The ‘downsizing’ of Christ

Philippians 2:7

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 9:6-7; Philippians 2:1-11

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 232, 32, 238, 292, 522

Series: Incarnation of Christ (#1)

Occasion: End of year Sunday School presentations after the service

Theme: Jesus emptied Himself of all the privileges of being God when He became a lowly human being

Proposition: Jesus trusted the goodness of His Heavenly Father’s will as he humbly counted others as more significant than himself.

**Introduction**

Today, after this morning worship service, we look forward to some presentations with our Sunday School children. I would like to speak to these children now. You are small! Well, some are bigger than others I know, but most of you are smaller in size than most of the adults here.

Imagine what it would be like if you were shrunk down in size to be very tiny, smaller than my hand! This is the physically impossible idea which has been explored in movies like ‘Ant-man’ (2015), ‘Honey, I shrunk the kids’ (1989), ‘the incredible shrinking woman’ (1981) preceded by ‘the incredible shrinking man’ (1957). The idea of tiny people was written about back in 1726 by Jonathan Swift in his novel ‘Gulliver’s Travels”. Mr Swift imagined an island populated by six-inch-tall people called the Lilliputians. More recently (2017) the movie ‘downsizing’ takes up the same idea in an imaginary world where some people are of almost Lilliputian size (5 inches). These individuals volunteer to be shrunk down from full size in order to help with overcrowding and reduce their impact on the environment. Their reward for being ‘downsized’ is a life of luxury living in the miniature resort of ‘Leisureland’.

I’ve used the word ‘downsizing’ in the title of this sermon to describe what Jesus did when He became a human being. He wasn’t physically reduced in size, but He was ‘downsized’ in glory, honour and power when became a human being. We’ll be looking closely at Philippians 2:7 (Jesus ‘*made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*’) under three headings:

1. The self-emptying of Jesus
2. The slavery of Jesus
3. The birth of Jesus
4. **The self-emptying of Jesus**

When the imaginary ‘Ant-man’ downsized himself, he became much smaller in size, but at the same time much stronger. When Jesus ‘was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man’ (to use the words of the Nicene Creed), his ‘downsizing’ was different in these ways:

* It actually happened. The historical account of the conception, birth, and life of Jesus Christ is accurate history. There’s never been a ‘downsizing’ – a descent from glory and privilege - like this before or since.
* It was not that Jesus became physically smaller than He had been, but that He became material whereas before He had not had a physical body.
* Jesus did not become stronger when He became a human being, but quite the reverse. He put aside His strength and became weak and vulnerable in His humanity.

These are the words which reveal to us the ‘downsizing’ of Jesus in our text: He ‘*made himself nothing*’. We need to be careful to understand correctly what happened when Jesus became a man. The Greek word translated ‘made nothing’ here does not mean that in ‘downsizing’ He completely lost everything that He once was. The meaning is that He gave up the privileges or benefits of being the Son of God, without ceasing to be divine.

He put aside the almighty power (omnipotence), the complete knowledge (omniscience), the ability to be everywhere present (omnipresence) and His self-existence (aseity) – qualities (attributes) which only God possesses.

He became weak, frail and limited as a human being, just as we all are, no matter how small or big our bodies are. He experienced tiredness and weariness as we do. He needed to sleep regularly, as we do. As a human being, He no longer had full-knowledge of all things, but needed to learn wisdom and obedience as he grew and matured (e.g. Luke 2:52; Heb 5:8), just as we do, no matter how old we are. He was restricted to being in one place at one time, just as you and I are, no matter how busy our schedules are. He was dependent upon his parents to care for him as a baby when he could not feed or cloth himself, just as we are were when we started out in this life.

He continued to be dependent upon what God, through this Creation provided as He lived his life on this earth as a human being. He needed to eat and drink to sustain his body. He experienced hunger and thirst. He was vulnerable to the hurtful words and harmful actions of others, just as we are. After his birth in Bethlehem, King Herod secretly summoned the wise men (Matt 2:7) who would later bring gifts to baby Jesus of gold and frankincense and myrrh (Matt 2:11). This wicked King pretended to want to worship infant King Jesus, but what he really wanted to do was to kill Him (Matt 2:13). Having emptied Himself of the almighty power which was His, Jesus could not escape from Herod. We could say that He willingly allowed Himself to remain trapped in the body of a helpless baby. He had to be carried away to safety in Egypt by his parents after Joseph was warned of the danger by an angel of the Lord in a dream (Matt 2:13).

After He had grown up to be an adult, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt 4:1). He was hungry and when Satan suggested that he turn stones into bread, He could have grabbed back His divine ‘superpower’ that He had willingly laid aside and satisfied his physical hunger, but He did not. When Jesus was arrested by a great crowd bearing swords and clubs in the garden of Gethsemane, He could have used His divine privilege to protect Himself, as He explained: “*Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*” (Matt 26:53). When He was hanging on the cross at Calvary, slowly dying there, those who passed by mocked him saying “*save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross*" (Matt 27.40).

Jesus could have reclaimed His divine power at that time and released himself from the nails which bound him. As almighty God this would have been no big thing at all. Yet He remained there to the end. Why did He never grab back His divine power and privilege? Because He fully trusted God in the troubled times of his life on this earth. Jesus trusted the greater goodness of His Heavenly Father’s will as he humbly counted others as more significant than himself. He humbly counted others as more significant than himself (Phil 2:3) which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The slavery of Jesus**

When the people in the imaginary world of the ‘downsizing’ movie chose the one-way process of being made small enough to fit into an adult-sized human hand the wealthier ones were rewarded with a lifetime of luxury, recreation and ease in the entertainment complex called ‘Leisureland’.

For Christ, when He became man it was the complete opposite. In reality, He exchanged the glories, the majesty, the privileges of a life in heaven, the enjoyment of peace, harmony and the pleasure of perfect fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, for the lowliest of lives.

The vast extent of the ‘downsizing’ of Jesus is revealed in these words ‘*taking on the form of a servant*’. As you may know, the Greek word here translated ‘servant’ refers to a person who was bound to another as a servant. This was a form of slavery where the ‘bondservant’ belonged to his or her master as their possession. Such a bondservant surrendered themselves completely to the will of their master so that their every thought, word and deed was subjected to the desire of the one who ruled over them. Although this was sometimes voluntary, the word here translated ‘servant’ usually refers to the involuntary, permanent service of a slave. To be such a slave was to occupy the lowest possible social position in society.

Mabel Williamson, an American missionary to China last century wrote a poem about Jesus called ‘He had no rights’, beginning with these words:

 “*He had no rights. No right to a soft bed, and a well-laid table.*

*No right to a home of His own, a place where His own pleasure might be sought.*

*No right to choose pleasant, congenial companions, those who could understand Him and sympathize with Him.*

*No right to shrink away from filth and sin, to pull His garments closer around Him and turn aside to walk in cleaner paths.*

*No right to be understood and appreciated; no, not by those upon whom He had poured out a double portion of His love.*

*No right even never to be forsaken by His Father, the One who meant more than all to Him.*

*His only right was silently to endure shame, spitting, blows; to take His place as a sinner at the dock; to bear my sins in anguish on the cross*”.

As we have already heard, Jesus emptied Himself of all the privileges of being God. He would have endured an immense ‘downsizing’ just to become the greatest human ruler on the planet. That would have been a very very long way down for Him. Yet He went so much lower even than that! He ‘took on the form of a servant’. He became the lowest of the low.

Even his conception was a shameful beginning as a human being. His human mother was unmarried. In 1st century Jewish society, if a man found his fiancée was pregnant by another before they were married, it was expected that he would break off the betrothal so that he did not share in her scandalous humiliation. Joseph did not want Mary to suffer any more than was unavoidable so when he found out that she was pregnant he ‘*resolved to divorce her quietly*’ (Matt 1:19). It was only because an angel of the Lord explained the unique supernatural nature of the baby she was carrying that he proceeded to marry her. The angel said: “*that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matt 1:20b-21).

Jesus was a slave on this earth in the sense that He was bound to the will of His Heavenly Father and that perfect will was for Him to serve others and to die to save His people from their sins. As He explained to His disciples: “*Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Matt 20:26b-28). In the form of a slave, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, giving them an example of how they should live for Him (John 13:15). Jesus was willingly bound to the cross and gave his life up to purchase a people for God who would be truly free.

We could say that He was ‘downsized’ so that all who trust in Him for their salvation could be ‘upsized’. The Bible puts it this way “*to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*” (John 1:12). ‘Upsized’ brothers and sisters in Christ, “*See what kind of love the Father has given to us*” (1 John 3:1) through the great ‘downsizing’ of His Son. “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*” (2 Cor 8:9).

When Jesus became a human being, He put aside all the privileges of being God, without ceasing to be divine. He voluntarily took on the role of being the servant of others and He was ‘born in the likeness of men’ – which brings us to our third point.

1. **The birth of Jesus**

In his novel ‘Gulliver’s Travels’, Jonathan Swift imagined the small Lilliputians giving birth to proportionately tiny children. They were just like their parents. In reality, when Mary gave birth to baby Jesus. He was like her in some ways, but different to her in others.

The last words of our text reveal more about the ‘downsizing’ of Jesus. He was ‘*born in the likeness of men*’. Even though He remained fully divine, Jesus looked just like an ordinary human being. He was and is fully human. He would likely have had some resemblance in his facial features to his human mother Mary. He had a human body like we all do. When He was born, He did not just appear to be like a baby boy. He was a baby boy. Over the years of his childhood, He grew in physical size and wisdom (Luke 2:52). His development was favourable in the sight of both God and the people around him (Luke 2:52).

The word ‘likeness’ does not mean that Jesus is anything less than fully human, but that He is not entirely the same as you and me. He is different from us in two important ways:

**Firstly**, as we have already heard, He is fully God. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians about Jesus “*though he was in the form of God, (He) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped*”, the word form (morphe), like the word ‘likeness’ does not mean that Jesus was less than divine, but that He is not just human.

**Secondly**, He was born in the ‘likeness of men’, born like you and me of a woman and ‘born under the law’ (Gal 4:4). Like us, Jesus was born with the obligation to perfectly fulfil the moral standard of God’s perfect law. Unlike us, Jesus was born without a sinful nature. He was **not** ‘brought forth in iniquity’. His mother Mary did **not** conceive Him in sin (cf. Psalm 51:5). The power of the Most High overshadowed Mary so that the child she gave birth to was called Holy – the Son of God (Luke 1:35). The conception of Jesus was like that of no other human being.

He “*made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*” (Phil 2:7). So what does the ‘downsizing of Christ’ mean for people like you and me? Jesus is true to the meaning of His name: ‘God saves’ (Matt 1:21). He is the promised offspring of a woman who has ‘bruised the head’ of Satan (Gen 3:15) and conquered sin and death. He is the One whom God sent to this earth so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). He is called *“Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end*” (Isaiah 9:6b-7).

He is a man who was born a helpless small baby, just as you were. He understands our weakness and our need, Believe in Him however small or tall, young or old, you are. Brothers and sisters in Christ, He was ‘downsized’ for us and He is the perfect example of trusting God in troubled times. He experienced sadness and loneliness so that we could know joy, peace, love and hope. He died in the place of people like you and me and lived a perfect life of obedience to the will of His Father in Heaven so that we could be ‘upsized’ to be the children of God, and so we are by faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

AMEN.