

Palm Sunday – A

If I were to begin a prayer with “Almighty, just and merciful God...” would you find that unusual? Does it sound right to you?

What if I were to start off a prayer with “God of all humility, you who take the lowest place, and put all others above yourself...” Is that something you could begin with?

From my experience “Humility” and “God” are terms that don’t often seem to find themselves in the same sentence.

But the second reading for today puts the humility of God front and center. And the Gospel shows clearly as how this humility is played out.

There have been times in our tradition when God’s humility has not been readily acknowledged. Majesty? Yes. Omnipotence? Absolutely. In fact, a good deal of our theology, at least from the Middle Ages onward, has made the Majesty and Omnipotence of God the leading features of his identity.

But humility? Not so much.

And yet, in today’s reading from Philippians the feeling is quite different. There we are reminded that Jesus, who is in the form of God, empties himself for the sake of those he has come to save.

He was not grasping, as if he needed to exercise his divine power in order to assure his position in the world.

We can look at that as something Jesus did, almost in a departure from the way God usually acts. The translation we

read at Mass almost sets us up to do that.

It reads, “*though* he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.”

But a closer reading of the original Greek text indicates that it does not have the word “*though*.” And other English translations do not render the text with it.

A better reading would seem to be “because Christ was in the form of God he did not grasp.”

When we dare to look at it from that perspective Christ’s refusal to grasp at status comes across as a characteristic he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit rather than something out of the ordinary divine way of doing things.

When we look at the passage this way it proclaims that, by his nature, God is humble and self-emptying.

That’s God’s way of going about being God, and it manifests itself in how Jesus went about his mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God—not standing on ceremony, not keeping his distance from ordinary people, not having his nose in the air.

This understanding fits in well with what follows: “Because of this, God greatly exalted him.” This exaltation comes in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

That is the indisputable sign that how Jesus went about his work was in

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keeping with what God had in mind from the very beginning.

The resurrection is God's absolute "yes" to how Jesus revealed the true nature of divinity through how he lived his life and how he embraced his death.

It's because of that that every knee must bend and every tongue confess that Jesus is the revelation of the glory of God in all his humility.

Can we make room in our view of God for such a perspective? What would happen to our prayer if we started out with "Humble God, who spares no expense, who is willing to pay any cost, do whatever is needed, for us to be saved..."?

I think it would make prayer easier and harder: easier because there's no barriers set up—not from God's side anyway.

And harder, because it's such a humbling experience for us to have to admit that there is One who loves us that much.

It's not something we can repay. We can only be grateful for it. Let's celebrate that thanksgiving in the Eucharist God has given to us.