

“Jesus is a Humanist” // Joe Heikman
Wildwood Mennonite Church
Palm Sunday // March 24, 2024



*This sermon began with a few scenes from the 2023 coronation of King Charles:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1Wj0gouWG0&ab_channel=BBCNews*

Good morning! My name is Joe, my pronouns are “he” and “him”, and even though I’ve lived in Canada for 20 years and affirmed my allegiance to the Crown during my citizenship ceremony, I’m still not quite sure what to make of this whole monarchy business. 😊

What do you think is going through soon-to-be King Charles’ head as he’s walking in that loooong processional through Westminster Abbey? I’d probably be distracted by the practical things like the weight of that robe or which hand is supposed to hold which scepter. Though I suppose King Charles has been groomed for this event so long that those things would just come naturally for him.

He’s probably also long settled the big question that would be on my mind that day--do I really *want* this job? I can’t imagine that he’s really ever had much of a choice, or maybe I’ve just read too many fantasy fiction novels about the burden of royalty.

But I do wonder, why would someone *want* to be a monarch?

I suppose there is something to the childish impulse of young Simba in the Lion King, who “just can’t wait to be king”: “no one sayin’ do this, do that... I’ll be free to do it all my way”

Free to do it all my way!

Of course there are more mature reasons to want to be in charge, noble reasons, even. Some leaders have a vision for making their world a better place, and they intend to use their power for the greater good. Some recognize that they have a gift, the wisdom of experience, the skill to inspire, the strength to stand and assume responsibility, the calling to lead, and they genuinely want to use their gifts to bless their community.



Of course, the monarchy comes with a ton of perks that would make the job appealing--the king is one of the most secure, well-protected people on the planet. There is instant respect given to him, deserved or not, and access to all kinds of celebrities and politicians who want to talk with you. It's a comfortable gig, lots of good food, fancy

clothes, private car, private plane, a posh lifestyle.

And of course there are the more nefarious urges of power, and ego, that thirst for control, for revenge, for shaping the world in your own image.

There are lots of reasons a person might want to be King, and my guess is that King Charles, like any human ruler, has a mix of many of those motives and more.

What about you? Would you want to be a monarch?

I honestly don't know that I would take the job if it were offered to me. I'd guess most of you would feel similarly. I'd have to do some research, but my guess is that the frustrations and responsibilities would outweigh the perks.

I don't think most of us want to be *The King*. But offer me a raise, sure. A promotion, a better office, a fancier title, a company car, a personal assistant, VIP access, a wider audience, the power to change a few things... yeah, I want that.

The job of King seems excessive for little ol' me, but yeah, I want *more* of all those things.

Upward mobility, that's the dream, am I right? Just a bit more... influence, security, comfort, validation... that's the path to happiness. Isn't it?

You sense a trap, as well you should. This is Palm Sunday, where nothing is as it appears.

Back to King Charles for one more second. What do you think would have happened on Coronation Day, if Charles had gotten to the end of that processional, and refused to wear the crown? Thanks for the party, but now that we're all here, I don't want this job. You're all great, thanks fam, but it's not you, it's me. I'm out.

What a scandal. It's unthinkable.

But that's exactly what Jesus did on Palm Sunday.

That big branch-waving parade we did at the start of the service, that was a coronation procession. Some of you have heard seventy-plus Palm Sunday sermons in your lifetime, and you know all the symbolism--the donkey, the palm branches, the shouts of "Hosanna - God Save Us Now!", this is the stuff of king-making.

Some of the people in the crowd were living their lives waiting for a Messiah, and thought Jesus was there to rally the crowd and start a political revolution against Rome.



Some of his followers thought this moment was the apex of Jesus' religious movement, that he would cleanse the Temple and restore the righteous worship of God with himself as the prophet.

Some expected this to be a day of miracles, the Day of the Lord, where the fullness of Jesus' supernatural power would be on display and the heavenly Kingdom of God would arrive on earth.

Nobody expected Jesus to walk away. But that's exactly what he did.

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple precincts. He inspected everything there, but since it was already late in the afternoon, he went out to Bethany accompanied by the Twelve.

No violent uprising, no overthrow of the priesthood, no coronation of a new king.

Just a look around, nope, not feeling it... and back out to the suburbs.

The King walked away from the Crown.

There's a whole lot to be unpacked in the story of the Triumphal Entry, but instead today I want to spend our time in the second text, Philippians 2:5-11.

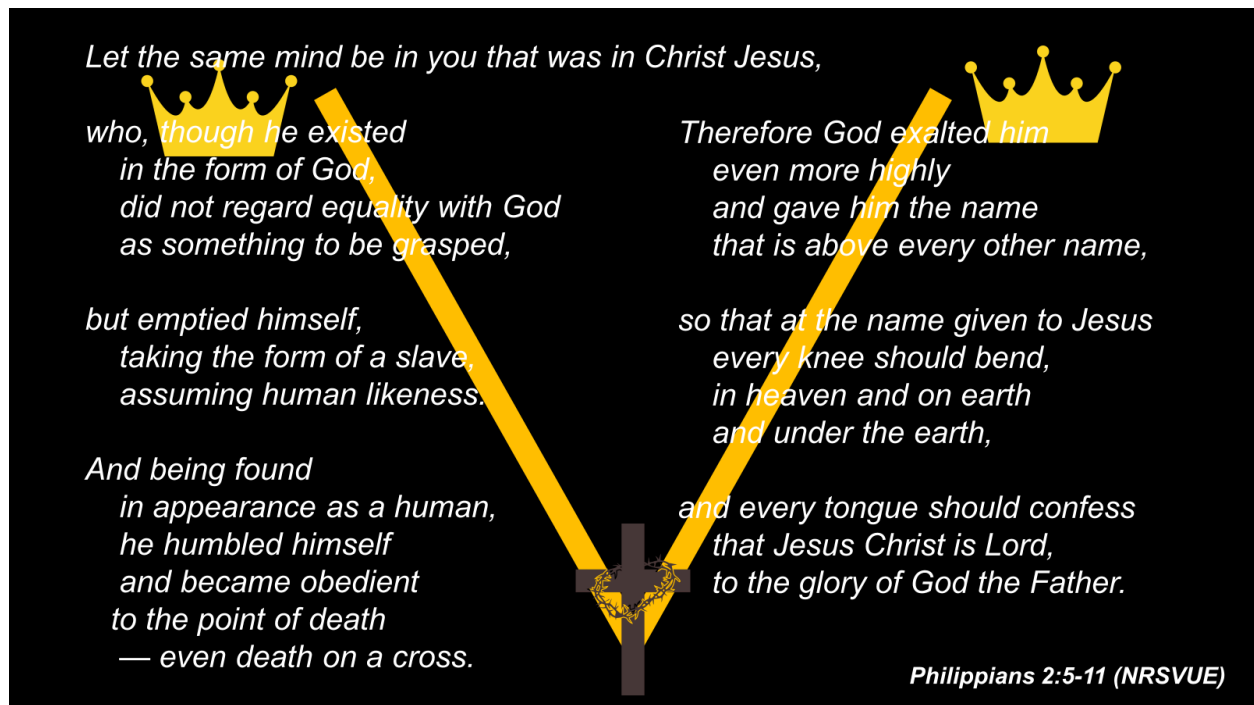
Because this explains *why* Jesus walked away from that crown, in spite of everyone's expectations.

Bible Study Time:

This poem is part of a letter from a prison cell, written by the Apostle Paul to the community of Christians in the Greek city of Philippi, sometime around 50-60 CE.

The people who study these things say that this particular section is a quotation: Paul is reciting the words to a common hymn that had already become central to the followers of Jesus throughout the region. No idea what the melody may have been, but I think it adds some flavour to know that this was a song, not just a theological treatise...

We read this text earlier in the *Inclusive Bible* translation, and now I'll read it in the New Revised Standard Version (Updated Edition), because variety is the spice of life:



Now, there are a couple of ways to read this story.

The one many of you are most familiar with, is about this V shape. Jesus goes from “up here” to “down here” and then back “up here.” (Lots of big hand waving in this one, sorry, you’ll have to use your imagination...)

In this reading, Jesus is up here with God. -- Remember, in the 1st Century, Christian theology was still in progress, they’re talking about God and Jesus as separate beings, because this is before anyone had crafted the idea of Trinity, three-in-one.

Jesus had all of this God-stuff: power, respect, immortality, sovereignty, divinity.

And Jesus left all of it. He “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped”-- he emptied himself, he humbled himself, and took on the form of a *doulou*, a servant, a slave.

We talked about “upward mobility” earlier, Western society’s vision of progress, getting better through self-improvement, hard work and education, careful saving and investing, gaining power and influence and security, all the good stuff up here.

But Jesus chose the opposite way. Downward mobility. He embraced the life of a servant. He gave up power. He swore off comfort. He took on vulnerability, even humiliation. He became obedient, even to death.

Downward mobility. That is the way of Jesus.

That language of servanthood is pretty familiar to those of us who spend a lot of time in Mennonite circles. We often highlight this and other scriptures about following Jesus in service:

- “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.”
- “Whatever you do unto the least of these, you have done unto me.”
- “If anyone would come after me, let them deny their self and take up their cross and follow me.”
- (singing) “Will you let me be your servant // let me be as Christ to you...”

Contrasted with our culture’s push to move up the social and economic ladder, Jesus is an example of *downward* mobility. “Is it better to give than to receive.”

I am one of many Mennonites who have taken that call to follow Jesus in the life of a servant literally. When I was in high school, I heard this challenge to service in the way of Jesus at a Christian rock festival, from a preacher named Tony Campolo.

And I followed that call to a program called Mennonite Service Adventure, where I served as a volunteer for a year, living with four other young adults serving in various roles in a low-income, inner-city neighbourhood.

Lots of stories I could tell from that experience.

Simple living, having more with less, and giving freely from the many gifts we have received. Those are Mennonite values. Many of you live with that in mind every day, and I admire you for it.

And that’s the Way of Jesus described here in Philippians 2: leaving behind the power and privilege at the top, not chasing those things, but instead embracing the life on the bottom, literally giving his life in service of others.

And in that life of sacrifice, miracle of miracles, there comes this fantastic reversal.

*Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,*

*so that at the name given to 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.*

Through sacrifice, through humility, through servanthood, came the transformation:

Jesus the Crucified, became Jesus the Exalted and Immortal. Jesus the Servant became Jesus the King of Kings. By walking away from the Crown, Jesus received the Crown.

The Crown here representing the stuff that matters, the stuff that lasts. "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose," in the words of one of my childhood heroes, missionary martyr, Jim Elliott.

Life is a Service Adventure, in the way of Jesus. Upward mobility is a myth, and the way to true joy is living to serve.

I can't prove that, and I certainly don't live that way much of the time. As I said, offer me a raise, and I'll say yes, please. I'm into home improvement, self improvement, "how to win friends and influence people."

But I've also lived the truth of the opposite, and feel that joy of service. I know for certain that I gained more in working for 2 hours at the Friendship Inn yesterday, making sandwiches in a back room for people that I will never see, than the 8 hours I spent carefully writing this sermon so that y'all will think I'm clever and funny. 😊

That's a false dichotomy, of course. There is value in sandwiches and sermons, for sure, but you know what I mean. There is joy and satisfaction in service, that recognition, payment, status and power can't deliver.

That is the way of Jesus.

Mostly. I said I had a couple of ways of reading this text. Because I think this reading misses something significant. You may have picked up on this already.

The problem with this V model, is that it starts and ends at the same place.

It begins with the assumption that God is up here, that Goodness is above, and the goal is to get to God. It's a transactional story - Jesus leaves heaven above, and comes down to the muck below: *Ugghh, service and humanity and death, yuck!*

But Jesus does it, because *he's a cool guy, like, suuuper humble*. And God rewards him by lifting him back up, bringing him back here to the goodness. And Jesus is the hero, because by going down and coming back up himself, he opens the way for us to get up here to God as well. He carries us with him.

Again, I'm not knocking this view; it's been a classic part of the Christian tradition for centuries. When you're down here, it's really hopeful to have a saviour that lifts you up, out of that miry clay and gives you a firm place to stand. If you're tempted by upward mobility, if you're tired of the rat race, it's wisdom to recognize that the path to what you really want is down, not up. That's a *Good* story.

The problem is that this reading makes the top of the "V", up here with God, that's the goal, the prize, the end that we're after.

And the Philippians hymn says explicitly that Jesus thought differently.

though he existed in the form of God, [he had all the glory and security and immortality], but he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*who, though he existed in the form of God, **did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,***

but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name,

so that at the name given to 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.

Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSVUE)

har-pag-mos, that's the Greek word, literally, plunder, the spoils, the booty. The prize.

This (hands up high) is not the prize, the goal is not to get up here!

The V model assumes that goodness is up here, and the paradox is that we have to go down in order to go up.

But what if the paradox is that “up” is not the prize we think it is, and “the prize” is actually at the bottom all along?

Think about this from a 1st Century perspective, for a minute.

When the hymn talks about servants, that is the identity of 99% of the population back then. There was no middle class. There was the ruling class, the economic and political elite, and then there was everyone else. The working poor, living hand to mouth.

There were a few levels within that; some skills and positions were more valuable than others, for sure. I’m massively oversimplifying a complex society. But there were only a handful of people with what we think of as freedom or opportunity. There was no such thing as upward mobility. Everybody bowed to someone, everyone paid tribute, everyone was subject to the whims of some kind of ruler.

That life was hard and scary and vulnerable in ways I can barely begin to understand.

And yet, Jesus *chose* that life. Jesus embraced it. Not as a way to get up here--remember, he just rejected that prize--but because he saw *this* as the prize, *this* as the goodness.

Do you hear the difference?

In their ancient worldview, God was literally up here - sovereign, transcendent, independent. God was eternal, holy, set apart. God was beyond limits, God didn’t need anything.

And yet Jesus made the move from up there, to down here, into the muddle that is a human life. Being a servant was all about limitations--your life is not your own, you do what you’re told. You have no guarantee of a future, you are subject to the whims of the master, the winds of the empire, the unpredictability of life without savings or health care or a “social safety net.”

That’s us, too, by the way. We have lots of privileges, for sure, and I’m grateful for all of it. And yet, it’s all fragile. It’s all a few inflation points away from disappearing. It’s a phone call away from tragedy. We’re a genetic mutation away from pandemic. I’m a breath away from no more breathing. “Don’t forget, you’re going to die.”

That’s awfully melodramatic, but it’s also reality.

And yet, Jesus took on that kind of human vulnerability, humbled himself to our mortality, became obedient unto death, even the worst kind of death imaginable.

Jesus *chose* this. He took on human form. He embraced our humanity, in all its limitations. He became one of us, even unto death.

What does that mean? Again, the V model sees this as a transaction, that Jesus that he became human in order to *transcend* humanity, that he accepted death in order to defeat death.

But what if that's not the whole story? What if Jesus embraced humanity, because he saw that as the real prize?

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,


but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name,

so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.



The fullness of life is the gift *Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSVUE)*

What if Jesus humbled himself and accepted his humanity, because *this vision we have of God above and beyond*, that's not real, that's not the prize we think it is. The things worth grasping, worth embracing, Jesus saw down here, in this life.

Does that make sense?

I'll put it this way: Maybe Jesus is a humanist. He chose to live a full human life--the complexities of family, the hunger of poverty, the thrill of success, the sorrow of grief, the pressures of society, the comfort of friendship, the anguish of betrayal, the pain of physicality, the fear of death.

I'm not saying that Jesus lived every possible experience and can relate to your every emotion. He had one life, and he lived it, fully. Highs and lows, pain and pleasure, satisfaction and disappointment, fullness and emptiness.

Christ lived a human life and died a human death--and he was here for all of it. He chose it. He embraced it.

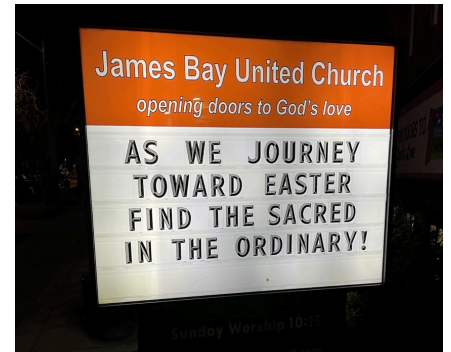
I think the message of Philipians, to a bunch of working class, living-on-the-edge, vulnerable servants:

This is the good stuff! This is the sacred, this is divine. This is the life that God has given you, that Jesus chose for himself. And not just the good parts, but also the hard parts, even the suffering. Even the dying. Even the Cross. This is where God is. This is what God loves. This is the Way, this is the Truth, this is the Life.

Life is hard, and full of uncertainty, full of pain, full of dying. And, this is Christ, among us.

Or, to simplify it enough to fit it on a church sign, the journey toward Easter is the invitation to find the sacred in the ordinary.

You can't get there by going upward, there's nothing better up there. Neither will you get there by going downward; although there is value in simplicity, there's nothing inherently more sacred down there, either.



Wherever you are, God is already there, Goodness is already there. The whole thing is a Temple, that's been the message from the beginning. This is the way of Christ.

And when you see that, the hymn says, that flips the whole thing on its head.

A graphic with a black background. A yellow inverted V-shape is centered, with a purple cross at its top vertex. The text is arranged around the V. On the left side of the V, it reads: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, **did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,** but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross." On the right side of the V, it reads: "Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to 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." At the bottom right, it says "Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSVUE)".

The V becomes a Δ . This is an imperfect metaphor as well, but the point is that rather than trying to pull us up to God in heaven, the Way of Jesus is to flip our perspective, to learn how to see Heaven in the Real World.

That's the prize, the full embrace of the human

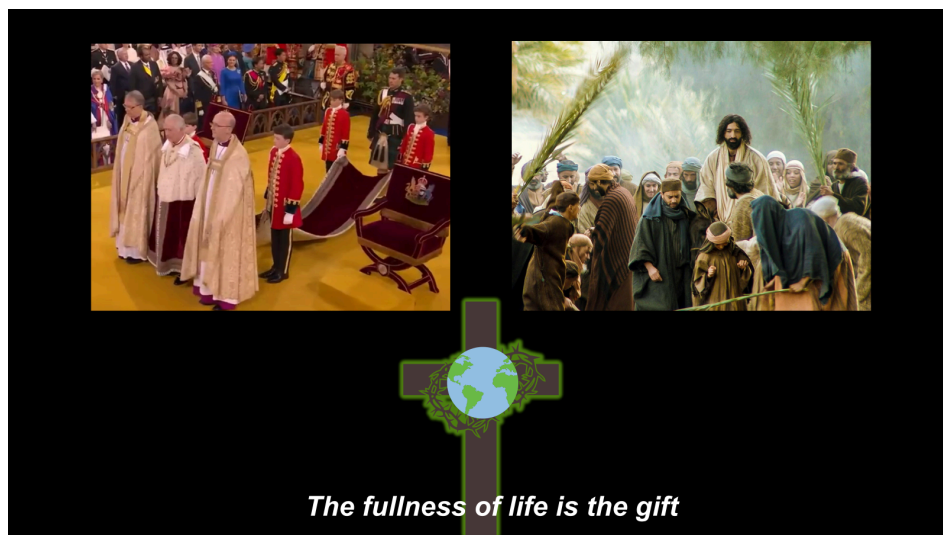
experience, to see, as God has been trying to tell us from the beginning, that God's Creation is Good, it is Good, it is very Good.

So what about the second half of the hymn, where God exalts Jesus and gives him a name that is above every name? That does imply that Jesus is lifted up, that everyone will kneel because of him.

Fair point. But remember, in the Way of Jesus, we are followers.

[demonstrates by kneeling beside the pulpit] We kneel, not because God is going to smite us if we don't, but because we are following Jesus. We kneel because he knelt. We humble ourselves, because Jesus humbled himself, because we trust him when he says that kneeling is not humiliation but gift. Our vulnerability is goodness. This is the Way of Christ.

I don't know if that all makes sense, let alone presents a convincing argument. Sunday got here before I could finish my academic research... However you hear it, this way of reading this hymn really resonates with my understanding of Jesus, dare I say with the Spirit of Christ in me.



So. Back to Palm Sunday and Coronation Day. Why did Jesus walk away from the Crown?

I'd say that it's because that's not where *life* is.

The promise of upward mobility is that things are *better* up here, that all those things we listed--the influence, the respect, the comfort, the security... all of that is supposed to bring fulfillment, happiness.

And maybe it does, I've never gotten very far in that game. There is certainly a line where life below a certain level of income and health and autonomy is a real struggle and I'm not wishing that for myself or anyone.

But from what I can see, the things at the top are not of inherent value. Influence, wealth, security, all of that is pretty flimsy.

We've been reminded a whole lot lately that the royal family, with all their privilege, is not protected from conflict, from dis-honor, from cancer. They get the best health care, I'm sure, but they, too, are obedient unto death.

I'm sympathetic to their struggles. Life happens up there, too, and the *quality* of life, it's not defined by resources and power and security.

Our society keeps score that way, with very real consequences. But we can choose what we value, what we pay attention to, what we prize.

And the way of Jesus says that there is goodness on the bottom. I know, coming from me and my comfortable middle class life, this is pretty weak...

But these aren't just my words. This is a letter from Paul, a political prisoner of the Roman Empire. This is the hymn of the people, crafted and sung by servants and slaves. This is the Way of Christ, who emptied himself and embraced humanity in all its weakness.

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

Blessings to you as you follow him into this very ordinary, very Holy week. Amen.