

Empty Conceit vs. Emptiness

We are aided greatly by this passage in our effort to follow Jesus Christ. In this passage, Paul appropriated a hymn of the early church, quoting from the hymn poem to describe the Way of Jesus Christ: the Way from Godhead, to human life including human death, and then to resurrection and exaltation. At the heart of this hymn poem is the term: **kenosis**. In verse 7, the hymn drops a bomb, as it were, declaring that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, “emptied himself,” in an all-consuming way – that’s what kenosis means. Jesus’ way as a human was a downward way. Jesus emptied himself, the text says, being born in human likeness, and if that were not down far enough, that human life for Jesus was characterized by obedience, humility and service, a service not only ending in death, but a service that included laying down all his rights, not only as the Son of God, but all his rights as a human being as well!

For the hymn poem then to say “Therefore God also highly exalted him,” is truly a shock and a scandal. It is shock and scandal, however, only for those who would follow this Jesus. As some of you have heard me say before, the way DOWN now becomes the way UP! To be exalted, one must empty oneself out. A lifetime of sermons about this one word, kenosis, would hardly be enough. But there is more here than even the intriguing hymn poem, with kenosis at its center. In Paul’s introduction, he framed the poem’s message in that gently accusative way Paul had. Indeed, to highlight exactly where Jesus’ disciples in Philippi were going wrong, Paul exhorted them to “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.”

So, standing in stark contrast with the idea of emptying oneself out as the Way of Jesus Christ, is the not just-Philippian-but-very-human problem of puffing oneself up! This problem of being puffed up is exactly what Paul’s seemingly innocuous introduction to the Christ Hymn is warning us about. Being puffed up implies an emptiness, alright, but not at all the emptiness to which we are called who would follow in the Way of Jesus Christ. Being puffed up is believing and acting as if one were greater, and better, and more powerful, and more moral BY FAR, than one really is!

If only it were as simple as taking a pin and popping the bubble, deflating the puffed up conceit. And yet something like that sometimes happens. You know the worldly wisdom that “the bigger they are, the harder they fall,” but Jesus said this, and more, when he said, “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” So, we are warned: the bubble, the balloon, will pop! Our conceit will be revealed for what it is.

This text, the Christ Hymn poem in Paul’s piercing context, offers us today the opportunity to reflect upon our own self-estimation, and challenges us to enter, whether for the first time, or yet over again into the Way of Jesus Christ. And since this sort of change always goes better when we do it together with each other, let us engage in the emptying out of our puffed up sense of self, of our wounded and/or arrogant ego; letting go of any further striving to create for ourselves glory and honor and privilege and power; and instead, to claim God’s glory and honor, privilege and power as our only hope for the same: a hope that does not puff up, and can never be diminished by any human circumstances.