

The Name above every name

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Most of us have favourite scriptural passages, ones that we learn off by heart and ponder time and again. One passage that I have 'inhabited' for many years comes from St Paul's letter to the Philippians, 2:5-11 (NRSV):

Let the same mind be in you 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.
And being found in human form he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

It is a beautiful passage, probably in its original form a hymn that Paul has adapted for his letter, filling out the earlier statements with explanatory phrases. As such it is one of the earliest statements of Christian belief, one of the hymns to Christ that the first Christians sang in the catacombs or in their own homes in the grey light of their early morning meetings. It is a hymn that glorifies Jesus for his role in the salvation of humankind, being traditionally interpreted as showing his descent from heaven as Son of God, his saving death and resurrection, and exaltation in glory. It is a kind of creed, a forerunner of the statements of Nicaea and Constantinople.

But it is also a problematic passage, particularly for those who have been involved in inter-faith dialogue, or who have drawn deeply from the wells of wisdom in other religious traditions. Is it true that Jesus is the 'only Son of God' who saves the world, and that every knee will bend at the name of Jesus, submitting to him as Master and Lord? To the ears of a Buddhist or Hindu it can sound triumphalistic and overbearing. As such, like the famous 'I am the Way...' saying of John 14:6, it requires careful examination if it is to be understood in a way that makes sense of our contemporary experience of the encounters of the different faiths.

In fact, however, there are many ways of understanding this passage from Philippians, rooted in the text itself, yet open to a wider embrace of other religious traditions. Firstly, Paul exhorts his readers to have 'the mind of Christ', which is in itself a bridge to the Buddhist emphasis on the mind as the focus of the spiritual path. It is a mind of love, compassion, sympathy and joy (already three of the Buddha's *brahmavihara* or 'Divine Abidings'). For Paul, as for the Buddha, it is a mind that moves radically beyond self.

Secondly, this passage is not necessarily about a divine redeemer descending from above. There are many New Testament scholars who see this rather as arising from a meditation on the role of Adam, and of Christ as representing that archetypal 'everyman'. Philippians 2:6 speaks of Christ as being 'in the form of God', but this is an echo of Genesis 1:27 where it says that 'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.' The word for 'form' used by Paul is '*morphe*', whereas in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) it is '*eikon*'; but in Colossians 1:15, Paul says that Christ is 'the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God', so it is arguable that Paul uses the two terms interchangeably. Christ is the new Adam, just as Paul argues elsewhere in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. So Paul is talking

not so much about Jesus as being different from all others, but about how Jesus reveals what is true in all of us, how Jesus represents the ideal human being, how the Christ is also Adam.

Paul then goes on to say that Christ 'did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited' (or grasped). As with the Buddha, it is attachment, particularly to self, that is the root cause of suffering. A truer response is that of self-emptying (*kenosis*), though the Buddha would go even further and say that it is the realisation that there is no self at all, that all is originally empty, which is itself enlightenment. But this grasping of equality with God is the sin of Adam, which Christ rectifies by his relinquishment of all grasping at self. Adam and Eve literally grasp the apple of disobedience, thinking to gain the knowledge of good and evil, and so fall into the primordial dualism of self and other, gain and loss, life and now inescapable death. (See Wisdom of Solomon 2:23f – 'For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.')

Christ, then, humbles himself, accepting death, even death on a cross. This is truly the death to self in which we share, and of which Paul speaks elsewhere in Philippians (3:10): 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' Or even more clearly in Galatians 2:19f: 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.' The death of Christ is an inclusive event, in which all may share who die to themselves and live by the power of the Spirit of God. Christ's death is ours, just as we share in the power of his resurrection. All are linked to the Adam recapitulated in Christ: 'for as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive' (1 Corinthians 15:22).

But then we get to the tricky part in Paul's adapted hymn: 'Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...' Does this mean that the name 'Jesus' is above every name, and that at the name 'Jesus' every knee shall bow? That is the traditional understanding and what I had always, despite my inter-faith embarrassment, felt to be the unavoidable interpretation. But to really understand this passage I think we need to ask again: What is the name that is given to Jesus? In the Book of Exodus, when Moses goes up Mount Sinai to receive the commandments of God, we get a hint of what this name might be. Moses asks to see God's glory, but God says: "'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'... but you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.'" And... The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The LORD'" (Ex.33:19; 34:5). This, of course, is in the background of the story of the Transfiguration, where Jesus meets Moses and Elijah in a cloud on a mountain top and is himself transfigured by radiant light (the glory of the Lord – God's radiant presence). The name of God, spoken as 'the LORD' is in fact the unspeakable name YHWH, first revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex.3:14f). It means something 'I am who I am' or simply 'I AM'. The 'name of Jesus', of which Paul speaks to the Philippians, 'that is above every name', is simply YHWH, the unpronounceable name of God, the hidden name which all in some way honour.

But is there still some way this name can be vocalised, something for the body to be able to share in our worship of God? The Greek Old Testament has '*Kyrios*' (Lord) in Ex.33/34, but in Ex.3:14 the name is explained as *ὁ ων*, '*Ho Ōn*', the One Who Is. This is the name often found inscribed in the nimbus (halo) around the head of Jesus in Orthodox icons. Jesus is given the name I AM, The One Who Is, pronounced in Greek something like '*Ho Own*'. (Is it just a wild flight of fancy in my mind that connects this with the Sanskrit divine name of *Aum* or *Om*?) So, going back to Philippians, the name given to Jesus is in fact YHWH, the LORD, otherwise known as The One Who Is, or in later Latin terminology, *Esse Ipsum*, Being Itself. This is the 'name of Jesus' at which every knee shall bow – Being Itself, '*Ho Ōn*'. Every tongue shall indeed confess that the Christ is YHWH, that the one who can say from the depths of their being 'Before Abraham was I am' (Jn.8:58) is indeed the LORD.

But are we still in an area of exclusion, that Jesus carries this name and no other? Here again I think the New Testament says otherwise. In the Book of Revelation there is an intriguing verse which says that in the

heavenly city the servants of God 'will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads' (Rev.22:4). This is both the name of the Lamb (Jesus) and the name of his Father (Rev.14:1). (This may also be the 'new name' given on a white stone to 'everyone who conquers' (Rev.2:17), 'that no one knows except the one who receives it'.) What could this name be? In fact it may be the name that is worn on the forehead of the High Priest at the Temple, on the *petalon* strapped to his head. Jesus himself is described as the 'great high priest who has passed through the heavens' (Heb. 4:14). But this priesthood is shared by all believers in the new dispensation: the Book of Revelation praises the One 'who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father...' (Rev.1:5,6). All the redeemed are to carry the name of God, to the glory of God the Father (God Most High, the Name that cannot be named.) All add their voice to the great I AM, the One Who Is, '*Ho Ōn*'.

So this enigmatic passage from St Paul's letter to the Philippians is full of surprises. It takes us back to Christ the new Adam, the truly Human One, who by his humility and self-emptying is given the name beyond all names. It shows that there is nothing to grasp and everything to receive; that God speaks God's name within us, and we are set free. And Paul wishes that the joy of this discovery, the compassion and sympathy that it evokes, be the ever-present experience of those for whom he writes. For as he reminds the Corinthians (1 Cor.2:16): ' "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.'