

Readings: (1) At the Blessing of Palms: Luke 19: 28 – 40. (2) At Mass: Isaiah 50: 4 – 7; Psalm 21(22): 7, 8, 16 – 19, 22, 23; Philippians 2: (5), 6 – 11; Luke 22: 14 – 23: 56.

There are a few passages in the New Testament which seem, in one way or another, to encapsulate the whole of the Christian Gospel – passages which, however often we hear them, speak to the depths of our faith. Today's New Testament Reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians is one such passage.

The context of these verses is a plea from Paul to the members of the Church in Philippi – a Church which he and Silas had founded (see Acts 16). The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned, probably in Rome, and reveals his deep affection for the Philippian Christians: *You have a permanent place in my heart, and God knows how much I miss you all, loving you as Christ Jesus loves you.* His prayerful longing is for continuing and deepening love between them. It is this longing which leads him to set before them the example of Jesus in words which are often described as a hymn, and certainly have a poetic ring to them. I think it's a pity when verse 5 is omitted from the beginning of today's reading, as it makes clear Paul's intention: *Have this mind among yourselves that was in Christ Jesus,* he writes, and then sets before them the picture of Christ in words which may be his own or may be the quotation of an earlier 'hymn'.

The theological content of this dramatic picture falls into three parts: - verses 6 and 7 speak of Christ's pre-existence – before his birth; verses 8 and 9 speak of his human life and his death on the cross; and verses 10 and 11 of his exalted status – that is after his resurrection.

Whether the words are Paul's or another's they show that, within a generation, the Church had the conviction that Christ existed in the divine sphere before his human birth, and that after his death he was exalted and given the divine title Lord (*Kyrios*).

Hearing this passage in Holy Week, and particularly hearing it alongside one of the passages in Isaiah which are known as 'Songs of the Servant of the Lord', means that it will focus our minds on the death and resurrection of our Lord. But this is not to be an abstract theological study: Paul's use of the 'Hymn of Christ the Servant' leads us to see that the humility and self-denial of Christ demand from us a willingness to model our lives on his.