



Holy Week 2024

*'Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross!' Philippians 2:7-8*

Dear friends,

In 1973 the major denominations in the north of England came together in an evangelism initiative following the 'Call to the North' issued by the then Archbishop of York, Donald Coggan. Every year since, Archbishop Coggan's successors have called church leaders from across the north together at Passiontide for shared reflection and retreat. Last week I was part of a group gathered at Hinsley Hall in Leeds reflecting on Paul's Letter to the Philippians. We were led by Revd Dr Susan Durber, a URC minister and President of the World Council of Churches Europe Region and a former Moderator of the WCCs Faith and Order Commission.

Philippians has always been one of my favourite Pauline letters but Dr Durber reminded us just how radical its message is even for contemporary readers. The letter revolves around the great christological hymn in chapter 2:6-11 – if you want to know more about the centrality of these verses to the whole letter, do look at the brilliant resources provided by the Bible Project at [Book of Philippians Summary | Watch an Overview Video \(bibleproject.com\)](https://www.bibleproject.com). She unfolded the meaning of the letter in relation to four themes: joy; humility; perseverance; and unity. One of the remarkable features of the letter is that it was written when Paul was in prison facing possible death. The great hymn of chapter 2 – which could be Paul's original composition or, possibly more likely, an ancient hymn sang by the early Christian communities – enables Paul to see his experience in the context of Christ Jesus who though in the form of God does not claim equality with God but comes amongst us in the form of a servant (more literally a slave), obedient to the point of death on a cross, raised triumphant so that every tongue shall proclaim him Lord.

If we take the hymn seriously – and we should – then we are confronted with a truth that is radical, audacious, subversive and may well leave us feeling breathless. Here is Paul, part of what at that time is a marginal Christian community on the fringes of the Roman Empire, claiming for Jesus what Roman Emperors had claimed for themselves. Jesus is at once human and divine, the real king who subverts empires.

There has been a lot of froth in recent weeks about the use or non-use of the cross in our culture. The supermarket Iceland has apparently removed the cross from its hot cross buns and replaced it with a tick; the colours of the St George's Cross on the England shirt have been changed. I am sure there are other examples. But as a Christian I am far less interested

in the froth that surrounds us than in proclaiming the substance. I suspect that very few within our culture understand the radicality of the cross worn around their necks. For me it is that message that should be the centre of our attention.

Perhaps Philippians, written for a fringe community by an apostle facing the possibility of death, has much to teach us about how we should live in a post-Christendom context. As Dr Durbar reminded us: now is the time to be 'boldly humble.'

Yours in Christ,

Revd Richard Andrew

District Chair