

**Mark 11:1-11**  
**Isaiah 50:4-9a**  
**Psalm 31**  
**Philippians 2:5-11**  
**Mark 15:1-39**

## **The Hero and God**

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The hero's epic journey through challenge and difficulty is a theme that occupies a strong place in the mythic traditions of many cultures, even down to Lord of the Rings. The hero usually ventures forth from a world of common concerns into a world of supernatural wonder: fabulous or even dark forces are encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow benefits on the people he left behind. For example Prometheus ascended to the heavens, stole fire from the gods and descended. Aeneas went down into the underworld, crossed the dreadful river of the dead, threw a sop to the three-headed watchdog Cerberus, and conversed at last with the shade of his dead father. All things were unfolded to him: the destiny of Rome that he was about to found, and the knowledge to help him avoid or endure every burden. He returned through the ivory gate to his work in the world. Many of us were once Argonauts, members of an ABC Radio club, which followed Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece. Our hearts were in our mouths as he battled with the Harpies, sailed through the Clashing Rocks into a sea of marvels, circumvented the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece, and returned with the fleece and the power to wrest the throne that was rightfully his from a usurper. These are only a few examples but in them the hero leaves the ordinary to encounter the extraordinary, and returns to bring boons to the people left behind in the everyday world.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul quotes a hymn to Christ which follows a similar pattern to the journey of the hero. The hymn comes in two parts, the first recites the descent of the Redeemer from heaven to the world of mortals, including the realm of the dead. The second tells of his ascent to heaven as victor where he is enthroned in glory by God to receive the homage of every realm of the cosmos.

What is the meaning of this hymn and why does Paul quote it? In relation to the Hymn to Christ we may be able to identify similarities and differences between it and the pattern of stories the ancient world told about heroes. But we also have to ask what Paul intended to say when he used it as he did.

Compared with some hero myths in the Hymn Christ moves in the opposite direction - from heaven to earth. He who existed in the heavenly realms did not think divinity was a prize to be looted from God. Instead he obediently humbled himself and renounced the divine majesty to enter fully into mortal life. It says: *he emptied himself*. There is an encyclopedia of discussion about this particular line of scripture, but the thing to see is that he, who already shared the divine estate to which Adam and Lucifer aspired did not seek to compete with God. Instead he voluntarily chose to become fully human chose to become as poor as a beggar and was taken for a criminal. And on his journey

through life he encountered not supernatural wonders or fabulous forces but the deepest humiliation, rejection, suffering and death. He who was lord of all appeared amongst us in a crown of thorns, was reviled and taunted by all and sundry before suffering the fate of a criminal's death. Paul emphasised the deep humiliation of this journey when he interfered with the poetry of the hymn: he added the line *even death on a cross*. Neither copyright restrictions nor aesthetic sensitivity deterred Paul making this point. The cross was scorned in the ancient world. It would never have occurred to anyone to exalt the cross into a religious symbol but here it becomes absolutely pivotal: the quintessential symbol of Jesus' self-emptying humility and his profound reliance on God alone.

The second part of the hymn tells of God's response to what Christ has done. As an act of grace and love towards one so faithful God raised him up to the heavenly realms. What Christ was prepared to eschew became his by right. Because he was willing to enter so fully into our lot, God has taken him to the heavenly places to be our mediator, our great high priest, with the aim that we would go there with him.

This is highly symbolic, mythic style language which conveys a world view that is difficult to unpack. It is in fact akin to an enthronement Psalm the purpose of which was to testify that all the powers of the cosmos now pay homage to Christ, who was one of us. Paul takes this cosmic, mythic language and applies it to our life in the everyday world. He wants the Philippians, and us, to find the motivation for life together from this pattern, to see Christ as a mentor. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus* - It means do not try to hold your own with God: discover in the cross the deliverance that has already been gifted to you. Live now allowing God to be God to the uttermost extent.

The modern approach to myth tends to read them as stories that reveal the human struggle for identity. Who are we and how do we become whole? At the commencement of Holy Week we are given a myth which answers that question by showing that it is bound up with knowing something deep about God. It shows us that whatever we do it is God who lifts us up. And when we are confronted by different sort of parades for different sorts of heroes, we are reminded here that God did not lift up a hero who acted violently in the world, but one who, as it says, ...emptied himself, and as Wesley would say, ...of all but love.

In the coming days we enter into the part of the story that is the very seed corn of the church itself. It is from here that our life and our faith have come. Everything we know and believe about God, and life, has been built from this. Before we travel those roads again, the hero's journey of Paul's adopted Hymn stands as a great challenge to us. It holds a mirror to the face of the Church. Are we ready to see the purpose and the power in Jesus' humiliation and to go on that journey with him once more? Are we ready to find God revealed for us in place that we least expect - in love that was scorned, in suffering death and new life?