

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
Newport News, Virginia
March 28, 2010

Reaching for a Hymn
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40

During a conversation at a Session meeting several months ago, Martha Hunt commented on the staying power of hymns for some residents in an extended care facility. Even after memory is almost completely gone, for those whom faith and church hymns were important, the singing of familiar hymns continues to play an important role in these lives.

I remember the first time I encountered this. During my first year in ministry, one of the church's members, Mrs. Peoples, lived in the Barnwell County Extended Care Facility. She was blind, had little memory left, and she only knew me in her mind's eye as her pastor...for the several minutes that I was there. On one of those early visits, she was simply lying in her bed softly singing "Amazing Grace" while the rest of her physical world was dark. Those words and the tune were as alive as they had ever been, though the rest of her life had long been forgotten.

Jesus and his followers were reaching for hymns during parts of Passover—his last week on earth that we know as Holy Week. As their Passover meal came to a close—their Last Supper—he and his disciples sang a hymn before they went out into the darkness of that evening—our Maundy Thursday. Hanging from the cross, Matthew has Jesus reaching for a hymn we know as Psalm 22: "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" or "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

However, on Palm Sunday, the day Jesus descended the Mount of Olives riding on a donkey as he entered Jerusalem, the people were waving their palm branches, placing cloaks before the pathway of the donkey and singing a portion of a hymn we know as Psalm 118: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

In their book, *The Last Week*, Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg have enriched our understanding of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.¹ In contrast to simply being an almost out-of-control parade, they describe the volatility of every high, holy day in Jerusalem during Roman occupation in the early part of the first century. The pattern was to send in troops from Caesarea by the Sea to Jerusalem. Their purpose was to put down riots and rebellion against Roman authority during a time the city was flooded with Jewish pilgrims. Passover was one such occasion. Pilate was the governor of the Roman province of Judaea. Coming from his Roman quarters west of Jerusalem, Pilate rode a horse, a symbol of war and power, leading his troops to the Jewish Holy City. In a planned contrast, Jesus entered the city from the East, riding a symbol of peace—the donkey. Using the details in the gospels and first century Judean history, Borg and Crossan describe a non-violent protest against the Roman authority that was destroying the country economically and religiously. Jesus had been predicting his death that would come in Jerusalem. His disciples well knew what was in store for Jesus, and perhaps themselves, if Jesus followed through with his plans to go to Jerusalem during Passover.

Much like the civil rights marches of the 1960s in which the non-violent protests carried the soft tunes and words of “We Shall Over Come” to dispel the fear and anxiety of such treacherous marches, on that first Palm Sunday the followers of Jesus were singing, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Thirty to forty years later, just prior to the Roman destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, Paul wrote to his congregation in Philippi, encouraging them to remain strong in the faith. In that letter, we find Paul reaching for a hymn to muster encouragement for his people. The hymn is the passage we read earlier (Philippians 2:5-11) with Paul's introductory phrase: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....”

For the full details of Jesus' arrest, arraignment, torture, and death, you have to read the Gospel. For the mind of Christ—the attitude that determined his actions every day of his life, including the last—you have to carefully read the

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York, HarperOne: 2006).

epistle containing this hymn. This famous “Christ hymn” in Philippians is so important to the spirit of Holy Week and Palm Sunday that it is repeated in each of the three lectionary years. While the gospels accounts of Jesus’ last week rotate from Matthew to Mark to Luke, Philippians 2: 5-11 is the only epistle reading used for all three years.

The hymn has two parts, plus the opening phrase of verse 5. The first half of the passage is full of verbs—Jesus *emptied* himself, *took* the form of a slave, *humbled* himself, *became* obedient. These were not spontaneous actions on Jesus’ part. They all arose from the Christ-mind. In the second half of the text, Jesus does nothing. The verbs and action all belong to God.

For anyone trying to make sense of Jesus death on this Palm Sunday, you will find no better script for doing so than these seven verses. Jesus’ death was no more spontaneous than anything else that happens in his life. He certainly saw it coming. As awful as the manner of his death turned out to be, it was an unsurprising end for one who spent no energy protecting himself. Having emptied himself all of his life, he emptied himself to the end. The most important phrase in the text is the introduction to the hymn:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....

Let me offer three observations about this simple phrase. First, letting the same mind-set be in you that was in Christ Jesus is at the heart of spiritual transformation. The one thing we—our personalities—resist more than anything else is change. We are, by nature, survivors. Whether due to oppression, emotional abuse, physical abuse, or other traumatic experiences earlier in life, our defensive selves will do anything rather than change—even if it means acting against our best interest. The defensive process that can go on in our minds is skilled at keeping us blinded to the truth about ourselves and is what holds us down. Ask any addict or anyone who is overly identified with a group. Look at the deep polarization in our nation due to those who are rabidly associated with only one way of thinking, politically. Most people have not been offered a different mind, only different beliefs, different behaviors, and different belonging systems.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

Secondly, this is the source of inner strength for the individual. “He emptied himself, took the form of a slave, humbled himself, and became obedient to the Spirit within.”

Different beliefs, different behaviors, and different belonging systems do not nourish us, much less transform us. They do not ultimately strengthen us, but they can be good places to hide and can be used to validate our attitudes and actions. How else was Jesus able to do those difficult things he did throughout his life and especially during his last week...and do them with wisdom, enormous compassion, and deep resolve.

In the New Revised Standard Version, there is a line space between verses 8 and 9 on the page. Notice the space and the division between the first and second half of the hymn. And, notice the “therefore;” say it slowly so that it sinks in. “Therefore,” may be the most interesting word on the page. If we imitate Christ, therefore, we too will be exalted, right? If we humble ourselves, therefore, we too will share in the glory of God, right?

At yesterday’s portion of our confirmand’s beach retreat, Bob Sulzberger and Beth Rivenbark led sessions designed to help our youth focus on “How do we have purpose in our lives?” “How do we truly worship?” “How do we glorify God?” The essence of these questions is summed up in this simple phrase:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

The third comment I would make about this phrase is this: it is the source of strength for any church. Paul is writing from prison to former church members he loves. They are facing growing difficulties from without. There are also tensions within the spiritual community as well—interpersonal and institutional distractions. It is not a passage just for the individual. His words are directed to the full congregation. In the verse just preceding this passage Paul says, “Let each of you look not to your own interest, but to the interests of others.” His words are meant to wash over the congregation in waves of support:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy... (2:1)

Despite their conditional tone—“if there is...”—the sense of the Greek wording could just as well translate these four clauses with “Since there is....” Paul is saying, “You have more than an abundance of everything you need, so let the

same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." and then the words to their familiar hymn begins.

The church's habit of singing is one of its oldest ways of reaching down into the depths of its honesty to tap the abundance of what already exists. The strength, the wisdom, and the incredible love for others that drove Jesus to Jerusalem and his death are here among us. "So let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." Paul is telling us... "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Luke 19:28-40

28After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

29When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it'" 32So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34They said, "The Lord needs it."35Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
And glory in the highest heaven!"

39Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Philippians 2:5-11

5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,8he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

9Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,11and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.