

One of the challenges to reading the New Testament letters is that we only get a small snippet of one side of the conversation. We know that Paul thought highly of the Philippians – as Curtis put it last week, Paul basically said “you guys rock!”

But, the beginning of today’s reading hints that there might be some sort of dispute going on. What it is we don’t know. It seems to be connected to a dispute between Euodia and Synteché mentioned later in the letter.

Euodia and Synteché were two women who were Paul’s coworkers and who were sent to Philippi to help lead the church there.

Paul invokes the humility of Christ as an example of how to live and how to deal with disputes. He says be of the same mind as Christ Jesus. He then quotes what was probably a very early Christian hymn that we now call the Christ Hymn.

We can better understand the Christ hymn and what it’s really saying about Jesus with a little trip into history.

The city of Philippi was the site of the last battle between the assassins of Julius Caesar and Caesar’s supporters in 42 BC.

After the battle, Roman soldiers were released from service and settled there with their families. Philippi became a sort of little Rome – the architecture, art, and governance were thoroughly Roman.

And so were the gods, including the cult of Emperor worship.

We tend to think of propaganda and “spin” as more modern developments. But the Roman emperors were masters of spin. They didn’t have TV, TikTok or Facebook or even newspapers. They didn’t have YouTube tutorials to teach them how to build their brand.

They had statues. And coins with the emperor’s likeness. Unlike a Facebook post you might decide to delete, a statue is a commitment. Some of them are still there, over 2000 years later.

The images – whether statues or coins - projected the image the Emperor wanted the people to have of him. They typically showed the Emperor as either a warrior and conqueror, or a bringer of peace and prosperity.

The Emperors traced their ancestry to the gods. It was part of a process of deification which for most emperors culminated in the declaration that they were in fact gods. Their statues often showed them as gods.

Paul's ministry was during the time of two emperors – Claudius and Nero. Like the Emperors before, they claimed divine lineage – for Claudius it was Jupiter. Jupiter represented divine authority, law and order, and the divine protection of Rome.

Nero identified with Apollo, or Sol, the sun god, to establish his absolute authority.

This Roman propaganda...this spin...was inescapable for Roman citizens and residents throughout the Empire. Statues and coins were everywhere. They gave the message that the Emperor was backed by the gods, had absolute authority, and all was well.

An article for the BBC website written in 2011 said this about the propaganda for Augustus, but the same could be said for all the emperors:

“The message the Emperors meant to convey was clear: thanks to the leadership of the emperor, the frontiers are secure, order reigns at home, and we can all go safely about our business and prosper.”

But there was no mistaking that the number one thing the statues projected was power. Power that had crushed any resistance that the people in the colonies might put up. Power to enslave people and to take property if it was deemed necessary by the Empire.

The statues projected a god-like power that exercised complete domination of the people who lived in the Roman Empire.

So when Paul writes about grasping for equality with God, that's the backdrop. It's exactly what the emperors did.

Jesus had every right to claim equality with God. In fact, in John's gospel, he says I and the Father are one.

But he meant something very different than what the various Caesars and their propaganda statues meant.

And Paul makes it pretty clear that Jesus was the complete opposite of that kind of power. In verse 8, the Christ hymn is clear: domination, conquest, exploitation—the so called “patriotic” images that the Roman Empire embraced—go completely against God's true divine nature.

The thing is, if we're honest, the more dominating kind of power exercised by the Emperors can sometimes seem safer.

Although we'd probably agree most of the Emperors went too far, projecting power and dominance can seem pretty attractive – as long as it's not directed against us.

So really think about this image of the divine Christ, taking the form of a human – a slave even - emptying himself of any dominating power, and even allowing himself to be put to death on a cross.

Now think about the very Roman Philippians who have been steeped in the worship of dominating gods...the worship of the Emperors who did grasp equality with their gods.

When you put those two images alongside each other, you can see how it would be very jarring. And it should be for us.

Some of the things Paul wrote in his letters are sources of conflict in the 21st Century church – the role of women, household codes, homosexuality. Some Christians tend to be all over those...women should be silent in church. The Bible says it and that settles it for all time.

But what about this reading? What about this kind of humility? It does get quoted by powerful people, although they tend to emphasize the part about every knee bending to Christ.

But how many of us can say we really want to be that much like Christ? This self-emptying isn't something humans very often want to take on.

And we sometimes tend to worship, or at least admire, power and strength that was more like that of the emperor-gods.

Humility is a struggle for many of us. I know it is for me. But the line "think of others more highly than yourself" can also be misinterpreted.

It is no more Christlike to wallow in self-loathing and constantly bash yourself. That isn't what this means. We are God's beloved and we are not called to be anything less than that. Instead, it means to lose your self-centeredness and your ego – think of yourself less often.

So here's the good news all of this. Christ doesn't wield power over us the way the Emperors wielded power over their subjects.

Instead, Christ emptied himself...into us. Into this new creation. Paul wrote in one of his other letters, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.

That is our salvation. Christ becomes the center of us and our communities. And It is from that center...that center which is Jesus Christ...that we work out what it should look like in the world.

Jesus came as a humble servant to us. The power we receive from Christ is the power to serve in the same way he did.

That is where our unity comes from, even when we have disputes. That sort of humble service has more power to change hearts than all the power behind any ruler.

Every tongue would not confess that Jesus is Lord if Jesus were the same as the emperors. Every tongue would not confess that Jesus is Lord by force.

If every tongue is to confess that Jesus reigns, It will be by the same self-emptying love Jesus showed us. It will be by the example of humble love rather than the power of mighty armies and oppressive laws.

Virg has been called to her work as a spiritual director. She has been shaped by the self-giving love of Jesus. And now she is called into showing that self-giving love to those she will serve.

It's the season of graduations. Gracie and Izzy and graduates everywhere have been adopted into Christ's self-giving love so that in whatever future work they do, they will show that same self-giving love to the world.

We all are filled by Christ with that self-giving love so we can spread it to the world in all areas of our lives.

In a world where earthly power seems so seductive, we are reminded in this Christ hymn that Jesus did not grasp that kind of power. Instead, he emptied himself into us...into the world for our salvation.