

## 5a) The Cross, The Resurrection & The Ascension

Rose Patterson-Veira | Philippians 2:1-11

5<sup>th</sup> October 2025

What a journey we've been on over the past few weeks in this series. We've thought about what it means that the Bible is God-breathed...that God is three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We've reflected on our sin and our need for a saviour... and last week Tom spoke about the arrival of Jesus into the world as a human being and as God with us. And so today we find ourselves in the middle of the series and at the epicentre of the Christian faith. Because today we're looking at the events that literally changed the course of history - Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension. Really, the passage for today should be Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, because this is the beating heart of the whole story of the Bible. Tom clearly felt that would have made for a slightly long reading, so he's opted instead for this amazing passage from Philippians.

The section of the passage that I'm going to focus on today is verses 6-11, where we get this incredible poem. It's only 76 words long, but it encapsulates an enormous amount. It's like one of those glass prisms that we had in physics classes – a compact little thing, but shine a beam of light on it and this amazing spectrum of colours appears. We'll only really scratch the surface of it this morning, so I would encourage you to take the time, perhaps later today or sometime this week, to sit with this passage, maybe even memorise it.

Although the message and truth of this poem is clearly universal, we have it in our bibles because Paul included it in a letter he wrote to a particular group of people. And so before we go any further, I think it's helpful for us to understand a bit about the people Paul was writing to. Philippi was a small, but prominent Roman colony in northern Greece, and although only about half of the population would have been Roman citizens, it was very much ruled by the Romans. They had a strong presence and power – they owned almost all the land, had all the political power, wealth and status. The imperial cult – the worship of Roman emperors as gods – was particularly strong here, and citizens would have been expected to recognise the deity of the imperial 'gods', alongside the various other traditional gods.

The culture was all about self-promotion, about climbing the social ladder, gaining honour and glory and power and using that power to dominate those who were beneath you. Upward mobility was the name of the game and it didn't matter who or how many people you had to step on to get there. And the fact that Paul writes what he does in this letter to the Philippians, suggests that this culture was influencing the church as well.

And that's the setting into which Paul writes this:

*'...being in very nature God, [Christ Jesus] did not consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage; rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.'*

Into a world of upward mobility, Jesus - God's equal – *descends*. He has ultimate status, glory and honour, but instead of exploiting those things for his own benefit, he gives them up. This is the absolute antithesis of the way things worked in the world of the Philippians. The very first thing Jesus does as he comes into the world is to make himself nothing – to empty himself of his Godly status. And having emptied himself, he takes up the form of a human being – he arrives in the world as every other human does, naked, vulnerable, helpless, and he lives the life of a Jewish man under Roman occupation and oppression.

This is staggering, but it's just the start of Jesus's downward journey. Because, Paul says, Jesus doesn't just come in the form of a human, but of a slave. Slaves in this world didn't even have access to the social ladder, let alone any means of climbing it. And so from day one, we see that Jesus resolutely refuses to play by the accepted rules or to operate within the accepted power structures. He is reading from a different rule book.

Let's just return for a moment to the opening line: *'...being in very nature God'*. Tom spoke last week on the beautiful mystery of Jesus as being both fully God and fully human. It's an impossible thing for us to understand, but we need to hold on to the truth of it, because what it means is that what Jesus is and does as a human, reveals who God is. And at no point in the events of Jesus's life does he stop being either one, even though it may look a lot like that at times.

And so already here we've learned something about the nature of God, that humility and service, things which most people would have thought of as being incompatible with divine status, actually form part of what it means to be divine. Humility and service are both very much a part of, not contrary to, God's nature.

But Jesus's downward journey doesn't end there. Having come into the world as a human being, as a slave, Jesus descends to the depths of the human experience.

*'...being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!'*

He is rejected, humiliated, tortured and nailed to a cross. The only person lower down the social scale than a slave was a dead slave, and the only person lower than a dead slave was a crucified slave. The cross was the absolute worst that the Romans could do – and they were famous for their brutality. Crucifixion was designed to maximise and prolong pain and to utterly humiliate its victims.

Once again – who Jesus is and what he does, reveals who God is. I think we sometimes have a tendency to look for God over Jesus's shoulder – to the God who's hovering in the background somewhere, a bit distant and detached. Perhaps we struggle to see Jesus's divinity – his one-ness with God – as we take in the image of him nailed to a cross. We can't quite grasp the fact that the man hanging on the cross is one with and equal to the God who created the universe. But Jesus has not pressed pause on his divinity in this moment. When we look at the face of Jesus on the cross we are, in some mysterious way, looking at the face of God.

One of the things that's so remarkable about this poem is that while it clearly tells the story of Jesus, it also points to the story of the whole human race, with Jesus as its representative – the ultimate human being. Genesis tells us that humans were made in the image of God and here we have Jesus being made in human likeness. And whereas Adam grasped at the chance of equality with God, Jesus, who has that status, lets go of it. And so there's this sense that Jesus is both repeating and reversing the story of Adam, and we see that reflected in the downward and then upward movement of this poem. But while the downward journey of Jesus involves descending in humility and love, the human story involves a downward spiral into sin and slavery.

Humans were created in the image of God to be ‘image-bearers’ in God’s world and to live in relationship with him. We were given responsibility and authority to care for and steward God’s world. To worship him and to reflect onto him the praises of all creation. It’s a beautiful image of what we were created to be and do.

But time and time again in the story of the Israelites and in the history of humanity, we see that God’s people reject that calling, turning their backs on God and going their own way. But we were made to worship, so when we stop worshipping God we create a void into which something else inevitably steps. And so we end up worshipping things other than God, handing over power that those things were never intended to have. That’s basically what we mean by idolatry and it’s the root of all our sin. And so God’s relationship with humanity was broken, and his beloved people, his ‘image-bearers’, are taken captive by the power of sin and ultimately, death – the corruption and destruction of God’s creation. So humanity was caught in this downward spiral.

An important feature of this poem is that it’s structured around a central point. It’s a tool that’s often used in biblical poetry to draw attention to and emphasise the importance of whatever sits in the centre. It also often marks a pivotal moment, a change of direction. And in this case, the line that sits at the centre of the poem is this one – *‘even death on a cross’*.

And so the cross is revealed to be the pivotal point not only of Jesus’s story, but of ours too. On the cross, Jesus intercepts our downward spiral, taking onto himself the consequence of our sin, the consequence of our repeated decision to turn our backs on God. And he does that by freely offering himself as a sacrifice in our place. And so on the cross, God reveals himself to be the God of immense, self-giving, self-sacrificing love as he pours himself out in the body of his only Son, for the sake of those who turned their backs on him. What wondrous love, what boundless grace.

And the story doesn't end at the cross. The fact that this is the centre point and means that by definition it's not the end – there is a second half to this poem. In the next verse we begin the upward ascent, but the poem makes it clear that there is no way to it other than the cross. In that heartbreaking prayer that Jesus prays in Gethsemane, he asks if there is any other way – if the end can be reached by any other means. The fact that he is nailed to the cross tells us that there wasn't. Only by drawing the full weight of the world's sin, the full force of the powers of evil and sin and death onto himself, could their power over his beloved people, his beloved world, be broken. There is a chasm between the first half and the second half of this poem that can only be bridged by the cross. It is the only way to what we read next...

*'Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name which is above all other names, 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.'*

This is more the kind of thing that the people of the Graeco-Roman would have approved of – exaltation and Lordship and power. And yet the story Paul tells doesn't let them or us get there any way other than through the cross. Not only that, but exaltation and Lordship don't mean to God what they mean to the people of the Graeco-Roman world or to the world we live in. The power that we see on display in this second half of the poem is power re-claimed and re-defined. Because the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead means that the power of Sin and death itself has been defeated and that the full weight of human sin has been dealt with once and for all. And the means of that victory, the source of its power, isn't domination and violence, but humility, sacrifice and love.

Paul says elsewhere that if the rulers and authorities of the age – visible and invisible – had understood what they were doing, they wouldn't have crucified Jesus. Because in his victory on the cross, those powers are stripped bare, exposed as the puffed-up caricatures they really are, and they are over-thrown. At the name of Jesus, and no other, will every knee bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. This is an almost direct quote from Isaiah 45 verse 23. And in the verse just before it, God says this: *'Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.'*

The Philippians were facing real pressure to acknowledge and worship other gods, and we're in real danger if we don't recognise the fact that we are too. The only difference is that today's gods take the form of things like money, sex and power. This verse is a resolute no to bowing to that pressure. *I am God and there is no other.* Jesus sits on the throne and he is Lord not just of the known world but of the entire cosmos.

In the first half of the poem, it's Jesus's *divinity* that we struggle to hold onto as we see him nailed to a cross, but with his exaltation and Lordship in the second half of the poem, we're fairly comfortable with that idea – somehow it fits the picture. In the second half, the thing that we struggle to hold on to as we see Jesus exalted to the highest place is his *humanity*. On the cross we lose sight of his divinity and in his exaltation we lose sight of his humanity.

Although this poem depicts Jesus's descent and ascent, it isn't the case that Jesus simply returns to his starting point – it's not a circular loop. And we know this because as we've just said, Jesus's exaltation comes about through and only through the cross. In his commentary on Philippians, the great theologian Karl Barth reflects that there was a good reason for what the ancient painters did when in their representations of Jesus ascending and enthroned in heaven they included the wounds from the cross. Nowhere in the second half of this poem does it say that Jesus resumed the nature or form of God. It is the crucified, risen Jesus, who still bears the scars of the cross, who was exalted and now sits enthroned in heaven.

So the story of Jesus upward journey has reached its climax – what of the human story? In another of Paul's letters – his letter to the Ephesians – he says this:

*'...you were dead in your transgressions and sins... But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ... And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.'*

When we put our faith in Jesus, we are united to him and what is true of him becomes true of us. Baptism is an incredibly powerful and symbolic act – as we are lowered into the water, we die to sin and as we re-emerge we are raised to new life in Christ and we are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. ‘Christ claims you for his own’, as the baptism liturgy says.

There’s an interesting change that happens between the first and second half of this poem. In the first half, Jesus empties *himself* and humbles *himself* – but in the second half he *is exalted* by God and *given* the name that is above every other name. Now, we could get ourselves into a real tangle here trying to unpick this in terms of Jesus being both God and human, but I think the important for today is that again Jesus’s humility is on display – he *didn’t* consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage and he doesn’t now – nothing has changed on that front. And in the case of the human story, our descent was the spiralling consequence of human decision. We chose to turn our backs on God. But at the pivotal point that is the cross, Jesus acts on our behalf, and it is through his death and resurrection that we are raised up. We had everything to do with our descent and nothing to do with our ascent. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith.* God did what only God could do. He saved those who could not save themselves. *It is by grace you have been saved.*

In Mark 10 Jesus is trying to teach his disciples what life in the kingdom of God looks like – particularly when it comes to power and status. He says this:

*“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

This poem is both a glorious statement about what God has done for us in Jesus and a call to a particular way of being. In Jesus, God has revealed himself to be the God of astonishing humility and immense, self-giving love. And at the centre of this image, this portrait of who God is, sits the cross. It is the pivotal point in Jesus's story and in the history of the cosmos, at which God intervened and saved those who could not save themselves. When we put our faith in Jesus, we are united with him and we are invited into new life in him – a life in which we are forgiven and set free to be the image-bearers that we were created and called to be – not grasping for power and status, but reflecting God's humility and self-giving love into the world. And so my prayer for us all is that we may never lose sight of what God has done for us, that we may live as those who belong to Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, and that we will know that he is powerfully with us by his Spirit as we seek to love, to serve, and to make him known. Amen