

Singing with a Purpose

Palm Sunday; Series C

Philippians 2:5-11

The Christian Church has always been a singing Church. In his letters the Apostle Paul encourages both the Ephesian Christians and the Colossian Christians to “sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16; also Eph 5:19). In Acts 16 we read that Paul and Silas were in prison for preaching the message of the Gospel in the City of Philippi of the region of Macedonia. We read that “about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

The Lutheran Church carries on in this singing tradition. It uses a liturgy, chanting various parts of it and singing Biblical canticles. The Lutheran Church has a rich hymnody that is reflected in our *Lutheran Service Book*. There are hymns all the way from the 4th Century to the Reformation era in the 16th Century to the present time in the 21st Century. The four part chorale represented here at Atonement was largely the work of the famous Lutheran composer and musician, Johann Sebastian Bach. We here at Atonement continue the tradition of the singing Church, joining in the lyrics, tunes, and melodies that have carried the Church through the centuries.



The artist Gaudenzio Ferrari (1475-1546) illustrates the Christian Church as a singing Church in his painting entitled, *Musical Angels*. He pictures a heavenly band performing. This picture is consistent with the Apostle Paul's. The Church is a singing Church. Ferrari's painting also shows us why the Church sings. One of the chief activities of angels and believers who have died in the faith is praising God, giving him thanks, and rejoicing. By using angels to represent the Christian Church as a

singing Church, Ferrari shows us the primary purposes that Christians sing. We praise and give thanks to God in song for all that he has done. Singing with a purpose! The Lutheran Church also emphasizes another purpose for singing—to teach the faith. In the hymns and the liturgy of our Church the key doctrines or teachings of the faith are clothed in song. Martin Luther himself wrote a hymn for many of the chief parts of the *Small Catechism*—“These Are the Holy Ten Commands” and “We All Believe in One True God” to name a couple. The Church continues to sing, as she always has, with purpose.

The reason I bring all of this up about the Church being a singing Church and singing with a purpose is because today is Palm Sunday, also known as Passion Sunday. On this day the Church remembers the

first day of the last week before Jesus' suffering and death for the salvation of the whole world. The Church has traditionally tied together readings from the Gospels concerning the events of Palm Sunday and the events of Jesus' Passion. If one were listening closely to the Palm Sunday reading, that person would hear the tune. Listen now: "As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest' (Luke 19:37-38). We even put these lyrics to a tune and sing it as the "Sanctus" in our liturgy in the Divine Service, right before the Words of Institution. That is our purpose for this song. Yet, the real reason the people were singing these lyrics that first Palm Sunday had more to do with pride.

Many of the people on that first Palm Sunday thought that Jesus was their Military Messiah who had come. They believed he was the Messiah but they were expecting him to be the Messiah in a different way. They were expecting him to come as God's representative to crush their enemies as a military ruler like God did to the Egyptians in the Exodus. Namely, they were expecting Jesus to be this new Moses, leading a second Exodus by conquering Rome and delivering them from its oppression. They saw Rome and other nations as their enemy. Not for one second did the majority of Israel and its religious leaders think that the problem that the Messiah had come to address had to do with them. So this Palm Sunday song was primarily a song of pride and arrogance.

The second song we heard this morning is actually believed to be an early Christian hymn. It is the text of Philippians 2:5-11. Many believe that verses 6-11 are not Paul's words but that he was making use of a very early Christian hymn for his purposes. This would mean that these verses probably pre-date the writings of the New Testament, possibly written around 50AD. This is further evidence that the Church is a singing Church.

It appears that the Apostle Paul's primary purpose for dusting off this piece of music is to address an old problem. It is the problem that spread its roots in the Garden of Eden and bore poison fruit that showed itself on Palm Sunday through the singing voices of the people. Paul uses this Christian hymn presumably to address the problem of pride and arrogance. Right before he incorporates this hymn Paul urges the Philippians, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2:5). This problem can use other aliases: conceit, overconfidence, haughtiness, egotism, self-importance to name a few. Whether you call it pride or arrogance or name it with one of these other words, the result is often the same. Communities crumble and the bond of a family fades. This is often the result when members of a family or community continually, unrepentantly count themselves as more important than others, being self-interested more than other-interested.

Pride or arrogance shows itself through selfish and self-centered patterns of behavior. We spend our money and time and other resources primarily on ourselves and our interests, wants, and desires. We

are concerned about our agenda. We like to hear ourselves talk rather than listen to others. We are overly concerned about our reputation, what we are wearing, what others might be thinking of us.

This self-centered behavior has consequences. An overly self-interested husband can be neglecting the needs of his wife and it can harm their marriage. A self-absorbed child can drive a wedge between parents, perhaps pitting them against each other in order to get what he wants. A self-absorbed worker may step on whoever he needs to in order to climb the corporate ladder. A pastor may harm a congregation with careless allocation of his time and talents. Likewise, a congregation that is looking primarily to its own self-interests rather than the needs of others may be hoarding or mismanaging resources given to it rather than being good stewards of them.

Self-interest, self-indulgence, self-importance, arrogance, pride and the like can easily take root in our lives and in our homes and in our communities, and in our congregations. It is the insidious effect of the problem of Sin. In order for healthy families, congregations, communities to show forth a character of godliness, self-interest, self-importance, arrogance, pride, and the like cannot be the root.

So Paul reuses and re-presents this hymn of humility. In so doing he anticipates the words of Thomas Moore, the Irish poet from the 18th and 19th centuries, "Humility, that low, sweet root, from which all heavenly virtues shoot."

In this early Christian hymn we sing of the service of Christ. We sing of the humility of Christ for us. He was in the form of God but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant. He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. Through his death as an obedient, humble servant of God, the Father, he paid the price of Sin. Through his selfless service the Son of God put to death the guilt that comes from arrogance, pride, and an excessive self-interest, self-indulgence, and self-importance. Christ counted you more important than himself and looked out for your interests above his own so that the guilt of your Sin could be forgiven, the debt paid. And he even makes it possible for you to be a participant in his selfless work. He brings the selfless servant and his work of forgiveness to you as a Baptized child of God. He declares you to be in a right relationship before God on account of Christ. Paul says to the Philippians two times before he recites this hymn that they are "in Christ."

Being found in Christ, you also have the humility of Christ, that low, sweet root from which all heavenly virtues flow. You now have his Spirit that helps the fruit of godly selflessness bear on that tree. As one in the Spirit you have one who helps conform you more and more to the image of God in Christ. You have one that helps you to count others more significant than yourself. You have one that helps you look out for the interests of others in your families and in our communities and in our congregation.

And we can do this in small but significant and practical ways—by working on listening to others better. By asking more questions and seeking to understand first. By spending quality time with family

members, friends, and fellow parishioners, even outside the parish. And as we do these small things, let us be in prayer about it. Let us ask God to help us be a blessing to others with the same character of selfless, humble service that our Lord himself has given us. And let us hold fast and confidently to the sure forgiveness of God in Christ as we seek to live humbly and in selfless service.

And one more thing. May we continue to be a singing people, carrying on the tradition of the Church. Let us continue to sing the rich hymns and meditate upon their deep, Scriptural content. Let us sing with joy the canticles and other parts of our liturgy in our Divine Service. For, the Word of the Lord and the grace of God dwells richly in these songs and hymns and spiritual songs. In our singing dwells the very one who once humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross—for us. So in our singing may we continue to proclaim this Christ, give thanksgiving to God, and teach the faith. Singing with a purpose. Amen.