The Humility of Christ
Philippians 2:1-11

This is our fourth outing in Philippians, and as we've seen so far, Paul is chained and in prison, awaiting trial in Rome, and facing real difficulties. And yet he's not the only one. In fact he's writing to these Philippians precisely because he's heard that life is far from easy for them as well. They're having to contend with growing hostility from the outside, which would be bad enough, but worryingly, that was beginning to take its toll on the relationships on the inside.

Now last week we saw how Paul urged them to stand firm against external opposition by striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, that they can only stand firm if they stand together.

But this issue of their unity is so important that Paul doesn't leave it there. And what he does is he moves from this outward focus of standing firm against opposition to gently tending to these inner wounds of relational strain and the seeds of discord that are just beginning to spring up in Philippi.

Three points: A Call to Unity; The Need for Humility; The Way to Get There

A Call to Unity
Look at V1-2: 'So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.'

So despite all that Paul is facing: imprisonment, chains, impending court case, threat of execution, incredibly he knows this very real sense of inner joy, and the one thing that would max that joy out for him is not that he be released from jail or be found not guilty, but if he could hear that despite all they faced, these Philippians were united.

And I reckon there are two reasons for that. The first one is his own situation there in Rome. If you remember, he's got certain Christians there who are making trouble for him. He sees them preaching Christ 'from envy and rivalry' and 'out of selfish ambition' (1:15, 17) and he sees the kind of damage that is done when people behave like that, when it's all about advancing their own agendas. And he doesn't want that to happen at Philippi.

Now, of course the tragedy is that the modern church is just as plagued by that sort of thing, isn't it? And we claim that these divisions are all about vital points of principle, but often it's just about wanting our own way in music style, or church activities or whatever, and it's really just rivalry and self interest and what I want.

Which gets to the second reason Paul comes back to this issue of unity, and that's because disunity – the opposite of unity - is also the opposite, the antithesis of the gospel isn't it? Paul's been encouraging the Philippians and you and me to see all of life, including the trials and difficulties and relational strains of life through the lens of the gospel. But disunity in the face of difficulties really strikes at the heart of the gospel.

Look at what he says in v1 again. 'So…' which links what he's about to say with what he's just said at the end of chapter one, which was all about living a life worthy of the gospel. 'So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy.' Ok, guys, he's saying, if this stuff is true of you, and I know it is: if you know in your own heart and experience the encouragement of Christ in your trials; if you know God's love for you and for each other; if you know the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, that deep sense of knowing God and being known by Him and the Spirit giving you the strength to stand firm, and, and if all of that is affecting both your inner life, your emotions and affections, and your outer life in sympathy for others; if God is at work like this in your life, and I know He is, then let that work out in your relationships with each other.

V2 again: 'Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.'

If all of this is true for you, if all that God has done for you in the gospel is transforming you, how can you not live in unity together?

But it's interesting isn't it… because he has to encourage and exhort them and us to do it. And that's because it doesn't come naturally, in fact there is something deeply unnatural about it. Now, on the one hand, any of us who are Christians know this wonderful sense of unity. You meet someone for the first time, you discover they're a Christian as well, and very quickly there is this bond. You really don't know them at all, and they could be very different from you, I mean they might even be Dutch or something else odd, but there's this bond. And that's the unity of the Spirit, and you don't have to create it, it's just there, it's the glue that binds the people of God together. And Paul says in Ephesians 4:3, 'Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.' So it's not for us to create it with ecumenical movements, it's just for you and I to maintain it.

But maintaining that unity is not a passive thing. These Philippians and you and I have to be encouraged to do it. And the way Paul explains it is by giving a kind of 'one-mind sandwich'. Look at v2 again, he says our corporate, church life together should be marked by 4 things, and the first is 'being of the same mind' that's one side of the sandwich, and the last is 'of one mind' and that's the other side. But sandwiched between those two is the filling 'having the same love, being in full accord.' And that full accord literally means something like being united in soul, being soul-mates.

So this being of the same mind isn't about some kind of dull, intellectual uniformity, or being like a bunch of brainwashed zombies all forced to think the same. Because after all, you can agree with someone on all the essential doctrines, and still want to strangle them, can't you? What Paul has got in mind goes much deeper than an intellectual agreement, he's talking about an attitude of mind that shows itself in genuine love and affection and spiritual, heart-level oneness: having the same love, being in full accord.

Now, that's not to say that truth doesn't matter, it absolutely matters, and Paul's already addressed that in chapter one and he'll get there again in chapter three. But within a church, the real threat to maintaining and deepening unity is not that we think differently on some things. The real threat is our self-centredness. It's that, deep down, we want things our own way.

Now, imagine that you are going wild-camping with some friends. There are about 4 or 5 of you. And you've got one ground-sheet, one tarpaulin between you all. And it starts raining. Now, you all want to stay dry, so you've got a choice. Do you all shelter under that tarpaulin, and each hold it up to keep the rain off and one another dry? Or do you each grab at it and start pulling and yanking against one another, because *you* want to stay dry and *you* want the tarpaulin? Well if you do that of course you might well end up with some of the tarpaulin, this scrappy, ripped, torn bit, but it won't be enough to keep the rain out. And it's like that with unity. We know that if we're to stand firm, we need to stand together, and be united. But we will destroy that unity if we only want it on our terms.

And the real problem of this call to deep, affectionate, heart-level unity is not that we need to sit down and work out in laborious detail what we can all agree on, it's that it clashes with our inner-drive of selfishness, with our underlying desire to have things our way, to exert my rights in this or that issue, to decide for myself what I should or shouldn't do. And that's as true for marriages and families and relationships as it is for churches.

Which is why, as Paul explains, true unity depends on humility.

The Need for Humility

Look at v3-4: 'Do nothing from selfish ambition 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.'

When I was a medic I spent a number of years training and working in a large, prestigious teaching hospital. And at the end of those years, I have to say, I couldn't wait to leave. I think I'd just had enough of the backstabbing, and people trying to step over one another to secure the best post, or ingratiate themselves in fairly desperate ways with their seniors to secure that next step up.

But that's often the reality of life, isn't it? To climb the ladder of success and prosperity, to shin up that greasy pole, you've got to assert yourself, you've got to try and get some advantage over your competitors. And when that's coupled with this human tendency to dominate others, and I want things my way, and you've got to bend to me, it can all be pretty destructive. And it's coming from this engrained desire to keep me at the centre, to make sure it's my needs that are met, and my rights that are promoted.

Which, if we behave like that of course, kills this affectionate, oneness of spirit unity. So Paul says do *nothing* from selfish ambition or conceit. Don't give any ground to those attitudes. Don't be putting and pushing yourself to the front

constantly, rather be humble. Verse 3, 'in humility count others more significant than yourselves.'

Now, if these Philippians with their strained relationships found that hard to swallow, to say it's counter-cultural for you and me would be an understatement, wouldn't it? 'You want me to have an attitude of mind that counts others more significant than me?' I mean that so goes against our modern culture and mindset doesn't it! 'No, I want to push myself forward, I want to make sure things are done my way, because after all that's the best way, I want to assert my rights here, because after all they are my rights.' And Paul says, 'hey, you've got these conflicts emerging. Guys, humble yourselves, and do that by preferring each other over yourself.'

Now humility's a funny thing isn't it? Because the moment you think you've got it, the moment you say, 'yeh, I think I've got this humility thing licked' you are further away than ever. So this is never going to be something that you can say, 'I've arrived… and you may now call me, Saint Martin the Humble.' No, this is a life long attitude: v4: 'Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.'

Well, looking to our interests, that's the easy part isn't it? I mean, that's natural. But Paul says, 'don't *just* do that'. There is a legitimate sense in which we can do that, but don't just do that. Look to others also, and prefer them, and that's how you'll preserve this unity. But to do that requires a total rewiring of how we think and see the world, doesn't it?

And Paul makes it clear that it's something we must all do. V4 again, 'let each of you'. All of you. Everyone of you. No-one ducking it. No-one saying, 'well, she's the one with the issue, I want to see her budge first'; or 'when they start showing me and my wishes some attention then I'll think about theirs'. No, it's 'hey, each of you, it's for everyone of us to develop this mindset of counting others more significant.'

Now, you lot are an intelligent bunch. So here's a spelling test, which I know will tax the Americans because spelling always does. What's the first letter of the word Unity. U. And that's one U that not even the Americans can drop. And unity begins with and it depends on you, and me, on each of us. So it's not someone else's responsibility, like the elders or the leaders, or in a marriage your husband or wife, to create unity. It's all of our responsibility to maintain it by spending our lifetimes humbling ourselves and counting others more significant.

And just imagine how our relationships – whether in our marriages or families or churches, would be transformed, if we chose that path in place of asserting ourselves and wanting our own way.

And yet this is so unnatural, isn't it? It so goes against the grain. And the question is, how can we get there? How can we treat and respond and serve others like that? And the answer is, we can't do it out of ourselves. We can only do it if we

have ourselves been radically served like this. We can only show grace to others like this, if we have experienced it for ourselves and been transformed by it.

The Way to Get There

Now, in our modern, media driven world, we're not short of a role model or two, are we? At least, we're not short of people who want to promote themselves as role models, or examples to follow, or as self-appointed gurus on all of life. And you can follow them on Twitter or like them on Facebook, and they're in sport, and business and entertainment and music. And to be really hip, or successful, or just plain cool and 'in', these are the ones you need to follow. And the only problem is that doing so will not help you pursue humility. In fact, it's hard to think of anything less along the lines of what Paul is talking about here than the crazy world of self-promotion that we live in.

But Paul gives a much better example, v5: 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.' This humility, this counting others more significant than yourself, this looking to the interests of others, Paul says, is supremely exemplified in Christ. And let His kind of thinking, His way of behaving, His way of relating become the mindset of your community life together. Let your relationships, in the church, in your families, in your marriage, be molded and shaped by His example.

Because look what Christ did, v6: 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.' Though He existed before all time, though in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, He was 'the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Heb 1:3) He didn't use that position and status for his own advantage, he didn't grasp at it and see it as something to be exploited for his own ends.

And that's so very different from what we do isn't it? I mean just think about the first temptation. The serpent comes to Adam and Eve in the garden and says, 'look this fruit that God says you shouldn't eat, the reason he says that is because he knows that when you eat it you'll be like him, you'll know good from evil.' In other words the very first temptation was to want to grasp at this equality with God, to decide for yourself what's good and what's not, to be the one who makes the rules, and make them around what suits you, to be the one in charge and at the center, the one who calls the shots.

But Jesus doesn't do that. Though he was God in His very nature, He refused to use that for His own gain, to have His own way. Instead Paul says, v7, he 'emptied himself', and v8, 'he humbled himself.' He who was in the form of God, He who was the ultimate Master, became a servant, a slave. And he poured Himself into this vessel of our humanity. He gave up all the privileges and the dignity and the glory of heaven to be born in the squalor of a stable as a human baby.

Now, the truth is that you and I can serve, we can take the lower position, we can 'humble' ourselves, but in reality often when we do that it's about us getting noticed, isn't it. The tragedy is our hearts are like that, we want someone to see

and say, 'what a servant heart!' And you're just doing it for yourself. But Christ didn't do it out of self-promotion, but out of loving obedience to His Father.

Verse 8: 'And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' Now for these Philippians, you could go no lower than the cross. It's difficult for us, so many centuries removed to understand the full social horror and humiliation of crucifixion. Crucifixion was the punishment reserved for the lowest of the low, for traitors and runaway slaves. It was the ultimate public humiliation, and for a Jew it was proof of being cursed by God and cut off from his people, for cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.

And so Jesus, the one who was immortal, humbled himself under death, even the death of the cross. He took upon himself the thing that most blights our lives, which is death. He experienced the thing that we should dread the most, which is alienation and separation from God. He who was the highest of the high, came and plumbed the lowest of the lows. And as he hung dying upon a Roman cross, cursed by men and forsaken by God, it's impossible to imagine anything else as far removed, as profoundly in contrast, to His eternal majesty.

And the question is, why? Why does he do that? And the answer is for you and for me. The cross is what it means for God to be God. This is not some ego trip, this is not some power play, this is not manipulating things for His own advantage. This is Christ pouring out his life in love for you, to bring you to himself. To pay the price for the things you've done that you shouldn't have done, and the things you should have done but you've left undone. This is Christ taking upon himself all our sin and the shame and alienation that you and I deserve. And he was forsaken and abandoned and humiliated so that we never have to go there.

And that is so far removed from the seeking of fame, or position, or pushing down on others so you can push yourself up. It's so far removed from the mind set of 'I want my own way'. And yet Paul says, have this mind among yourselves. Let this attitude, Christ's way, be your way.

But you know what, you'll never get there if Jesus is only your example. You'll never get there if he's just a teacher and a role model, and you try and do it in your own strength. Because then you're right back where you started, either unable to do it, or your motives are self-centred and it's all about you. The only way we can get there, is by being 'in Christ'. V5 again: 'have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.'

It is only as we allow His grace and His love for us to humble us, as we realize that this is how God has treated us, that it will transform how we think of and treat others. It is only as we find ourselves united with Christ, by faith trusting that He has done what we could never do, that we will find our hearts changing.

And it's as that love humbles us that we can confess that He is Lord and not us. It's as it dawns on us that this is how much he loves us, even when we don't

deserve it that we realize that all our attempts at having our own way, or forcing our selves forward, or thinking we should be the one calling the shots, come to an end. That as Paul says in v9 it's Jesus who 'God has highly exalted' and not me. That, v10, its 'at the name of Jesus' [and not at my name] 'that every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.' That as this incredible love and grace sinks in, and knowing that this is what God honours and exalts, that we can leave in the dust all our attempts at being the one who needs to control, or promote ourselves.

You see, selfish ambition and conceit all come to an end at the cross and at the throne of the one who is really the Lord.

So how can you humble yourself and serve the interests of others ahead of your own? By knowing deep inside that Christ has humbled himself for you and put your interests ahead of his, and by letting that transform you.