

Proclaim the Lord's Death until He Comes

In the name of him who gives us his body to eat and his blood to drink, dear friends in Christ: In Old Testament times, the Lord God gave his people a sacred meal of remembrance by which they were annually to recount and to a certain extent *relive* the greatest salvation event in their history: the Lord's rescue of his people from their Egyptian bondage with his mighty hand and outstretched arm. The sacred meal of remembrance was called the Passover. It was a family celebration in which God's people reenacted the night of the tenth and most terrible plague by which the Lord secured the freedom of his people. During this plague the firstborn of all Egypt died while God's people feasted on the sacrificial lambs whose blood on the doorposts of their homes protected all who were inside. For when the angel of death saw the blood, he passed over that home, not visiting it with the death he brought to the homes that were not so covered with the sign of God's grace.

Thus for uncounted generations through some fourteen hundred years, God's people commemorated their deliverance with this annual meal – their deliverance which was a prophetic foreshadowing of the much greater deliverance by which the Lord would free his people from their bondage to sin and death through the death of his own Firstborn Son. So, properly understood by celebrating the Passover God's people were in fact proclaiming the death of Jesus Christ, God's firstborn, whose blood covers and redeems his people. They did this *prophetically* through the shadows and images of the Passover meal until Jesus came and fulfilled everything the shadows and images pointed to. And just as the Lord gave his people a sacred meal to commemorate the lesser salvation event, so also he has given us a sacred meal in which we relive the greater salvation achieved by Jesus Christ. Through it we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again in glory.

And not just once a year, but *as often* as we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death. Nor is the meal only a shadow. Now it's the real thing. Just as the salvation achieved by Christ is so much greater, so also is the meal in which it's relived much greater. Before God's people only remembered the blood of the lambs that saved them. Now, in the Lord's Supper, Jesus is actually present giving us his body and blood by which we are saved from sin and nourished in holy faith. And as we heard, in order to be worthy to partake of this sacred meal, it's necessary that we recognize the Lord's presence – that he's truly and bodily here in the meal giving himself to us; because if we don't, we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves for denying the Words of Christ.

With this in mind, this evening I want to show how our Communion liturgy is designed to help us recognize the Lord's real presence in the Supper. It's easy to go on liturgical autopilot just sort of mindlessly following along, mouthing familiar words without really thinking about what we're saying and why we're saying it. So, please turn with me to page 194 of the hymnal. In the communion liturgy that we will be using very shortly to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we'll see how it's all set up to help us understand what's really going on. I should probably mention too that there are many arrangements for the communion liturgy as it's observed in the Christian church throughout the world; but all of them have the same basic components in pretty much the same sequence.

So, on the top of page 194, you see that the Service of the Sacrament begins with a series of three short sentences and responses called the *Preface*. The celebrant faces the

congregation and says, “The Lord be with you”. This is not just a churchly way to say hello. No. What the pastor is saying is that the Lord Jesus is about to come into our presence in a way that he isn’t here already. He’s about to come to us sacramentally under the bread and wine. So the pastor is saying, “I want *that* presence of Christ to be with you – and I want you to understand and appreciate it.” The congregation replies, “And with thy spirit.” You’re saying, “Yes, we understand the Lord Jesus is coming to us – specifically he’s coming to us through the ministry you are about to perform. Therefore we want him to be with *your* spirit as you perform this ministry for us.

Next the pastor says, “Lift up your hearts.” To lift your heart means to be eager with anticipation. It’s like saying, “Get ready, here he comes!” There may be also a sense in which it means “Let’s show him what’s broken.” When you go to the doctor, he’s going to ask you to show him where it hurts. Well, Jesus is the Great Physician, and it’s our hearts that need healing. So if he’s coming, we ought to approach him like the supplicants that came to him during his earthly ministry with all their problems – their blind eyes, their deaf ears, their crippled limbs. And very often Jesus would heal them with a touch. So the congregation responds, “We lift them up to the Lord.” You’re saying, “Yes, we’re ready for Jesus to come – and we’re ready to have our hearts healed by his saving touch.’

Then the pastor says, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” Naturally. Like the one leper of ten who returned to Jesus when he saw he was cleansed, who fell at the Lord’s feet in gratitude, we want to thank the Lord for coming to cleanse us – so thankful, in fact, that we’re doing it in advance. The congregation responds “It is meet and right so to do.” You’re agreeing that giving thanks to God for sending his Son for our redemption is the right thing to do.

What follows next is a prayer of thanksgiving spoken by the pastor. It’s called the *Proper Preface*, not because it’s the proper thing to do, but because it follows the *propers of the day*; that is, it changes according to the seasons of the church year. It is, like I said, a prayer of thanksgiving to God for sending Jesus to be our Savior specifically highlighting the part of the salvation story being remembered at that time of the year. During Christmas we thank the Lord for sending his Son in human flesh. During Epiphany we thank him for the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus. In Lent we thank him for the cross and passion of our Lord, and so on. But regardless of the season, the prayer always ends with the same words: “Therefore with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your glorious name, ever more praising you and saying ...”

That leads us into what follows on page 195. It’s a hymn of praise called the Sanctus, which is Latin for “holy”. That’s how the hymn begins: “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.” These words are lifted straight from the prophet Isaiah who was given a vision of the Lord in his temple. The prophet sees the Lord seated on a throne high and exalted. There are angelic beings burning like fire hovering around him, and they are singing these words back and forth to each other, “Holy, holy, holy.” So the idea is that we too, standing in the Lord’s presence, join in the song of the angels. But there’s more to the story. As Isaiah takes all this in – this glorious vision of the most holy God – he’s struck with an overwhelming sense of his sin and uncleanness. He’s in utter terror – convinced that he’s about to be destroyed. For what sinner can stand in the presence of God and live?

But Isaiah is not destroyed. One of the angels goes to the altar before the Lord which is burning with live coals. He takes a glowing coal with a pair of tongs, flies to Isaiah, and touches it to his lips. The angel then speaks these wonderful words, “See, this has touched your lips. Your sin is atoned for and your guilt is taken away.” Isaiah’s fear vanishes. Having been

cleansed from his sin, he's able to stand boldly in the Lord's holy presence. More than that, he's empowered to go forth and do God's holy will. When the Lord says he's looking for someone to do a job for him, Isaiah leaps at the opportunity to serve: "Here am I! Send me!"

By using the words of the Sanctus in the Communion liturgy we're recognizing that Isaiah's experience is the same one we will have in the Lord's Supper. We will stand in the presence of the Lord in his temple. As sinners we have no right to be here. It should mean our destruction. But the Lord in his mercy sends his messenger to the altar to collect something that can take away sin – not a live coal; but the one thing that really takes away sin, namely the body and blood of Christ. He touches it to your lips and says, "Take and eat, take and drink, this is for the forgiveness of your sins." And again, for Isaiah it was only a vision; for us it's the real thing.

Returning then to the Sanctus, note that after singing with angels, we join the earthly choir with the words, "Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." These words are those used by the crowd that welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday. The idea is that we are placing ourselves in that crowd, welcoming and honoring Jesus who is coming to give his life a ransom for us. With them we sing, "Hosanna!" It's a Hebrew word that means, "Oh, please, save us now!"

Okay then, on page 196 we've got the Lord's Prayer. Since the earliest days of the Church it's been included in the Communion liturgy rather than with the rest prayers of the Church. The reason is that they used to dismiss everyone who was not going to participate in Lord's Supper before that part of the service began. Recall that for the first several centuries of Christianity, most people coming into the church were converts from paganism. People in the process of making the transition, the catechumens, were encouraged to come to worship to hear the readings and the sermon; but they weren't ready to take communion yet. So they were sent out before the communion liturgy began. The doors were literally *closed* behind them, which is why, even today call it "closed communion." The Lord's Prayer was included after they left because those dismissed had not yet become full-fledged baptized and confessing Christians, and therefore they weren't allowed to refer to God as Father.

What follows on page 197 are the Words of Institution. In this version the words are chanted. This is for two reasons. The first was because of the bad acoustics in most church buildings back in the old days. The idea was that even if you couldn't make out the words the pastor was saying, you still knew *what* he was saying by the chant tone. I've discovered that the confirmands who have to memorize the words of institution as part of the Catechism find it easier to remember the words if they too chant them. The other reason the words were chanted was to prevent the pastor from trying to impress everyone with his skills of rhetoric. It's the Words of Institution, the actual Words of Jesus, that make the Sacrament the Sacrament. Chanting the words forces a certain uniformity on them that reminds everyone it's not about the pastor who speaks the words; it's about Christ who comes through the Word.

Good. What follows the mysterious moment of Christ's coming to be present in, with, and under the bread and wine is the all important proclamation of the Peace of the Lord. Recall the words of Jesus when he first appeared to his disciples in the locked chamber on the evening of his resurrection. The disciples were startled and fearful, thinking they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus calms them by saying "Peace to you." Then he shows them the wounds in his hands and side – the wounds by which our peace with God was obtained, and again he says, "Peace to you." Only then are the disciples overjoyed to see him. We've got essentially the same thing happening. Now that the body and blood of Christ are present in sacramental elements, the

pastor holds them up and says, “The peace of the Lord be with you always.” What he’s saying is “Here it is, I’m holding in my hands your peace with God – it’s Jesus’ body and blood given for you.”

The congregation responds “Amen”, which means “Yes, truly that’s what it is”; and then they launch immediately into another hymn called the *Agnus Dei*, which is Latin for “Lamb of God”. These words also come straight from the Scripture. The speaker is John the Baptist who, upon seeing Jesus approach, tells his disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” That’s what the congregation is saying. Seeing by faith the presence of Christ in the bread and wine you’re saying, “We see you Jesus. You are the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us your peace.” And that’s precisely what Jesus does for you as you receive his body and blood in the distribution.

After everyone has communed, the Service of the Sacrament comes to its conclusion with a final canticle called the *Nunc Dimittis* on page 199. These words were spoken by Simeon when Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus into the Temple for his dedication. The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he’d seen the Lord’s Christ. Upon seeing what he had been promised, he takes the baby from the parents and says, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace. Your word has been fulfilled; for my eyes have seen your salvation ... the Light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the Glory of your people Israel.” Having just received Christ’s body and blood, that’s what we’re saying too. “We’ve seen him. We’ve touched him. We’ve actually consumed his body and blood for our salvation. Now we can go in peace knowing that God’s Word is fulfilled.”

So again, what I want you to take away this evening is how our communion liturgy, using the very words of Scripture, is designed to stress the true presence of the Lord Jesus in, with, and under the sacramental bread and wine. We stress this because we believe it – that every time we come to communion, we are receiving the benefit of the death of Christ for our sin and we are feasting upon the very Lamb of God whose blood sets us free from death and God’s condemnation. Let us therefore eat this bread and drink this cup with thankful and believing hearts, for as often as we do, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!