become ours. I mean, just think how we tend to look down on others – because we all do it, don't we? Maybe you rank people based on their education; or their income. Maybe it's on their class, or their ethnicity, or their politics. And these people you see as your equals, but these others you feel justified to look down on. But when Christ's mind becomes yours it turns all our ways of looking down on others on their head, doesn't it? Because the One person who could look down on everyone, God himself, deliberately takes the very lowest position.

And he did it for you. And when it dawns on you that this king became a servant and took the lowest place that he might lift you up to the highest place, then it changes the way you see yourself, and others, and service. And you find that you too can take the place of service. And rather than being quickly impressed by name, or fame, or prestige, or wealth, you know that Christ became poor to make you rich, and so rather than live to make yourself rich, and have your own way, you can make others rich by investing in their lives with your time and resources and encouragement.

Now, how do you react when you hear something like that? Do you feel yourself squirm at the thought that you might lose control - that this kind of life of service might cost you? Well, as one writer (Keller) says, in the light of Christ's humbling himself, 'We must give up our right to self-determination', and instead take the path of self-denial. The question is, how can you do that? How can you willingly, happily, submit yourself to the direction and control of Christ?

The Authority of Christ

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In his book, *Hidden Christmas*, Tim Keller quotes Thomas Nagel, the American philosopher, who writes about his fear of religion. This is what he says, 'I am speaking from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself. I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God, and naturally I hope that my belief is right. I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God. I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is', Nagel writes, 'that this cosmic authority problem is not rare.'

This cosmic authority problem – that if there is a God, he might have something to say about how I live my life; that if there is a God, I might have to give up my right to self-determination. And I don't want to do that. Because, today, we idolise personal autonomy, don't we? We think we will only be happy if we are in charge of our lives. We can't imagine ceding control of our lives to another, and so if we were to do that it would be one of the most counter cultural things we could do today. But the irony is that it's in God humbling himself, and putting himself in the power of others, in Christ being born as a defenceless baby, that our claim of authority and power over our lives crumbles.

Do you recall, in the reading we heard earlier from Matthew's gospel, how the angel tells Joseph what he's to call Mary's baby? Matthew 1:21, "You shall call his name Jesus." Does anything strike you about that? You see, in that culture it was every father's right to choose a name for his child. And here is the angel telling Joseph to be a husband to Mary and father to Jesus, but at the same time taking away from him that right of naming. And that would have been a deeply humbling thing to accept. In fact, it would have been totally culturally acceptable for Joseph to turn around and demand his rights: 'hey, I get to choose this boy's name. This is my decision'. But the angel is asking Joseph to submit. And so, with the birth of this baby boy, Joseph must let go of his 'right' to control. But if Christ the Lord really has been born in a manger in Bethlehem, then so must we – we must all lose control of our lives.

You see, it's not just Jesus' *example* that has profound implications for us, but also his *exaltation*. Listen to Paul again, "Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:9-11).

And so Joseph must bow the knee to Jesus at his birth, but so must we in his exaltation – because the One who took the lowest place is now seated in the very highest Paul says. And that means that we must give to Christ the ultimate place in our lives that we want to keep for ourselves. And it's when our hearts are melted by his love for us, in his humbling himself and in his dying for us, that our love for him will displace and uproot our self-love, and we'll willingly let him take that place.

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And when that happens – when Jesus really is your Lord - there are far reaching implications, aren't there? Firstly, if Christ is your Lord, you'll trust him in everything he allows into your life: the bad times as well as the good. You see, often we're happy for Christ to be Lord when things are going well. But what about when they're not? Do we want to take back control then? But for Christ to be really Lord means we trust him in the difficulties and disappointments as well as the triumphs and successes; in those times when you don't understand why he is letting this happen, as well as when you do. And you can trust him because you know that he's Lord, he's the one in that exalted position, and not you. That he's the one who knows everything, and you humbly acknowledge you don't. And that means you know that he knows what is best for you.

And when that's the case –when you find your hope, and help, and security in him, it brings with it a deep sense of peace that the troubles of life can't trouble. And with that peace comes joy and a new steadfastness and grounded-ness in the face of trouble.

And as an example of that, think of the shame that Joseph embraces by submitting to Christ. Our reading from Matthew tells us, v19, that 'Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.' Joseph wanted to limit Mary's shame. But obedience to God, having Christ as his Lord, meant that Joseph had to take that shame on himself. The shame of people thinking that either he'd slept with Mary before they were married, or she'd cheated on him and slept with someone else. And in that kind of culture, that kind of shame was huge.

But to embrace Christ, to bow to God here, meant Joseph embracing that shame. And whilst Christmas is wonderful, when Christ is your lord, sometimes things aren't so wonderful. Sometimes, like Joseph, you'll face public shame or ridicule or criticism, for Christ. But you can accept the trouble that comes your way, and you can trust him in it, when you know that he was shamed for you.

But secondly, for Christ to be Lord also means you will obey everything he tells you through the Bible to do, whether you like it or not. Now, of course, you can obey what the Bible tells you to do and still be doing so you stay in control, can't you: if I live like this, then God will have to bless me and do me good. In other words, if I live right, I get to control God. But that is not what it means for him to be Lord. For him to be Lord means you cede authority. And that might sound scary to you, but to submit to Christ and surrender to him is not like teaching your teenage daughter to drive, is it? If you've never done it, I have. Twice. It's terrifying! You're sat in the passenger seat of the car you're used to driving, and you let someone inexperienced, and incompetent, take the wheel of your life. But Christ knows how to drive, better than you, so yielding control to him is ultimately the best, and wisest thing you could possibly do.

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And so it's in the light of his coming, in his humbling himself at Bethlehem, in his example and exaltation, that you and I can, and should, bow to him. And as we daily do that, we will find his mind becoming ours, and find a growing heart of loving, humble service.