

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11
HE CAME DOWN

Paris 1895, Capt Alfred Dreyfus has been convicted of treason; he was accused of being a spy and passing French secrets to Germany. Dreyfus was a captain in the French Army and once convicted, this public ceremony took place in which he was openly stripped of his rank. The ceremony took place in the courtyard of the Military academy at which Dreyfus had been one of the elite but now his fellow soldiers ripped the decorations off his cap and sleeves, tossed his badges of rank onto the ground, and broke his sword in two; it was called a ceremony of degradation. He was also sentenced to imprisonment on Devil's Island, the famous French penal colony off the coast of South America. Later, it was proved that he had been set up, that he had committed no crime, that the accusations were false and that someone else was the spy; the French military awarded him their highest honour as some measure of recompense for all that he had suffered falsely at the hands of others; he was reinstated as a major and ended World War One with the rank of Lt-Colonel and died in 1935.

This is a story of someone who is stripped of their rank by other people. In Dreyfus' case it was as result of malicious work by his enemies; he was the victim of their conspiracy and only as result of a campaign by his friends did he find freedom again. Dreyfus faced up to his enemies as they tore his badges of rank off his uniform; he could not fight back; he was in their hands and forced into that situation. There are all kinds of other examples that we could give of people who once enjoyed fame and fortune, celebrity or high office, being brought down by some scandal or other, or wealthy people who have lost everything in the bank or stock market crash, or government ministers forced to resign over some indiscretion; it is all about being brought down; what a come-down! How the mighty are fallen!

"He came down..." one of our carols uses that phrase about Jesus. "He came down..." but in Jesus' case this is something that He chose to do; He did this as a volunteer, He gave up a place that was His by right and renounced it voluntarily to come down into our world. Paul says of Jesus: "*He did...*" (*Phil 2:6f*) If there were any badges of glory and rank that Jesus wore, any 'insignia of majesty' (Lightfoot), then He stripped Himself of these badges, these insignia; the carol says "He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all..." This describes a journey, but not a geographical journey, a spiritual journey of coming down. The glory of His story is that as a result of His coming down, He Himself is exalted to the highest place and we are blessed forever.

Philippians 2:5-11 is thought to be an early Christian hymn that Paul quotes in his letter. It is a hymn that is to be sung in praise of Jesus and it describes two movements: the downward movement when Jesus came down and then the upward movement when God exalted Him again. But Paul quotes this hymn as way of showing Christians how to live and behave as Church. "*Your attitude...*" (v5) so, in telling us about Jesus' coming down, Paul is telling us that our way of thinking should be the same. There is something we are to do as a result of seeing what Jesus did. Advent is a season of waiting for Jesus; we said that a couple of weeks ago, reflecting the centuries of waiting for God's promises to be completed. It is also a season of preparation for Christ, reflecting the spiritual preparation that was going on in Israel, as the people were made ready to meet their new Saviour; more of that later.

There are three stages in Jesus' coming down.

1. **“He did not...” (v6)** This all begins with a choice and some of this is hard for us to grasp because it takes us beyond the notions of time and space, into unknown areas for us. The Bible gives us some notion that Christ was there at creation of world *“In the...” (John 1:1)* Somehow Jesus, the Son of God, has always existed; everything was made by Him and for Him. He is the Son of God sharing the glory and majesty of heaven with His Father; it is His by right! But at some point, He chose to give that up for a time; He chose not to insist on His rights, but to voluntarily give up these rights, and this majesty to come to our world. Jesus’ coming down began with the decision to do it; it began when He chose to give something up; it began with the freely made choice to be like this and to do this. So “the One who strode among the stars... must learn to walk again.” (MP959) – He chose to do this.

2. **“He made Himself...” (v7)** He became human. What do we see when we look at Jesus? We see a real man and for many that is what is most attractive about Him; He is a real flesh and blood man. There is some debate about what it means to talk about ‘emptying Himself’ or ‘made Himself nothing’ but one thing it does mean – he laid aside the glory of heaven to become a real person. When we read the story that the gospels tell and we read at Christmas, the overwhelming impression is not of glory and greatness, but of ordinary-ness and poverty. Mary was engaged to the village carpenter from an obscure village in Northern Israel; there is no fame and fortune and glory there; He is born in a stable because there is no room for them in any hotel in the town; His first visitors were not royalty but shepherds and the only other recorded visitors were foreigners. Now Jesus has all the frailties of a real human being; He knows what it means to get tired, hot, hungry, thirsty, grumpy, angry, to bleed, to sweat, to love and to be disappointed, afraid etc. “He came down...” and became a real human being.

3. **“He humbled...” (v8)** The lowest point of His journey is the cross. Jesus crucified, died on cross. Again we need to see the cross as a choice Jesus made; it is not to be understood as the waste of a young life, He was not the victim of tragic circumstances, but Jesus went to cross, ‘obedient to death’. It was what He came to do; it was the reason for His coming, but it was also the lowest part of His journey, the place where He experienced hell, being God-forsaken, taking on Himself the whole of human sin; the place where He suffered physically and spiritually; the place where the true man died in our place; the place where His whole self-understanding was questioned; His sanity and His relationship with God were questioned; His relationships with other people stretched to the limit.

All of this coming down had two results, one for Jesus, one for us. For Jesus: *“Therefore God...” (vv9ff)* Now Jesus has the highest place; the place that He gave up for a time is His again by right and glory and majesty are His all over again. For us, we are promised to be blessed in the richest and fullest way because of Jesus: because He came down, there is forgiveness for our sins; because He came down, there is hope of life and heaven for us; because He came down there is peace with God and peace to calm our fears; because He came down our relationship with God is healed and have access to God in faith and prayer; people who once were lost and living in darkness are now lifted up with the promise to share in Jesus’ glory for ever.

CS Lewis has a most powerful picture of this: “One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders.” (Miracles p115) Jesus comes down; Jesus almost disappears under the load; then Jesus is exalted; Jesus carries us with Him so that we are blessed because He came down. He lifts us, He blesses us, He exalts us and He does that

because He first chose to give up the insignia of majesty, He made Himself nothing and became a human being; He humbled Himself to die on cross.

All of this is about us and way we behave; “*Your attitude...*” (v5) “Paul’s joy is... in a church living the gospel life of unity in mind, heart and will, devoted to the task of unselfish mutual care.” (Motyer p.107) “*Make my...*” (vv2ff) There are natural human instincts that are very different from this: “looking out for myself and my own interests even at expense of others; the will to win at all costs; putting myself first to make sure that my voice is heard and my opinion shapes the group and all because I am better than the rest”. The result of these human instincts in Church is divisive, a people who are split, people who don’t get on with each other, falling out with one another. On the other hand, here are learned attitudes: a spirit of unity, being like-minded, aware of things that we share in common; looking out for the interests of others as well as our own, even being unselfish. We need to learn these attitudes; we need to learn to be like Jesus in way we think and way we behave.

We come down. Humility is the heart of this. Jesus humbled Himself; we are to have humble hearts. Proud hearts stand on our rights and demand things from others. Humble hearts look to needs of others and look to give of ourselves to others. You know the joke? What’s the slowest thing on four legs? Two Christians trying to get through a door! ‘After you!’ ‘No, after you!’ The reality is often far different: Christians at loggerheads with one another is the saddest thing you ever see! Christians riding roughshod over others, expressing their opinions regardless of the effect on a brother or sister in Christ; proud Christians demanding to get their own way and bullying people till they get it. How far away from the spirit of Jesus is that! Humble hearts, unselfish hearts, hearts that look to the interests and needs of others, hearts that see what we have in common, hearts that love – that’s the attitude of Jesus. We must come down; humble hearts are the order of the day.

This is how we prepare our hearts to celebrate Christmas! We come down. We pray humbly, confessing our faults and failings before God, acknowledging that we are not perfect and that have made mistakes; even if we don’t kneel physically, we kneel in our spirit before God. We come down in our attitudes to one another, acknowledge ways in which have got this wrong and pledge ourselves to live in Jesus’ way, to have in our hearts and minds, the same attitude as we see in Jesus. Advent is a time for faith and renewing our faith in Jesus; it is a time for celebrating Jesus’ coming and we do that by telling His stories and singing hymns and carols; Advent must also be time to make relationships right, with God and with other people; there is no better time to make sure our lives are shaped by Jesus and what he did. “He came down” – He gave up glory, He made Himself nothing, He humbled Himself; we come down with humble hearts?