

Another Day

Biblical reflections for busy teachers



Humility and Learning

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:5

This injunction in Philippians 2 is a summing-up of a call in the preceding verses to like-mindedness, love and oneness in spirit and purpose, in which we are to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, to consider others better than ourselves and to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others. “In a word,” says Paul, “be like Jesus!”

It is followed by a spelling out of the steps down and down and down that Jesus took from the heights of equality with God to the deepest depths of death, even death on that most shameful of instruments, the wooden cross of public executions by the Romans. From there he was raised to the highest place in acknowledgement of which all must one day say that Jesus Christ is Lord.

A diagrammatic representation of these steps down and down taken by Jesus is the reverse image of one of the steps up and up that we want to take in Adam. We want to be like God, we want to make ourselves something, we want to take the place of the master and ruler of our universe rather than that of the slave . . . and the end of the process is condemnation and disgrace rather than exaltation.*

The most difficult person to teach is not perhaps the most ill-disciplined, but the arrogant know-all who is convinced he has nothing of importance to learn in my class. There is a humility that is a pre-condition to learning, an openness to the teacher or the text under study that acknowledges that we may be mistaken in our present beliefs and that there is so much of importance that we do not know or understand.

We may not be able to inject those we teach with a dose of humility but perhaps they can catch it from us, as we ourselves approach with humility that which we are studying with them. Aristotle seemed to think humility a vice rather than a virtue, and contemporary moral philosophers do not all accept it to be a virtue, but Paul’s call to us in this verse is clearly to an attitude that characterised our Lord, an attitude of humility.

*Lord, let my attitude be the same as yours and may those I teach come to share it too.
Amen.*

* David I Smith & John Shortt, *The Bible and the task of teaching*, (Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre, 2002), pp. 86-87.

**Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
Lamentations 3:21-23**