

Attitude carries a lot of weight these days. When politicians have it, they please voters. When talk show hosts have it, listeners cheer them on. But attitude does not work so well in families. If one spouse has it, it can stop communication. When teenagers have it, adults wish they'd get over it.

Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians addresses this problem. Attitude was keeping them from living in harmony. They probably faced the same issues that can divide a church today – conflicting priorities, the immoral behavior of certain leaders, the splintering of families, and how to honor the traditions of our ancestors while opening up to new ideas. Any of these and many more could have caused the Philippians to lose harmony and to gain attitude.

To address it, Paul takes a crazy approach. He sings a song. In the middle of his letter, he quotes the words of a popular Christian hymn. Perhaps he learned it from the Philippians and was singing it back in their face. The song has two verses. The first tells how Christ left heaven and came to earth, and the second tells how he left earth and returned to heaven. It goes like this: "Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; . . . he humbled himself . . . to the point of death, even death on a cross." OK, it's not a real toe-tapper, but the second verse is more upbeat. "Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

This hymn states the bold affirmation that Jesus is God. Yet he did not hang around heaven to enjoy it. He emptied himself to become a lowly human being, accepting even the worst kind of death. He was rewarded for this. God exalted him so that every creature could acknowledge who Jesus is. Jesus ended great because he began lowly.

Paul says Jesus had attitude. Not the attitude that puts people down, not the attitude that withdraws from family and friends, but an attitude of humility, one that thinks more of others than of oneself. Paul offered this solution to the divided Philippians: if you want unity at home, there's one thing you should do. Change your attitude. It is hard, especially if the people you are dealing with don't seem to be changing their attitude. But Jesus didn't wait for us to change before he came. He gave us an example. Paul tells the Philippians they can do the same thing. Don't wait for someone else to change; show the right attitude and make it easier on others to rethink how they should act.

This particular passage appears frequently in our lectionary. We hear it every year on Palm Sunday. We heard it just two weeks ago for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. And here it is again. Perhaps we need to be reminded over and over not just that Jesus came, but how humbly he came. It was the key to his success. Things go better if we adopt his attitude.