

Brancepeth Sermon

1 October 2023

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Philippians 2:1–13

Matthew 21:23–32

Psalms 25:8–13

Open our ears, O Lord,

to hear your word and know your voice.

Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,

that we may serve you today and always.

Amen

This week has been birthday week in the Higton household.

It was Jordan's 20th on Tuesday –

though we'd celebrated earlier, before they returned to Exeter,

so Tuesday itself was fairly muted.

But then on Thursday it was Tom's 18th.

So we've been thinking a lot about growing up,
about the transition from childhood to adulthood,
and about the increase in independence involved in that.

It is, of course, a good thing for children
to become more independent as they get older,
even if it is sometimes difficult for parents
– not me, of course, but *hypothetical* parents –
even if it is sometimes difficult for *hypothetical* parents
to accept some of the ways in which
their children become independent from them.

Growing independence is a proper part of growing up,
of increasing in maturity.

Most people move from *complete* dependence
when they are tiny babies,
step by step, through to full independence,
to standing on their own two feet,
making their own decisions,
taking responsibility for their own achievements and mistakes.
And that's a good and healthy development.

But there is *another* kind of dependence

that doesn't work like that at all.

When I was growing up, I was dependent upon my parents,
and I slowly became less dependent as time went by.

But I was also, at the same time,
dependent upon the air that I breathe

And I have *not* become less dependent on that *air*
as time has gone by,
and nor do I want to be.

I am just as dependent on oxygen now
as I was when I was born.

And that is not a sign of immaturity,
some kind of arrested development.

It's just part of being human:

I am now, and I will always be
dependent upon a good supply of air,
if I am going to remain alive and healthy.

So, I want you to keep this idea in mind:
there are *two kinds* of dependence.

There's a kind that is properly temporary,
because it goes with immaturity;
the kind that you are meant to grow out of.

And there's a kind that is properly permanent,
that is simply part of being human,
and that it makes *no* sense to grow out of.

Now, I am telling you all this because
it can help us make sense of the passage we heard
from Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi.

‘Let the same mind be in you’, he says,
‘that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself.
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.’

I'm a bit more familiar with an older version,
which says that Jesus
'did not count equality with God a thing to be *grasped*'.

And *one* of the things going on in this passage –
though it isn't very visible on the surface –
is a contrast between *Jesus* on the one hand
and *Adam and Eve* on the other.

Adam and Eve aren't mentioned,
but they *are* there in the background.

When Eve encounters the serpent,
you will remember that the serpent tells her that
if she and Adam eat the fruit of the tree,
they will be like God.

She and Adam will *gain equality with God*.

And so she and Adam do take the fruit.

They *grasp* at that equality with God.

Paul, in this passage in Philippians, is saying that, by contrast
Jesus 'did *not* count equality with God a thing to be grasped'.

Jesus did *not* behave like Adam and Eve.

You see, Eve's and Adam's error

was to mistake one kind of dependence for the other.

They knew that they were, in a sense, children of God.

They lived dependent upon God's good provision,

and within the context that God had set for their lives.

The serpent, talking to Eve, persuaded her

to think of this as the *temporary* kind of dependence,

as something she and Adam could and should *outgrow*.

Hasn't she been dependent for long enough?

Isn't it time for her now to stand on her own two feet,

and stop relying upon God for everything?

But the problem for Eve and Adam is that

dependence upon God is *not* like

dependence upon one's parents.

It's not the kind of dependence you can grow out of.

It's like the other kind of dependence.

It's like dependence upon the air you breath.

In God we live and move and have our being.

Whatever we need to exist and to grow

ultimately comes from God,

and keeps coming from God.

God is like the air we breathe

There's no growing past dependence upon God.

There's no stage of maturity where you no longer need God.

So Eve and Adam *mistake one kind of dependence for the other.*

They treat their permanent, healthy, necessary

dependence upon God's good gifts,

as if it were a temporary, infantile dependence upon a parent.

Their turn away from God

is like them cutting off their own air supply

and trying to breathe without oxygen.

And Paul, in our reading, is telling us that

Jesus does not make the same mistake.

Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus *is* equal to God,
but Jesus as God's Son knows that
everything that he, the Son, has,
he has received, and goes on receiving, from the Father.
He is equal to God the Father because
God the Father has *given* him his whole life.

And Jesus therefore refuses to do an Adam and Eve.
He refuses to declare himself independent from his Father.
He refuses to set himself up on his own.

He doesn't *grasp at*, doesn't *exploit*, he doesn't
treat as his own selfish possession
everything that he has received.

Instead, recognising that he has received,
and goes on receiving, everything that he has,
he's willing to give it all away,
to give even his own life away.

That is why Paul tells the Christians in Philippi,

‘Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.

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

We need to know what Jesus knew.

We are and will remain entirely dependent upon God.

Every good thing we have is not *primarily*

something that we have achieved,

or something that we possess by ourselves,

or something that we own outright.

Every good thing about us, every good thing in our lives,

is a *gift*,

it is something we have received, and go on receiving.

If we have any health, it is a gift.

If we have any wealth, it is a gift.

If we have good relationships, they are a gift.

If we have any knowledge, it is a gift.

If we have any faith, it is a gift.

And, yes, we can work with what we have been given,
and make something of it,
but if we have any ability to do that,
that ability, too, is a gift;
if we have any good habits, *they* are a gift;
if we have helpful ways of thinking and feeling, *they* are a gift.

‘It is God who is at work in you,’

Paul says at the end of our reading,

‘enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.’

Any *willpower* you have that turns you in the right direction,

any *effort* you are able to put in to doing any good,

that too is a gift from God, who is at work in you

to bring these things about.

In Christianity, in one sense,

there are no such things as possessions,

if we mean by possession something that is simply,

purely your own,

yours because you own it,

yours because you have paid for it yourself,

yours because you were the only one responsible
for you getting it and keeping it.

In Christianity, there is no such thing.

It is *all* gift.

Life is a gift, health is a gift, happiness is a gift,
and every one of your possessions is and remains a gift.

In all things, we remain recipients,
wholly dependent upon all those who give,
and upon God the ultimate giver.

And that is true of us as a church, as well.

I have often, when standing up here as treasurer,
said that ‘St Brandon’s runs on generosity.’

And that’s not just a surface truth about us.

Our life here, all that we share, all that we are together –
it’s all gift.

Ultimately, it’s all a gift from God –
but we receive that gift from God in large part
through the gifts of others:

the gifts of those who built this building, and who look after it,
who clean it and decorate it;
the gifts of those who lead us and teach us
and who play music and sing for us;
the gifts of those who wrote our hymns and our prayers;
the gifts of those who make coffee for us,
and chat to us, and share the peace with us;
the gifts of those who pay for all our activities
and all our resources,
and our ability to support the other churches around us.

It's *all* gift; it's gift all the way down.

And it is because we receive gifts that we give,
because we have been loved that we love,
because we have been helped that we help,
because we have been served that we serve.

That's a large part of what Christian faith is about:
learning to recognise how deeply, how completely,
we are dependent upon the gifts of others –

dependent upon the gifts of God in creation,
dependent upon the gifts of God in Christ,
dependent upon the gifts of God
that come to us through the church,
dependent upon the gifts of God that we discover in the world,
dependent upon the gifts of God
that we meet and enjoy in one another.

Everything we have and do and are and enjoy is a gift.

And it is in that light that we are called
to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus,
and to *become givers*,
to become people who do not grasp hold of
all that we think of as our own,
who do not clutch it tight to ourselves,
but who are able and willing to pass on what we have received.

We have received, and so we *give* –
receiving as Jesus received,
and giving as Jesus gave.

That is our gift and our calling. *Amen.*