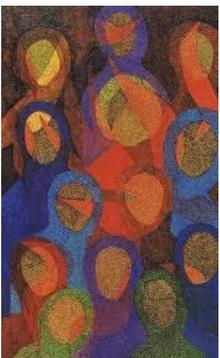


**Reflections on Philippians 2:1–15**  
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On the eve of budget night, the ABC interviewed members of the general public about their speculations on what the Government would soon reveal. One blokey voice filled my car space as he talked about the lack of impact the pandemic had on him so far. As a tradie, his industry has not experienced a lag and he was confident the incentives in the new budget would keep people like him busy. His future was secure. When asked about whether or not he felt hopeful about the budget reveal, he said, “I’ll see what’s in it for me, then I’ll decide.”

Whether we voice such a perspective across radio airwaves or hold it close to our chest, I would gently suggest the question “What’s in it for me?” echoes within each of us in its own way. Do we *feel* the impact of climate crisis? If not, then we are less likely to make changes to our lifestyle. Do we *personally* suffer from the social stigma of mental illness? If not, then we may not put effort into listening and understanding. Are we struggling to make ends meet, making hard choices about which bill to pay and the essentials we will need to go without? If not, then we may be less concerned for those who *are* facing this reality, and so on.

The pause in activity caused by lockdown has brought a similar question to the fore within community life. Free of obligation and routine for a while, many are now discerning how and if we wish to reengage. While reassessing our involvements can be healthy from time to time, the Apostle Paul cautions us about bringing any form of the question “What’s in it for me?” to bear in our discernment, especially when it comes to *koinonia*.



“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” Paul writes, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” This is followed by a sentence that is the real clincher when it comes to attitudes like the one I heard on the radio, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

At first it may seem like Paul is attempting simply to replace our self-centredness with other (better) behaviours. But in between his encouragement that the *koinonia* be unselfish and humble (vs. 1–4) and free of argument and grumbling (vs. 12–15), Paul inserts the words of an early church hymn. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” the song begins and then goes on to celebrate the self-emptying nature of God in Christ.

Rather than pull apart the poetry of this hymn with analytical commentary, it is enough to highlight that God’s self-emptying happens through a willingness to let go of the power and status inherent within God’s God-ness. In other words, Jesus *could have* exploited his God-ness, *but chose not to*. In becoming human, Jesus laid aside his power for the world God so loves.

It is this self-emptying nature of God to which Paul directs the *koinonia*. Yet having the mind of Christ in this regard is not the same as merely taking on the traits and behaviours of Jesus—i.e. WWJD. For to *take on* anything, even positive, Christ-like things, is the *opposite of self-emptying*, is it not?

So, it seems that what is being suggested to us in Paul’s letter is not just another version of the familiar path often laid out for us, namely, do more and be a better person, a road that leads to a cul-de-sac of relentless trying, fatigue and guilt. Instead, self-emptying not only describes the *nature* of Christ, it is the *pathless Path* that leads to Christ and Christ-like loving.

To seek the mind of Christ is to be engaged in relinquishing, laying aside, letting go, and laying down. Admittedly we are quite used to the road of activity and accomplishment. *Do more-be better, do more-be better...* chugs on in the background of our lives like the Little Engine that could or, as most of us feel it, *should*. In the midst of this noise, the invitation to be self-empty can feel like jumping headlong off a cliff. And, to a certain extent, that is exactly what it is.

Despite the need for intention when it comes to “working out our salvation,” union with God is not something to be acquired but something to be realised. Like the leap from the cliff, self-emptying requires that we entrust ourselves to that which is unseen to meet us mid-air and uphold us forever. Even more startling, in the work of emptying and de-cluttering, we discover that the One who holds us is actually *within*.

As the character Celie in Alice Walker’s powerful novel *The Color Purple* says, “Here’s the thing... The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside *everybody* else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it.” Writing nearly two millennia before Walker, St. Augustine states, “Our whole business in this life is to restore to health the eye of the heart, whereby God may be seen.” But as author Flannery O’Connor admitted, “I do not know You God because I am in the way,” and Augustine himself confessed that the “din of his thoughts” stood between himself and God.



In a 2012 landmark address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome, then Archbishop Rowan Williams spoke of the role of contemplative practices in helping to clear the inner path to God. Williams defines contemplation as “selfless attention to the Other that brings not death but life to self.” So, it seems we jump from the cliff seemingly to our peril but find ourselves alive and ennobled by Great Love teeming within. Williams goes on to say:

...contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom—freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deep revolutionary matter.

Given the Vatican setting with its influential hierarchy and wealth, we can only imagine how Williams’ words may have cut to the quick but also brought a welcome redirection. As always, Williams did not focus on forms of worship or yet another programme that might rescue the institution from its strain. Instead, he hopes to see the self-emptying way of Christ at the very centre of the church’s life.

Especially in this generation when the church can be preoccupied, anxious and self-concerned for its own survival, the challenge is for us to learn to allow for descent, to let go, to humble ourselves as God did in becoming Jesus so that we might be a clear channel of God’s love in the world. For it is our union with God, the Radiant Light deep within and all around, that alone causes us to shine like stars. Or as Paul puts it: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*. May it be so for us.