



The Lutheran Herald



The heavenly Jerusalem
November 2010
(For Trinity 22–Advent 1)

The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

Grace and peace to you in Christ Jesus!

As the end of the Church Year approaches, one of the aspects of this season which I particularly appreciate is its hymnody. In particular, I am mindful of the coming opportunity to sing the hymns of Bernard of Cluny (also known as Bernard of Morlas), drawn from his work, *De Contemptu Mundi* (*On Contempt for the World*).

It was Matthias Flacius, *enfant terrible* of the Lutheran Reformation, who brought the work of Bernard to the attention of the Church, publishing *De Contemptu Mundi* in 1557; Bernard's scathing assessment of the Roman Church of his day (the 12th century) fit well with the claims of the Reformation that the corruptions which had crept into the Church had not escaped notice. A faithful remnant protested in various ways, including poetry.

Snippets of Bernard's 3000 line poem are the basis for four hymns in *The Lutheran Hymnal*:

TLH 448: "Brief Life Is Here Our Portion"

TLH 605: "The World Is Very Evil"

TLH 613: "Jerusalem the Golden"

TLH 614: "For Thee, O Dear, Dear Country"

(Strangely, the first three are set to the same tune—"Ewing"—while 614 is set to "Bona patria". As the "Ewing" tune is the most familiar, it may be preferable to simply sing all four to that tune.)

A couple at Salem very generously presented me with a copy of the critical translation of *De Contemptu Mundi* last year for Christmas. I am in their debt! For the Christian, the hymns of this season—and particularly of Bernard—are a balm for our sorrows, and an encouragement to press on in faith.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop James Heiser

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

FROM THE PROPERs FOR TRINITY 22

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 18:23-35 (NKJV)

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all."

Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, "Pay me what you owe!"

So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?"

And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

The COLLECT

O God, our Refuge and Strength, who art the Author of all godliness, be ready, we beseech Thee, to hear the devout prayers of Thy Church, and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth, with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!” It is no small thing to lead another Christian—especially the little ones—into transgression. Such a one (the man by whom the offense comes) is that member of the Body of Christ, the Church, who may need to be cut off for the sake of the whole Body. St. Paul thus wrote to the Church in Corinth: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many.” (1 Cor. 12:13–14) Again, “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.” (v. 26–27)

Jesus teaches His disciples that such separations are necessary on occasion for the sake of the health of the whole Church. The normal calling of Christ’s servants is to seek out the lost, and gather them back; for the sake of the lost sheep, the shepherd for a time may even turn away from the rest of the flock to labor on behalf of the one who has strayed.

The keys were thus entrusted to the disciples for the sake of binding and loosing sins; as Christ said to the apostles on the day of the resurrection (John 20), so we hear His words in Matthew 18: “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Such binding and loosing is undertaken for the good of Christ’s saints. This is not something done indiscriminately; it is undertaken for the sake of Christ’s people; “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.” Normally, the Word of absolution is the one which is heard, to the joy of the penitent. But also, on occasion, the Word which binds must be proclaimed to the impenitent, for the sake of the whole flock. The Lord keep us in faith through His Word, that we may abide in His Body forever.

Again, we behold the disciples as they obsessed over the pointless question of which of them was “the greatest.” The question was pointless in the manner in which they were asking it, because they were thinking according to the categories of the Gentiles. As Jesus said to them in Matthew 20: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (v. 25–28)

The worldly notion is that authority is expressed through an ability to impose one’s will. The disciples essentially wanted to know which one of them could “boss around” the others—a notion which is certainly still at work in the Papacy, and in the minds of demagogues who rail about “voter supremacy.” The worldly notion of greatness is the ability to impose one’s own will on someone else; but in the Church, the greatest is the one who serves his brothers and sisters in Christ according to the Word and the calling which come from the Lord. Thus the called servant serves the whole flock according to the Lord’s will.

To give someone a cup of water in the name of Christ seems a trivial matter; the receiving of the little ones in the name of Jesus is often neglected, as well. Men want works that are glorious in their own eyes, rather than those which the Lord has appointed.

Thanks be to the Lord for Christ’s perfect obedience to His Father’s will, that the Lord of all came to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. In the performance of our duties according to our vocations (fathers, mothers, children, rulers, subjects, pastors and laity) sin will often intrude, and we will have much to repent. But the perfect service of the Christ in obedience to the Father’s will has delivered us from death.

Jesus warns us in Luke 17, “And they will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them or follow them.” There are many in our generation who would distract the Church by means of their idle speculations about the End Times, and such individuals are often quite eager to fix the time of the Lord’s return in glory. But Jesus declares: “For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day.” The suddenness of lightning, and that its light is not hidden from the eyes of men, tells us much concerning the return of our Lord at the end of the age.

Jesus presented the Pharisees with several moments in history when the judgment of God had descended in like manner: “And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man”. When the divine judgment descended on the Earth, men were caught going about their affairs as if this world would continue for ever. And they all were drowned with the exception of those who were gathered in the Ark.

So, too, Sodom seemed as if it would never be held accountable for its wickedness, until the Lord led Lot out of the city, and those who remained perished as fire and brimstone rained from heaven.

And in the year 70 A.D., the pretensions of the Jews came to nothing, when the Lord’s judgment was fulfilled against Jerusalem, and the Roman armies laid waste to the city—a foretaste of the judgment which will descend upon the Earth at the end of the age.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Remember Lot’s wife.” We are tempted by the things of this fallen world, and the labors which we have expended. In a moment, this world will come to its end, and the vanity of all that men trusted in which be revealed. We have our life in Christ Jesus, who has conquered death, and we trust in His Word which assures us that we will live forever with Him.

“For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” When the disciples came to the Lord and asked Him to teach them to pray, Jesus did not hesitate to answer their request, but responded, “When you pray, say...” and gave them the words which we now know as the Lord’s Prayer. (Luke 11:1–4) The eternal Son gives us the words to pray, and we are assured that our heavenly Father graciously hears our prayer; “for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God.” (John 16:27) And we are told that when words fail us, “the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” The love and grace of the Holy Trinity is manifest in the desire to pray, the prayer we are given, and the faith which trusts our prayers are heard and answered.

St. Paul declares, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” (Rom. 8:28) This is not some “wishful thinking” on the part of Paul; these words, written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were written by one who suffered persecution for the sake of Christ Jesus. Faith trusts that all things truly work together for good to those who love God, no matter how the flesh may howl in fear and anger over the crosses and trials which must come in the life of the Christian. The truth is that in this life you may never understand how various afflictions ‘worked together for good’; such things are only believed on the basis of the Word of the promise.

“It is God who justifies.” Thus we have hope; our salvation does not rest on anything of our own creation, or the quality of our suffering. The complete atonement for sin was accomplished through Jesus’ suffering and death for us, and the faith which takes hold of God’s gracious gift of salvation is worked by the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacrament. The Word of God is all sufficient, and in that Word we trust.

When Jesus spoke to the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, He did not hesitate to speak to them concerning their perilous spiritual condition. They had begun this encounter by challenging Jesus' authority: "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?" (Mark 11:28) But when they were unwilling answer Jesus plainly, and declare whether they believed the baptism of John was from heaven or from men, Jesus said to them: "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (v. 33) But it was then that Jesus told them the parable of the vineyard.

The interpretation of the parable is quite straightforward; its meaning was grasped by the priests, scribes and elders: "And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them." Jesus declared to them that they were simply those who had served as vinedressers for a time. They were to labor in the vineyard in service of the Lord—but now they had become greedy and wanted to take the place of God. The Lord sent His prophets to them, but they rejected the Word. Finally, He sent His Son, and their greed drove their murderous intention: "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours."

This rebellion led to the destruction of Jerusalem; and the office which the 'vinedressers' once held was taken from them.

But now, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Christ is our Cornerstone, and the Church is build upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles. As we labor while it is day, we are ever mindful of the lateness of the hour of this world, and the coming Judgment. Thus we have our hope not in our labors, but in the mercy of the Son of God, who has redeemed us from sin and death. For those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, the arrival of the Son in glory will be a time of everlasting joy.

The Lord afforded to each of the three servants talents “to each according to his own ability”. As the Triune God fashions each man according to His holy will, our abilities, circumstances, and vocations are in keeping with His plan for us within the history of His Church in this world.

Although it is always difficult to draw equivalences between the economics of different ages and cultures, given that a talent was equivalent in value to 3,600 shekels, the stewardship of even a single talent was a significant responsibility, and that responsibility was placed upon each servant according to the will of the One who knew each man’s abilities.

In the judgment which took place when the Lord returned, the differences between the servants were rooted not in the number of talents which had been allotted to them, but in their respective understanding of the nature of Him who entrusted the talents to them. The first two servants acknowledged the Lord: “Lord, you have delivered to me five talents,” and “Lord, you have delivered to me two talents”. The use to which they put that solemn trust from the Lord was a reflection of what they believed concerning the One who entrusted such a fortune to them.

Sadly, the same was also true of the third servant, whose view of his Lord was corrupted by sin. “Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground.” But what was the trust of talent but precisely a sowing of seed? The man knew neither his Lord, nor the gift which had been placed in his hands.

A bad tree bears bad fruit. There is no harvest of the third servant’s labor because he blasphemed the Lord in his heart. Despising the Lord, he despised the stewardship entrusted to him. The Lord grant that we repent of any such hardness of heart, and rejoice in the manifold gifts of God, even as we live day by day by His grace!

FROM THE PROPER FOR TRINITY 23

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 22:15–22 (NKJV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.”

So they brought Him a denarius.

And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”

They said to Him, “Caesar's.”

And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

The COLLECT

Absolve, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy people from their offenses, that from the bonds of our sins which by reason of our frailty we have brought upon us we may be delivered by Thy bountiful goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, he writes of his concern that these people are still exhibiting a rather infantile approach to Christianity. The people of Corinth had begun choosing up sides - "I follow Paul" . . . "I follow Apollos." Much like a child saying, "My dad can beat up your dad," these fledgling Christians had lost sight of the fact Paul and Apollos are on the same team. They are spiritual fathers who are not going to get caught up this childish banter in which the children think they have somehow "become wise" because they are rooting for their favorite pastor.

Paul would have the people in Corinth see that he and Apollos are God's instruments. "[Paul] planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." Neither of them is really all that important because it is God who is at work in them and through them making His church grow.

As their spiritual father, Paul points these erring children of God to what is really important, Christ. Paul wants the people of Corinth to know that what makes he and Apollos tick is same thing that makes every Christian tick, and that is the new life which is found only in Christ.

As children of God, we too need to cling to those comforting words of St. Paul, "You are Christ's, and Christ is God's." In these words we find true wisdom for we no longer look to ourselves or to others for assurance but to the only sure thing, Christ and His forgiveness of sins.

In this section of St. Matthew's Gospel, we hear the familiar story which is often referred to "The Story of the Rich Young Man." What sometimes happens with familiar Bible stories is we might say to ourselves, "So what's new? I heard it this all before." Instead of heeding Luther's admonition in his explanation to the Third Commandment to "not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it," we take the road that doesn't sound as perilous as despising God's Word. We don't despise His Word. We simply are bored with it.

The "Rich Young Man" was also bored with God's Word. He had been keeping all the commandments all his life, or so he thought. He didn't need to hear God's commands because he had heard it all before. But this is where the story takes an interesting twist. Jesus doesn't challenge the young man's claim of keeping the law. Instead, Jesus ups the ante. Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Likewise, when we tire of hearing God's Word God ups the ante. He will so weigh us down under the burden of sin until we see that it is impossible to save ourselves through the law. Then He comes through the very Word we had found so boring with the sweetness of the Gospel telling us our sins are forgiven.

That is the blessing we have of being God's children. Though we may at times tire of or become bored with God's Word, He never tires of bringing His life-giving Word to us.

“But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.”

Earlier in this chapter of St. Luke’s gospel, we hear that Jesus had been invited to the house of one of the chief Pharisees to dine on the sabbath day. It wasn’t a case of this Pharisee liking Jesus. Instead it was supposed to be a set-up. St. Luke tells us, “they were watching Him carefully.” However, the invitation would prove to be just another failed attempt to try and catch Jesus doing something wrong so as to discredit Him. But as always, sinful man doesn’t catch Jesus doing something wrong. Instead, sinful man is caught in his own sin.

With man’s sin in mind, Jesus wishes to instruct the Pharisees in what one might call “Godly etiquette.” The Pharisees were all about keeping the rules and regulations they had established in order to try to please God. Their reason for pleasing God wasn’t about trying to appease God’s wrath because of their sins as much as it was a case of the Pharisees thinking they were living in a state of “quid pro quo” with God. The Pharisees thought that because they were living such good lives God owed them eternal life. For the Pharisees, living a “good” life wasn’t much different from throwing a dinner party for people who would in turn invite them to their homes to dinner. The life of the Pharisee wasn’t lived for anyone but the Pharisee.

But a truly Godly life isn’t lived for “self” as most clearly seen in the life of Christ who gave His life as a ransom for many. Because of Christ, we have been given everything and are truly blessed because we “shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.”

Life in this world is only going to get worse. One need only read this section of St. Mark's gospel to see the picture most vividly. The Apostles were delivered over to be beaten and all but one were martyred. Since the time our Lord walked this earth, there have been wars and rumors of war. There have been numerous earthquakes and famines. People have been betrayed by members of their own families. Christians have been hated for Jesus' sake. Serious afflictions have come upon the people of the world and Christians have not been excluded. False Christs and false prophets have arisen in order to lead people away from Christ. Throughout the centuries, all the warning signs have kept popping up.

Depressing, isn't it? Well, not really.

Luther wrote in the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God": "Tho' devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us, We tremble not, we fear no ill, They shall not overpower us." We can see the terrible things that go on in this world with the full knowledge that though we are "in" the world we are not "of" this world. We belong to Christ as is clearly shown by Holy Baptism. The fact that we can see these signs for what they are - signs from God - is a gift from God to us His children.

Our Lord entreats us to "watch" for the time when He will return. Well, thankfully we need not lose an sleep by worrying if we will be ready. Christ has assured us that since we are His, we will be ready because "He who watches over Israel [that is believers] will neither slumber nor sleep."

Many years ago, a lady in Bible Class was struggling with this section of Romans. She just couldn't believe her Jewish friend and co-worker was going to hell. "She is such a nice person and God has a special place in His heart for Jews." She was and is not alone in her misunderstanding of God's relationship to people of Jewish descent.

Many Christians today are confused about the Jews and the current nation of Israel. Some would believe that the nation of Israel which was established in 1948 is somehow related to the Bible prophecy. Many Christians today believe that the Jews of today, and especially those Jews who reside in modern day Israel, are still God's "chosen people."

But St. Paul clearly says, "not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring." In the first chapter of St. John's gospel we hear a similar words: "[Jesus] came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

True children of Abraham - true Jews - are "the children of promise" as St. Paul reminds us. True Jews are believers i.e., are Christians. They have been chosen by God and are baptized in His name. They are the ones who believe in the only true God who "became flesh and dwelt among us." There can be no separation of faith in Christ from being a true child of Abraham for they are one in the same thing.

Do you remember one of those really difficult examines you had in high school or college? You remember, the examine that left you hoping the teacher would grade on a curve because you knew, you just knew, that should the teacher use a regular grading scale (A, 94-100%; B, 87-93%; C, 75-86%; D, 69-74%; F, below 69%) you were going to “Fail.”

“The person who does the commandments shall live by them.” That’s pretty straight forward. Do the Law and live. Unfortunately for the person who wishes to live by the law, the passing grade is 100%. St. Paul doesn’t say anything about of doing some of the law, or trying your best to do the Law, or even feeling like your doing the law. So, even if you begged God to grade on a curve it wouldn’t change your grade. Anything less than perfection is failure, and failure to keep the commandments brings certain death.

Thus, St. Paul distinguishes between the righteousness that comes by the law and the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ. “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness.” One no longer looks at his own righteousness and compares it with the righteousness of others saying, “Who will ascend into heaven?” or “Who will descend into the abyss?” Instead, faith listens to the Word and speaks of that which it knows. Salvation is in Christ and His forgiveness of sins.

FROM THE PROPERs FOR TRINITY 24

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 9:18–26 (NKJV)

While He spoke these things to them, behold, a ruler came and worshiped Him, saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live.”

So Jesus arose and followed him, and so did His disciples.

And suddenly, a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years came from behind and touched the hem of His garment. For she said to herself, “If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well.”

But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, “Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And the woman was made well from that hour.

When Jesus came into the ruler’s house, and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, He said to them, “Make room, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping.” And they ridiculed Him.

But when the crowd was put outside, He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. And the report of this went out into all that land.

The COLLECT

Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of Thy faithful people that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of Thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“And so all Israel will be saved.” This is what drives the Church to her missionary work. This is the Word that inspires the teaching of the Word to all nations. This is the truth that moves Christians to bring the Truth, Christ Himself (John 14:6), to Jews –and to others who do not know Jesus. The Holy Spirit proclaims that all Israel will be saved, and the Holy Ministry of the Church responds by preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments with missionary zeal.

That is how God works to carry out His timeless promise to save His people Israel. By His own design, God does not dispense saving grace and create saving faith in any way other than through the hearing of His Word and the receiving of His Sacraments. Truly, the Holy Spirit will bring certain ethnic Jews to know and believe that Jesus is the Messiah; yet this will happen in the context of Christian mission work, through the same means by which this enlightenment was brought to certain Gentiles. All Israel – which in its New Testament sense includes Jew and Gentile alike – will be saved, for God will bring forgiveness and salvation in Christ to all nations; He will do so by keeping His Church in mission until the end of the age, baptizing, absolving, and feeding His people Israel – even those of Israel of old!

Almighty and Everlasting God, Who loves to show mercy, hear the prayers which we offer unto Thee for Thine ancient people, that, acknowledging Jesus Christ, Who is the Light of truth, they may be delivered from their darkness; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, November 16: 2 Thessalonians 1:11 – 2:17 Trinity 24

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” Literally, the term “tradition” signifies the passing of an object from the hand of one person to the hand of another. A tradition is a practice that is handed down from one generation of people to the next, so that the custom might continue. The tradition connects a younger generation to an older one, through the contemporary practice of the old custom. The tradition also identifies a modern people as being the continuation of an ancient one, as the practice continues to be lived out among them.

Saint Paul urges the Church to hold the traditions handed to her by the Apostles of Christ. For what has been handed over is what the Apostles had been handed – from the very hand of Jesus Himself. The Apostles conveyed through their preaching and customs that which they themselves had heard, seen, and handled (1 John 1:1). The doctrine and practice of the Apostles is the very Word and Life of Christ Himself, handed as tradition by Him to them, to connect them to Him and to identify themselves as one with Him. The tradition continues wherever Christ’s Word is purely preached and His Sacraments rightly administered, connecting people to Christ their Life and identifying themselves as the continuation of His chosen people – and as the continuation of the apostolic mission to convey this tradition, handing over of Christ to the next generation, for the sake of their eternal life in this blessed tradition.

Merciful God, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church, that being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed Apostles, it may so walk in the light of Thy truth that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, November 17: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-18 Trinity 24

“And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” One of the heavy obligations given to the pastor, through Christ’s call to serve a particular congregation of Christ, is the responsibility to “retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent” (SC V). In certain cases, this will compel the pastor to excommunicate a member from the congregation and the fellowship of the Church.

Yet this is nothing less than a revealing of the true love of Christ – and the love of Christ’s servant of the Word – for the sinner. Yes, the noting of this person as one with which the Church will not keep company is an exercise of “tough love.” aimed at bringing shame upon the impenitent sinner to break his stony heart in repentance, so that he will receive the forgiveness of sins in faith. An excommunication is not intended to be permanent, but temporary. For this reason, the Apostle Paul charges the Church to go in mission to the one who has been removed from her fellowship and exhort him in brotherly love to repentance and back into faith, thereby bringing him back to the brotherhood, for now and forever!

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, Whose property it is always to have mercy, we most earnestly beseech Thee to visit with Thy fatherly correction all such have erred and gone astray from the truth of Thy holy Word and to bring them to a due sense of their error that they may again with hearty faith receive, and hold fast, Thine unchangeable truth; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Children are included in the Kingdom of God. Through Holy Baptism, God gives the Holy Spirit and every spiritual gift even to infants. By the working of His Spirit through the Word, taught in a simple way, children come to the knowledge of Jesus’ love and to faith in Him. Indeed, the children are the example of Christian faithfulness to which Christ directs all (Mk 10:15), for children receive the Word of God in simple faith, with minds unclouded by the worldly wisdom that so often confuses Christian adults.

Children are not only a vital part of the Church, but are a vital part of the Church’s mission. Even while they stand among the current congregation in her faithful receiving of the Word of God, the children stand as the next generation of the Church, preparing to carry on the apostolic tradition of baptizing infants, teaching little ones, and communing those who confess a mature Christian knowledge. God grant to His Church wisdom in reaching out to the little ones, that His Kingdom is extended in our generation, and in generations to come.

Almighty and Everlasting God, Who does will that not one of these little ones should perish and has sent Thine only Son to seek and to save that which was lost and through Him has said, “Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God,” most heartily we beseech Thee so to bless and govern the children of Thy Church by Thy Holy Spirit that they may grow in grace and in the knowledge of Thy Word; protect and defend them against all danger and harm, giving Thy holy angels charge over them; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The faithful pastor – and the faithful in the congregation that he serves – must expect persecution in the world for such faithfulness. For the Evil One hates Christ, and works out his rage by seeking to destroy the one who brings Christ to the nations through Christ's Word and Sacraments. St. Peter's exhortation is well taken by any preacher and missionary of the Word: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pt 5:8).

"But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. And I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." The Apostle Paul knows that the same thing that brings persecution by the lion is what delivers from the lion's mouth. Faithfully preaching in the Word of Christ, even in the season of the devil's devouring of you on account of that preaching, is what ultimately delivers you. That lion might succeed in bringing hurt to your body like he did with Job, but He cannot reach your soul; even as the Lord strengthened Job's faith, so He will strengthen your faith through this exercise and preserve you. In the end, God shall graciously honor such faithfulness with the crown of everlasting life, bestowed upon His faithful preacher of His Word -- and the faithful hearers who were blessed to hear it.

O Almighty God, Who by Thy Son, Jesus Christ, did give to Thy holy Apostles many excellent gifts and commanded them earnestly to feed Thy flock, make, we beseech Thee, all pastors diligently to preach Thy holy Word and the people obediently to follow the same, that they may receive the crown of everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” This verse is more than a prophecy about the time of the end of the world. This is a Word of mission until that end. This is a word of encouragement to the Church to send forth laborers into the harvest until the very moment that the reapers come.

For This Word is a command of Christ: “this gospel . . . will be preached.” It is thus a charge given to His called and ordained servants to bring the Word and Sacraments of His Gospel into all the world. It is a commission given to His Church to give witness to all the nations concerning the Good News of this Gospel of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus’ Name. And, like every other commandment that God gives, He Himself fulfills it. His Word does not return empty, but accomplishes His own purpose for it. He commands His Gospel be brought into the world until the end, on account of what He Himself will work through it unto the end. “For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel” (AC V). So He will do, unto a very blessed end!

Almighty and Everlasting God, Who desires not the death of the sinner, but would have all men to repent and live, hear our prayers for the heathen, take away iniquity from their hearts, and turn them from their idols unto the Living and True God and to Thine only Son; and gather them into Thy holy Church, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

FROM THE PROPER FOR TRINITY 27

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 25:1–13 (NKJV)

Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight a cry was heard: “Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!” Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.

And the foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.”

But the wise answered, saying, “No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.”

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, “Lord, Lord, open to us!”

But he answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.”

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

The COLLECT

Absolve, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy people from their offenses, that from the bonds of our sins which by reason of our frailty we have brought upon us we may be delivered by Thy bountiful goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end.

Today, the Apostle St. Peter warns us not to be drawn away by the cares and lies of the world. For the world will say that since the Lord has not come after almost 2,000 years, and, in their estimation, His presence is not seen within the world, that our Lord Jesus is not coming back, in fact, according to the world, He doesn't and never existed. St. Peter reveals that the true reason for them saying this, is that they want to follow the evil desires of their own heart and chase after the gods of their own choosing, which are themselves.

Therefore, the blessed St. Peter gives us comfort and assurance that our Lord is indeed coming again. God promised to destroy the earth in Noah's days with a flood, and even though there were many years between the promise and the carrying out of the promise, the flood still happened. The same was true of our Lord's first coming in the flesh. The Israelites waited for centuries for the promise to be fulfilled, and then like a thief in the night, the Lord God revealed Himself in our flesh, to save us from sin and death by His perfect obedience and His suffering and death. The Lord is patient, waiting for just the right time for the harvest to be ready for harvesting. He is patient with us and the world as well, giving ample opportunity to repent, and believe on Him.

“Certain men have crept in unnoticed.” This is how the devil works against the Church of God until the Lord Jesus comes again in His glory. He sends into the Church false teachers who by appearance of right and good, and with flattering lips, lead some away into sin and unbelief; denying the Lord Jesus as God, and claiming that that which God calls sin is not sin. Against these false teachers, we must *“contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”* What does this mean? It means pulling those false teachers, and the ones who follow them, out of the fire into which they have fallen by upholding and teaching the truth, that is, the doctrines that we have received from our forefathers, which they received from the Apostles. Those who refuse to repent of their false teaching must be put out of the Church; marked out for destruction by the Lord God.

Therefore, let us remember the words spoken through the Apostles, and not be *“grumblers, complainers, walking according to [our] own lusts; [who] mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage.* Instead, let us repent of these sins, listen to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and believe on Him, Who sends into us through His Word, the Holy Spirit, Who creates in us faith and life. And having been sustained in faith, we see clearly the Heavenly Father’s mercy toward us, and how He disregards our sins, on account of His Son’s suffering and death on the cross. But instead gathers us to Himself, into one people.

“It is the last hour.” This is both good news and bad news. It is good news, for it surely means that our Lord’s return is soon here. However, it is also bad news, for it means that as the Last Day approaches, which brings our Lord Jesus to us, it also means that the Antichrist is coming, even as there are now many antichrists within the world, who deny the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle St. John tells us that these antichrists had their beginning in the Church. But, on account of their false teachings, they were exposed as ones who did not belong within the Church. This is how we also can tell who does not belong to the Church of God: by their denial that the Lord Jesus is the One and Only Anointed One of the Father; that He and the Father are one; or those who deny the Father and the Son altogether. These are the ones who are antichrists.

“Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning” at your Holy Baptism. At your Holy Baptism, you received an anointing from the Holy One. You were made a child of God, and an heir of the Kingdom of God. St. John states that this anointing *“teaches you concerning all things.”* That means that when you were baptized, you were baptized into all truth, so that all falsehood within you was removed. And because the falsehood and lies of the devil, the world, and your flesh were removed, you were granted a promise—the promise of eternal life; an eternal life that waits expectantly for our Lord’s return on the Last Day.

There are two paths: lawlessness or purity. *“Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.”* *“Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”* The first path is the way of works; either trusting that one’s works will save him or, believing that freedom from sin means that one may live according to the evil desires of one’s own heart, and that he may do whatever pleases him without any consequence. The second path is the path of grace; trusting in our Lord and His works on our behalf for our salvation. Those who live according to grace, can see “what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us,” for we see that we are His children, and that He loves us very much, in spite of our sin.

This is why the Apostle St. John speaks the way he does in this pericope, so that those who may be on the first path, may turn and repent, and hope in the Lord Jesus for salvation. For St. John states that, *“Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.”* And, *“He who sins is of the devil.”* At first glance these are scary words for poor, miserable sinners, for we daily sin much, and immediately we think upon reading this, “Uh, oh! I’m in trouble.” Until we remember what St. John wrote earlier in his epistle, that Christ dwells in us, so that by His grace, we are pure and without sin. For His pure works abide in us, and as we hope in His works, and what He suffered for us, we remain pure and undefiled. Therefore, on account of Christ’s works, we *“cannot sin.”*

“God is greater than our heart.” What great words! Out of our hearts come all sorts of evil thoughts, words and deeds, and on account of our hearts we are condemned. But, *“God is greater than our hearts.”* Knowing our lost condition, He sent His One and Only Son into our flesh to bear our sin, and fulfill the Law perfectly for us. The Lord Jesus took on our flesh—our heart—and bore that heart to the cross, where it was pierced for our transgressions, and water and blood flowed out of His heart, even as sin and death, was poured out of our hearts. Therefore, our hearts no longer can condemn us, for they have been purified and sanctified on the cross of our Lord Jesus.

Therefore, since our hearts have been cleansed and made holy, our Heavenly Father has made us His children, so that, *“whatever we ask we receive from Him.”* St. John means here that when we ask for the Lord to strengthen our faith, or forgive us of our sins, or teach us to hope in our salvation, and not look at our sins, that the Lord God will indeed grant this unto us. The Lord does this by His Holy Spirit, Whom He pours out upon us through His Word and Sacraments. When we receive the means of grace, which bestow upon us the Holy Spirit, our faith is strengthened and renewed, so that we are filled with faith towards God and fervent love for our neighbor.

“Test the spirits, whether they are of God.” How does one test the spirits? By asking, “Do they confess that *“Jesus Christ has come in the flesh?”* The one who do not confess that the Lord Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is *“Antichrist.”* When we see just how few there are who are truly concerned with right teaching, and remaining faithful to the Lord’s Word, it can make one shudder. When we see how entrenched evil is in our society and the world; how those things which the Lord God clearly calls sin in His Holy Scriptures is made out to not be sin, it can be scary and intimidating. But the Apostle St. John in his epistle rescues us from these fears, for he states, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

God has overcome the devil, the world and our flesh. And because we have been baptized into the Lord Jesus, we are of God; therefore, we too have overcome them. Since we have been called by God out of death into life by our Holy Baptism, we hear the words of our Lord, Who proclaims to us that we are His children, and that no evil in this world can harm us. By this same token, we can discern who is not of God, for they do not listen to the teachings of the Church. Instead they speak as the world does. Therefore, as we prepare for our Lord’s coming in the flesh, let us stand fast to the pure teaching of the Lord God. Knowing that through His Word we are saved.

FROM THE PROPERs FOR ADVENT 1

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 21:1–8 (NKJV)

Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

“Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The COLLECT

Stir up, we beseech You, Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“I am gentle and lowly in heart.” The Son of God’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is a type and symbol of His very entrance into the world. The King of Kings does not enter into the city via war horse, fierce and vengeful, seeking an enemy to slay. Rather, this King comes in lowly form, humble and gentle, depicted in His arrival upon a previously unriden donkey and her colt. He Himself is the foal of a Virgin, born to be a lowly beast of burden. He has come to bear for us the weighty yoke of perfect obedience to God’s commands, carrying out a task that our sin-riddled flesh is simply too weak to accomplish. He has come to carry upon His own back the intolerable burden of our guilt for our utter disobedience to God’s Law, carrying it far away –as far as East is from West – when He gently and humbly lays down His life and is slain as the sacrifice for all sin.

Come now to the One Who is risen from the dead and reigns in Heaven, and yet remains gentle in His ways toward the lowly sinner. Come to Jesus as He ministers to you in humility in His Church, through His called and ordained servants, by the means of His Word and His Sacraments. Come in penitence over your sins, and receive in faith Christ’s gracious forgiveness of sins. Come with the hope for a life free from the heavy burden of the Law, and learn from Him a new life freely lived under the easy yoke of the Gospel. Come with a soul that longs for eternal life, and attain it as a gift from Him! For He truly is gentle -- and loving at heart – toward us!

“And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” According to the devilish words of the heretics, Abraham is the father of three distinct faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All of these so-called Abrahamic faiths are given legitimacy by the false teachers through their misappropriation of the Word that God spoke to Abraham, claiming that all of Abraham’s descendants are blessed – together with the faiths that they hold – by virtue of their being of Abraham’s bloodline.

Abraham himself believed differently. Abraham holds the one true faith, the Christian faith, established at the foundation of the world by God the Holy Trinity Himself. In the very Garden of Eden, immediately following man’s ruination of it by his disobedience to God’s command, God promised to send the Seed of the Woman (Gen 3:15), to save all the world from sin and death and Hell. As the Holy Spirit of God Himself testifies through the Apostle Paul, the seed of which God speaks to Abraham is a singular seed, Christ Himself (Gal 3:16). Abraham believed God’s prophecy that the Savior would be born from His bloodline, and God ultimately delivered on the promise when Christ Jesus was conceived and born of the Virgin Mary (Mt 1; Lk 3).

In this Seed truly all of the families of the earth shall be blessed, for Jesus is the Savior of all. As the Apostle Peter declares in his sermon at Pentecost, “God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities” (Ac 3:26). Any one from any of the families of the earth, whether of the blood of Abraham or not, is blessed in this Seed when he or she holds the only true Abrahamic faith – the faith of Abraham himself -- the Christian faith.

SEPTEMBER PASTORAL CONFERENCE
CAMBRIDGE, MINNESOTA
20 SEPTEMBER 2010



Deacon Dulas, Pastor Ahonen, Bishop Heiser, Pastor Mueller

To date, our pastors have normally only been able to gather for our annual diocesan synod; in between synods, the primary means for communications has been our periodic phone conferences. During Bishop Heiser's September visitation of parishes in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Ironwood, Michigan, the pastors took advantage of the opportunity to gather for a one-day conference at Our Redeemer Lutheran in Cambridge, MN. Pastor Mueller and the members very graciously hosted us. After Pr. Mueller began the day with an opening service, the pastors discussed a number of topics, including the Church's response to Islam, and plans for seminary education.

On Tuesday, Sept. 21, Bishop Heiser conducted his visitation of Good Shepherd Lutheran (Tony, WI). The church observed the Festival of St. Matthew, with Pr. Ahonen preaching.



Bishop Heiser's visitation also included his first visit to Alpha and Omega Lutheran Mission in Tony, Wisconsin. The visit on Sept. 22 gave members the

opportunity to learn more about the work of the diocese, and plans for the future.

Last, but by no means least, the bishop also visited Peace Lutheran in Ironwood for the first time.



JOINT ACLC-ELDoNA PASTORAL CONFERENCE
ST. PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH (ACLC)
ESCONDIDO, CALIFORNIA
20-21 OCTOBER 2010



Bishop Heiser and Deacon Dulas attended the joint Pastoral Conference, presenting papers and preaching for two of the services. The conference was an opportunity for an expression of the fellowship between the ACLC and ELDoNA, an occasion for edification, and discussions of plans for shared labors in the future, including the work of St. Ignatius Theological Seminary.

