

Humility, obedience and sacrifice. Those three words stand out as descriptors of the tragic, yet holy last week of Christ’s life in this world. Although no words, however precise, shall ever be able to adequately describe the immeasurable depths of the DIVINE MYSTERY of Christ’s Passion—nonetheless, these three: humility, obedience and sacrifice are likely among the most appropriate word-pictures we can employ as we focus on the apostle Paul’s words in our second lesson today.

This passage from Philippians is surely one of the most beautiful and important ones in the New Testament. Scholars believe that originally it could have been a creedal hymn sung by Christians in the church at Philippi. Whatever its origins, it certainly provides us with a good summary of the meaning and message of Christ’s life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Moreover, it also instructs and inspires us as followers of Jesus to live and die in a similar manner.

Paul begins in verse five with these words of instruction: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Now you might immediately be asking, “How is that possible? After all Jesus was divine, therefore perfect and without sin. How can sinners possibly have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus?” True enough Jesus was without sin all right. But, as the one whom BY HIS OWN WILL AND CHOICE emptied himself by becoming a human being; Jesus then shares in everything human. The irony, the paradox of this all means that his divinity is made known to us most clearly precisely in his humanity.

In the reading from Philippians, Paul states that Jesus’ oneness with God was not derived from any dominating, exalted position which he occupied; it was not a “supernatural rapture” to the high heavens that gave Jesus his

“Humility, Obedience, Sacrifice” Philippians 2:5-11 Palmarum 2025
divine status. Rather it was precisely his self-giving, his self-emptying in love for others that was the mark of his divine nature.

Therefore, it is possible for us to have the mind of Christ insofar as we are able to think and live like Jesus. Elsewhere when Paul speaks of us having the mind of Christ in I Corinthians 2:6-16; he says it is all possible not of our own doing—rather, it is possible only due to the work and presence of the Holy Spirit who gives us the wisdom of God to discern and understand the meaning and message of Christ’s life, suffering, death and resurrection. Paul explains this thinking and living further here in our second lesson today with those three word-pictures of humility, obedience and sacrifice.

Jesus emptied himself of his divinity and humbled himself by being born a human being. In our world, the humble often are looked down upon; humility according to worldly standards is more of a vice than a virtue. Why would Jesus willingly want to choose and take on humility?

I want to share a story of an experience I had while visiting a native reserve in northern Alberta. I remember it well, because no one was at the airstrip to meet me. Three Cree women sat in the cab of a pickup truck nearby. It was a raw cold evening in April, not winter, but not spring either in northern Manitoba. They offered me a ride—“but you’ll have to ride in the back,” they said. I was grateful and loaded my baggage. The air in the cab was warm—I could feel it when they opened the window to speak to me. I climbed in the truck box, prepared for a rough, cold ride to the village. I thought, “...just like an Indian...” Their kids usually get to ride in the back. Cold, undignified, uncomfortable. It was pretty funny. But it was significant too. For once, a white person took second place to a native!

How did Jesus feel when he “took the form of a slave”? No doubt it was undignified and uncomfortable—and worse—for one “in the form of God” to take a lowly place. But He willingly chose to become despised and rejected for our sakes.

In the person of Jesus, God transformed humility into dignity, weakness into strength. When Jesus humbled himself in the form of a slave, he showed his solidarity with the entire human race—sharing in their humanity and in so doing drawing us all to himself.

This humility also is tied to Christ’s obedience, says Paul, in that he “became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” It is most interesting and instructive that in the Bible, the word for obedience means, literally, “to hear.” One who is obedient is one who is a good listener. Jesus epitomized obedience because his listening was rooted in his love for all people.

For Jesus, being “obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross,” was not something he did because he dreaded the punishment of a tyrannical God if he failed to be obedient. NO! Rather, to be obedient meant that he was in a perfect, relationship of love and trust with his Heavenly Father; knowing that what his Father asked of him was always right and true. So it is with us, to be obedient to Christ means not that we are afraid of being punished if we disobey. Rather, in being obedient to Christ we live in and are motivated by a relationship of love and trust—knowing that the outcome of such love and trust is not the abuse of power but something life-giving and life-enriching.

The life-giving, life-enriching outcome of Christ’s obedience, of course, led to the ultimate sacrifice. It is most instructive that the biblical sense of sacrifice has at least three meanings—to draw closer, to slaughter, and to

“Humility, Obedience, Sacrifice” Philippians 2:5-11 Palmarum 2025
offer a gift. Does not the death of Jesus on the cross encompass all of these
three meanings of sacrifice? I believe it does.

In the concentration camp at Flossenbug, shortly before it was liberated
by the allied forces, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, was executed by
special order of Heinrich Himmler... For innumerable Christians in Germany,
on the Continent, in England, and in North America, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s
death has been a contemporary confirmation of Tertullian’s dictum, “The blood
of the martyrs is the seed of the church”; for his life and death and his
writings...are still a living witness in the ecumenical church which he served....

For him Christianity... [always] must be responsible, obedient action, (a
sacrifice involving) the discipleship of Christ in every situation of concrete
everyday life, personal and public. And it was this that led him in the end to
prison and death. Six years before his imprisonment by the Gestapo he had
written, “When Christ calls a (person), He bids (them) come and die.”

It is in looking at the suffering and death of Jesus on a cross that we
see in his ultimate sacrifice a drawing of humankind closer to him; a tragic
slaughter of the innocent Saviour; and the most all-encompassing, loving gift
ever given. This Holy Week may all of us be ever mindful and grateful of what
Christ has done for us on the cross; and in so doing, be granted the mind of
Christ to follow him in humility, obedience and sacrifice—drawing us and the
whole world ever closer to his kingdom. Amen!