

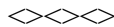
# **"With Angels and Archangels"**

## **Some Thoughts on Real-Time Worship**

by The Reverend Dean M. Bell

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Proper Preface for Holy Communion concludes by placing these words in the mouth of the officiant: "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Thy glorious name . . ." "Therefore with angels and archangels!" This statement is both glorious and utterly incredible. With these words we are transported. Suddenly time and space fall away; they recede into insignificance and we are united with heavenly choirs. In the Holy Communion we are joined to an ongoing feast in the presence of God. This is the feast which will never end. This is worship. This is the worship of saints. And here you have your place, a place reserved for you from the foundation of the world. At the Holy Communion heaven overlaps earth and the words of Hebrews 12 become present reality: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect." In the liturgy of the church this eternal worship of God enters time - our time. This is the "real" time - time which finds its beginning in God; time which is never diminished. Thus the title of this essay.



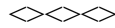
### **THE LITURGY**

Worship assumes liturgy. It must because worship assumes structure. While it is true we gather as sheep around the Heavenly Shepherd, we do not engage in mindless bleating! Our worship will always have liturgy because we are caught up in a heavenly rhythm that originates outside of us. To be Lutheran is to be liturgical. From beginning to end Lutheran worship (Lutheran liturgy) takes on a structure - a form - which reflects our theology.

From football games to corporate board meetings human life is lived within structures, within forms. Change the structure and the thing itself is changed. Remove the yard lines or time clock and football is no longer football. With no agenda or chairman a corporate board meeting becomes something else. So, too, in the church. Change the Lutheran structure (the liturgy) and Lutheran worship is changed into something else.

This, however, does not mean that our liturgy is stagnant. In the same way that football rules gradually evolve and meetings change their configurations liturgy is also adaptive. Our liturgy is not exactly the same as it was 500 years or 1500 years ago. Liturgy develops, it evolves. But this evolvment is a matter of detail, not of type. Were Martin

Luther of the sixteenth century or St Augustine of the fifth to enter a Lutheran church on Sunday morning he would recognize our liturgy as being his liturgy. It isn't that the church once worshipped by shooting off guns and swinging from ropes but no longer does. Rather, there is an ebb and flow over the centuries which modifies the details of our liturgical practice while allowing the structure itself to remain intact. In all liturgy, in all ages, God remains the Gracious Giver while we always remain the recipients. God is always the eternal 'initiator'. We receive the gifts He chooses to bestow and then we respond in ways which He has taught us. This does not change. Always we use His words; words He has given us to speak. Always His Sacraments surround and envelop us. And in this it always remains evident that we are Christians; we are Lutherans.



## 1. INVOCATION

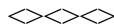
The Divine Service begins with the Invocation. But this is not the ecclesiastical equivalent of turning down the house lights in a theatre, reminding people the show is about to begin. Nor is it simply a proclamation of what we are doing. The Invocation is primarily a statement of the Gospel; the first proclamation of the Gospel you hear on Sunday morning. It is God who speaks, albeit through a human voice. And in that speaking God invokes His presence in His church. He drapes His name over you. Before you have confessed your sins – before you have had opportunity to stammer out your unworthiness – before everything else God speaks. In the Invocation God speaks His Name over you and thus you are reminded of who you are.

For most, your first encounter with God came long before you can remember. You were brought to Him. To the baptismal font you were carried so God could deal with you according to His mercy. You were baptized in God's name. Really, you were baptized into God. In that moment two things happened. In that moment you died, and in that moment you were born again. In your baptism you died with Jesus on the cross and you were raised back to life in His resurrection. In your baptism you were born as Christians. Truly, you left the baptismal water a different person, and you haven't been the same since. By God's action you entered the heavenly kingdom – the realm of God.

In this recreating activity God wrapped you in His name. It was "In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit" that you were baptized. Now, in the Invocation, you are reminded once again of that activity by God. You are reminded that God has dealt mercifully – graciously - with you. No one is baptized as part of a crowd. No one is baptized because of his membership in a human family. It wasn't as a Johnson or an Olson or a Smith that you were baptized. God does not pay attention to family names. He knows you by your given name. It was as Richard or Charlotte or Denise that you were taken up by God into His family. Individually God received you. Individually He gave you a new life. Individually He united you to Himself. This all happened then, and now – every Sunday morning – God reminds you in the Invocation that He has not changed His mind. Nor will He. The recreating power of God's word in baptism remains with you.



*(Here we must take an excursus; an 'aside' if you will. The Church often takes note of "physical speech." In other words your actions 'speak.' When you fold your hands you are saying something. Also when you bow your head, and when you kneel you 'speak.' So, too, when you make the sign of the cross upon yourself. Seventeenth-century German Pietism convinced Lutherans that the sign of the cross was an unfortunate residue of Roman Catholic superstition. Unfortunately we believed them. As a result we have lost an important component of true Lutheran piety. When God baptized you He traced the cross of Christ upon you. In reality you were marked by God. The finger of God carved Christ's cross into your flesh. In the Invocation that cross is once again placed over you. For what purpose? That you may simply be reminded of what God has done? No. Christ's cross is your cross. There you also died. And now God invites you to take what He once applied to you and trace it anew upon yourself. By crossing yourself you acknowledge what God has done for you. It is an act of confession; an act of faith. It is an action which only the Christian can perform. A Moslem or a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness can fold his hands or bow his head or kneel. Only a Christian, however, can bless themselves with the sign of the cross because only a Christian believes that Jesus accomplished their full salvation by His sacrifice of death on the cross.)*



## **2. CONFESSION/ABSOLUTION**

Until God speaks man is dumb; we have nothing to say. If God remains silent we can know nothing of Him. Sinful man is so totally corrupt he is incapable of addressing God as he should, or even finding Him. Indeed, sinful man is only dimly aware of God. The Divine Service takes note of this. God speaks first, and when God speaks He invites man to reply. Thus we come to what the church knows as Confession/Absolution.

Our baptism, which God reminds us of in the Invocation, gives us standing before God. Not a standing of our own creation, mind you, but a standing bestowed upon us by God. The baptized are children of God. As such they are invited to come to their Heavenly Father. God invites us to lay before Him the burdens of our conscience. He invites us to confess our sins.

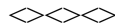
Confession is a matter of simple truthfulness. The truth is we have sinned. In ways we remember only too well, and in ways we are not even aware of, we have sinned. Sin is the fruit of our fallen nature. We are not sinners because we sin. Rather, we sin because we are sinners. Sinning is what we do. It is the warped fruit of warped lives. Generation after generation the sinful natures of parents have been passed on to their children. Humanly speaking it can be no other way. This God knows even before we open our mouths. But He wants us to know it – to recognize it – as well. Thus He invites us to speak the truth: to confess our sins.

And when we do, a wonderful thing happens. In response to our truthfulness God, too, is truthful. He absolves us. He forgives us. Indeed, He is compelled to. All we have done is confess. That is all we can do. We are incapable of removing even the smallest of our sins. But our capabilities are not the issue; God's mercy is, and that mercy has taken on human form in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God enfleshed. He is the Second

Person of the Most Holy Trinity made visible to human eyes - the Second Person of the Holy Trinity come for the salvation of man. The hymnist sets before us a glorious picture:

"Jesus has come as the mighty Redeemer.  
See now the threatening strong one disarmed!  
Jesus breaks down all the walls of death's fortress,  
Brings forth the pris'ners triumphant, unharmed  
Satan, you wicked one, own now your master!  
Jesus has come! He, the mighty Redeemer! (LW #78.4)

Here, in hymnodic poetry, the source of our salvation is held before our eyes. Here we behold God's truth of forgiveness that answers our truth of confession.



### 3. THE INTROIT

The pastor stands before his people on Sunday morning and proclaims to them the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Invocation the faithful are reminded who they are. Having been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit they have been incorporated into that timeless number known as the people of God; the Bride of Christ. God has spoken to His own and now His own can speak in return. They do so first by confessing the truth of their unfaithfulness.

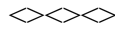
For Confession the pastor does not so much stand before his people as he stands with them. He, too, is a member of the congregation. Not only does he plead for God's mercy on their behalf; he pleads for himself. He makes his confession with them. And the words of absolution which he speaks to them he also speaks to himself. Our liturgical practice indicates this. To this point everything has occurred outside the chancel. As one with the congregation the pastor urges that confession be made. As one with the congregation he kneels on the chancel steps to make his own confession. And the forgiveness he proclaims also absolves him.

As has been mentioned, everything thus far has occurred outside the chancel. Everything to this point has been preparatory. It is only after Confession/Absolution that the Divine Service actually begins. Sin is an abomination to God. Nothing sinful can come into His presence. God's hatred of sin is complete. But having been forgiven of all sin the congregation is cleansed and acceptable to God. And even more, they are now urged by God to come into His presence. This "coming into the presence of God" is made evident in the Introit.

Our word Introit derives from the Latin *introitus* which means, "enter." As he ascends the chancel steps during the chanting of the Introit the pastor is "entering" into God's presence. He approaches the altar where Christ sits enthroned in the Holy Eucharist. And when the pastor enters God's presence he takes his people with him. Our eyes see only one man moving, but actually the entire congregation does. Pastor and people together gather around God.

It is no accident that the Introits of the church are taken from the Psalms. The New

Testament church sings to the same God as did the saints of the Old Testament. We simply worship God from the other side of the Incarnation. The One who was promised of old has come. Yet, we do not do 'new' things. We sing to God with ancient words. The hymns of King David in the Psalter are also our hymns. Our worship is anchored in God's Word. The introits simply place portions of that Word on our lips and our tongues. As the seasons of the Church Year hold before us the whole history of God's activity for man, so the introits change from week to week to reflect this. The music of the introits also changes, although less frequently. The eight chant tones which we use reflect the "colors" - the moods - of the church year. From expectation to joy to somber reflection, the music itself reflects reality. God's Word is given to God's people and they enter into God's presence.

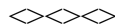


#### 4. THE KYRIE

Some portions of the liturgy seem, at first glance, to be misplaced. The Kyrie is one of these. Having been absolved of all sin and having entered God's presence by being gathered around His altar during the Introit it might seem strange that mercy is the first thing which occupies the Christian's mind. Indeed, mercy becomes our first plea before God. Two things, however, will help clarify this.

First, the structure of the Kyrie mirrors our confession of the true God. The three-part arrangement of this prayer flows from our acknowledgment of the Trinitarian nature of God. All three persons are addressed. Christian worship always gives voice to Christian confession. Even when our sinful nature hinders the perfect expression in our lives of what is believed, the confession which the liturgy places on our lips will reflect the true faith.

Secondly, the Kyrie reminds us that Christians know only one prayer. In spite of variety in detail, the prayer of the faithful always remains the same. Our only prayer is the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer – "Thy will be done." This is the constant plea of the redeemed. For the Christian there is nothing beyond God's will and the Kyrie reflects this. Thus the Kyrie simply expresses what is most certainly true. In his constant condition as saint and sinner – *simul iustus et peccator* – the child of God prays, only and always, for God's will to be accomplished in him. And what is God's will? To have mercy. The Christian never moves beyond the need for and the desire for this mercy. Apart from that mercy we would cease to be. If God's will – God's mercy - is not accomplished we are doomed.

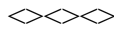


#### 5. THE GLORIA IN EXCELSIS

Our liturgy is not a hodge-podge of unrelated parts. Rather, our worship is like a moving tapestry which simply confesses the same faith and truth from beginning to end. Its unity is constant. There is no time when God is not being worshipped. On Sunday morning we simply join the ongoing liturgy - the liturgy of "angels and archangels and all the

company of heaven." On Sunday morning you become present in something which was taking place even before you were born. The constant object of our worship is "God for us" – God who comes in human flesh as our Savior. The liturgy simply places before us an ascending progression of this truth.

God, having introduced Himself anew in the Invocation now draws from His people words of praise wherein the faithful willingly confess His goodness. That this hymn should divide itself into three parts comes as no surprise. Here we simply acknowledge the epitome of God's will – the sending of His Son into the flesh for the salvation of man. As nothing stands between God's will and its fulfillment, so nothing separates the Kyrie from the Gloria in Excelsis – the later flows from the former. The church has sung these words since at least the fourth century, another indication of the timelessness of our liturgy. Week after week it unites us with the church of every age and every place.



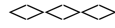
## 6. THE SALUTATION

A particular detail appearing several times in a novel is noted. Similarly in music, a repeated theme attracts our attention. The liturgy is no different. With its economy of language, things repeated in the liturgy take on special significance.

The Salutation is not an ecclesiastical equivalent of "Hi, how ya doin," - "Fine, how 'bout you." The liturgy has no time for such meaningless pleasantries. Rather this versicle and its response, occurring as it does three times, alerts us that something of unique importance is about to happen. The first use of the Salutation comes just before the Collect of the Day. This prayer, which we shall discuss shortly, summarizes the common petitions of the faithful on that Sunday. Secondly, we find the Salutation introducing the second major portion of the liturgy - the Service of the Sacrament in which the living Jesus unites Himself physically with His people. Finally, we find the Salutation at the very close of the service – just before the Benediction when God once again places His name over the faithful. Repetition denotes significance, and the significance of the Salutation comes in this; we are alerted that something especially important is about to happen.

But there is more here. This is formal language. It is not so much prayer as it is proclamation. The pastor is describing what exists. The Lord, by His choice, is with His people. He deals with them through the words and actions of His pastor. That any man should stand before the people of God – stand between them and God's altar and presume to speak to them for God – this can happen only because God allows it. We recognize the pastor as speaking and acting at God's direction. God has chosen this man to do these things. Thus, the Salutation finds its basis in a pastor's ordination. He has been called by God to do what God directs him to do. The congregation recognizes this by its response: "And with thy spirit." Here both congregation and pastor are reminded that he has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. St Paul speaks of this in writing to Timothy: "Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands . . ." (1 Tim. 4:14) He expands upon this later: ". . . I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my

hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." (2 Tim. 1:6) While no Lutheran would contend that ordination bestows an indelible character upon a pastor, it is very difficult to argue that ordination is simply a human rite in which nothing spiritual occurs. No, the pastor stands before his congregation as God's chosen spokesman and on that basis speaks and acts at God's behest. God has gifted him for this work.



## 7. THE COLLECT

As mentioned earlier, all Christian prayer is subsumed into the third petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done." This is a constant both in the Christian's private devotional life and in the public prayers of the church. This truth we see quite clearly in the church's collects which plead above all else that God would accomplish His will by bestowing His highest blessing – His favor – upon the faithful.

Like much of the church's language the word "collect" is Latin; from the word *collecta* which means "gathered up." Week after week the common desires, flowing from the lessons for the day and the church year are 'gathered up' into one petition and laid before God's throne of grace.

In the Collects we clearly see the ecumenical nature of the church. Imagine for a moment being transported back in time to fifth-century Rome. Naturally you would know Latin for that was the language of the church. Amazingly you would hear familiar prayers. The vast majority of our collects can be traced to three Roman bishops: Leo I (440-461), Gelasius (492-496) and Gregory the Great (590-604). By-and-large, we speak the prayers which these men wrote. Add one more individual, Thomas Cranmer, a sixteenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, and we have the ancient collects in English.

A Collect is not merely a jumble of words tossed together. Over the centuries these prayers have been polished and refined. The collects follow a specific pattern which generally consists of five parts.

1. The Address – This is the invocation, usually made to the Father, and based upon John 16:23, ". . . whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, He will give it to you."
2. The Acknowledgement – This is the doctrinal foundation upon which our request is made and reflects a quality of God related to that which we are praying for.
3. The Petition – This is the actual prayer, based on spiritual needs; cleansing, forgiveness, comfort, etc.
4. The Aspiration – Not appearing in all collects, the aspiration is often introduced by "that" and states the reason for our petition.
5. The Pleading – ". . . through Jesus Christ our Lord." We have but one mediator, one advocate, the God-man Jesus. Historically, the pleading concluded with the

doxological words "who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end."

Even though various parts of the collect sometimes blend together, an example will help us see the structure. Below is the Collect for Ash Wednesday.

1. The Address – "Almighty and everlasting God . . ."
2. The Acknowledgement – " . . . because you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent . . ."
3. The Petition – " . . . create in us new and contrite hearts . . ."
4. The Aspiration – " . . . that we, worthily repenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness . . ."
5. The Pleading – " . . . through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."

As mentioned, the Collect form is somewhat variable but the general structure remains. This is 'collective' prayer which is the property of no one individual in particular but from which none of the faithful are excluded.



## 8. THE LESSONS

The pastor does not arbitrarily choose which portions of the Bible he will read in the Divine Service. The Lessons – really, series of lessons – have grown out of the accumulated life of the church. That is to say, various collections of readings have developed over the centuries to bring the Word of God to the faithful. These selections from Scripture – called Pericopes – are organized around the rhythm of the Church Year and the various Feasts which the Church keeps.

The Lutheran Hymnal, on pages 159 and 160, contains two series of lessons. These are usually called the Historic Pericopes, having long been associated with their various Sundays. Page 161 also contains Pericopes for various Minor Feasts and Festivals. Other pericopal systems have also been developed and are used by many. Understood in the development of these series of readings is that the church finds her life in God's Word. It is that Word which called her into being and which defines her life. Without God's Word there is no church because without that Word there is no knowledge of God, nor of His saving work for us.

The Lessons for Sunday morning – readings from the Old Testament, the Epistles of the New Testament and the Gospels – become the focus for the Divine Service. Chief among these is the Gospel. While the entire Bible is God's Word, there are distinctions to be made within it. The Old Testament, encompassing the history of Israel, always points forward - to Messiah's coming. By contrast the Epistles of the New Testament, dealing with life rooted in Messiah's appearing, always point back to Him. It is the Gospels

which stand at the center. In the Gospels Jesus, the Messiah stands before us. In the Gospels we don't simply hear about Jesus, we hear Him! Unlike the Old Testament and the Epistles, the Gospels give us the actual words of Jesus. The congregation indicates this distinction by its posture. It is only for the Gospel – for the words of Jesus – that the congregation stands. The Gospel brings them into the living presence of Jesus who speaks to them and acts for them.

Obviously the Bible can be read by anyone. We have the Biblical text available in many languages; our language. But what about the public reading of the Bible in the Divine Service? Who has been given this responsibility? The public reading of Scripture is intimately connected to its preaching. Reading assumes explanation. This duty God gives to His ministers. They are charged with "opening" the Scriptures for the faithful. Reading and preaching go together – they are two sides of one coin. We recall St Paul's directive to St Timothy: "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." (1 Tim. 4) It would appear that Paul intends all three – public reading, preaching and teaching – to be kept together. Thus, the one who preaches publicly reads publicly.



## 9. THE CREED

The Christian Church confesses three Creeds. These are called "Ecumenical" because they confess universally accepted truth. They mirror God, confessing back to Him the revelation which He has given of Himself. Scripture is God's voice. The Creed is man's reply. While **faith** makes one a Christian, his confession of the Creed marks him as one.

The Apostles' Creed, which can be dated to the mid-second century, is called the Baptismal Creed. It unfolds the meaning of the baptismal formula given in Matthew 28. Luther described it in these words, ". . . as the bee gathers the honey from many a beautiful and delicious flower, so this creed has been collected in commendable brevity from the books of the beloved prophets and apostles, that is, from the entire Holy Scriptures . . ."

The Nicene Creed dates from the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325. In opposition to the Arian heresy it emphasizes the full, eternal deity of Christ. This is the Creed of the Lord's Supper since it confesses the eternal and complete divinity of the Son who gives Himself to us in the Sacrament. In the early church it was chanted antiphonally each Sunday. The priest would begin: ***Credo in unum Deum*** (I believe in one God) and the people would respond ***Patrem omnipotentem*** (the Father Almighty). So it would go, back and forth, until the end.

The longest of the creeds, the Athanasian, comes from the fourth-century. It is the creed for the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. Thomas Aquinas called this creed a ". . .manifesto of faith . . . a doctrinal exposition . . ." It is the summary of Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy which stands against all heresy.

Confessing the creeds has never been a question in the Christian church. However, their

position in the Divine Liturgy has been. Some would place the creed just before the sermon. In that position it sets limits upon what can be preached. All preaching must be in agreement with the creed. Others would place the creed after the sermon. There it becomes the congregation's answer to what they have just heard. Preaching calls forth a response and that response is encompassed by the creed. Regardless, the creed defines the church by confessing the True God who creates and sustains her.

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## 10. THE SERMON

A minister's most important pastoral work takes place in his pulpit on Sunday morning. There he addresses more people than at any other time during the week. His fundamental calling is to preach – to be the spokesman of God in that place - and his preaching must be with utmost clarity and faithfulness.

Sunday sermons are not story time. They are not times for entertainment or amusing anecdotes. The sermon is not even for addressing people's "felt needs." "Felt needs" are illusions. Your sinful nature always lies to you. You have but one real need and that is to be saved. Eternity is at stake and if you are to be saved that "saving" must come to you. Salvation is not within your power to accomplish. The true seriousness comes in this; someone may be hearing the gospel for the last time. Someone in the pew may well go to his grave before the next Lord's Day. Each Sunday the battle between death and life is joined, and sermons must always show people who they are in themselves and who they have become through the gracious activity of Jesus Christ.

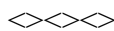
In an earlier age when congregations kept the prayer offices of Matins and Vespers those were used to expound the Old Testament lesson and the Epistle. The Gospel was always reserved for the Sunday Divine Service – the Hauptgottesdienst. The chief portion of Holy Scripture – the actual words of Jesus – belongs to the chief service of the church. It must because the Gospel reveals to us the Incarnate, Living Lord as no other portion of Scripture does.

The purpose of preaching is not to 'touch' people. The purpose is not to make people feel good about themselves. Preaching is meant to transform people – to turn them away from faith in themselves and to faith in the One who cleanses from all sin by His death and resurrection. Preaching places people into the narrative of the Gospel. There they must see themselves, and there they must see their Savior. In the sermon hearers are told who they really are. Their disbelief, the seedbed of all sin, is held before them. They are judged. The sermon is not about "the world." It is about them. As individuals they have become unclean. As individuals they have sinned in thought, word and deed. As individuals they stand condemned before the holy righteousness of God.

But this is not the end. Hearers are not left to wallow about in self-designed plans of self-improvement. They are not left with "principles" for Christian living and told "go to it!" Having been killed through the preaching of the Law of God, they must be made alive through the preaching of the Gospel of God. They are to be shown who they really are - recipients of Divine mercy in Jesus Christ. It is not enough to preach about the Gospel;

the Gospel itself must be proclaimed. To say "Jesus loves sinners" or that "the Gospel forgives sins" is really to say nothing. Generalizations provide no comfort. The penitent must hear that God is for him; has had pity on him; has acted for him. Of all people, God has rescued him. Jesus has lifted all your sins from you. He has wrapped Himself in those sins and carried them into death. Your sins were laid in the tomb with Jesus and there they remain, buried forever. Jesus' death was your death. You died with Him and His resurrection was your resurrection. God looks at you – sees you – only through the sacrifice of Jesus. The God who created you has died for you. You are forgiven. God no longer sees your sins. They are gone. You are hidden in the wounds of Christ and there you now live. His holiness has become your holiness. God looks at you and sees Christ. He does not see you apart from Christ. This is the Gospel which people must to hear.

How is this accomplished? By showing people their place in the text. The Gospels are not simply nice stories about a nice Jesus who did nice things for nice people once-upon-a-time. As redeemed children of God the Gospels are about you. You are Jairus' daughter whom Jesus has rescued from the death of sin and restored to life in the Father's house. You are the widow's son, raised from the devil's domain of death. You are the man whom Satan has attacked and left wounded; bleeding in the ditch. To your rescue has come a stranger – a Good Samaritan, Jesus – who carries you to the house of His Father. You are the treasure hidden in the field which someone – Jesus – finds and gives all that He has for. You are a treasure that Jesus dies for. You are the pearl of great price. And on it goes. We sinners, rescued by the mercy of God, find ourselves defined by Jesus. In the gospel you learn who you have become through the activity of the Holy One of God for you. And now, having seen yourselves in a new way, the crucifixion of Jesus becomes not just one event among many; it becomes the only event that really matters. The crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus – the sacrifice of Jesus - becomes the moment that defines you. This is the preaching that must permeate every Sunday sermon.

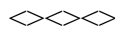


## 11. THE OFFERTORY

The preaching of the Gospel always generates a response. Within the Christian that response finds its expression as prayer. Additionally, our response to the Gospel is not that God would help us do something, but that His power would help us become something. The faithful always pray that God would reshape them in His image, into what He intends. The faithful always pray that God would accomplish His will in them. This desire for Divine intervention stands behind the Offertory.

The Offertory is not our act of giving something to God – ‘offering’ Him something. Rather, we ask that we be ‘offered’ to God. In the atonement we die with Christ. St Paul describes it this way: "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3:3) The crucifixion of Jesus is much more than simple historical event. It is a present reality. In a sense there is nothing beyond the crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus. The sacrifice of Jesus always stands before the face of God the Father. This is why the crucifix on Lutheran altars is so important. Jesus' death for the sins of the world is always true, always valid, always ‘now’. Our Heavenly Father sees us there. He does not see us apart from the atonement. Always the death and resurrection of the Son stands between

us and the Father. This reality informs our prayer in the Offertory. We pray, in words taken from Psalm 51, that we might be offered to God the Father as a people pleasing in His sight. We wish to be offered to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our wish is that the Divine plan be accomplished: "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Heb. 10:10) We are offered to God with Christ. His death is our death. In His sacrifice we, too, die and are made holy (sanctified) through His blood. Constantly recreated through the power of the Word which is preached, we always seek the clean heart and right spirit which restore us in the joy of our salvation. We long for the image of God. We long for the words of St Paul to be accomplished within us: "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (2 Cor. 5) To be kept by the Spirit of God in the sacrifice of Jesus is to be a new creation of God.

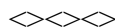


## 12. THE GENERAL PRAYER

God does not require our advice. He knows what we need. We are the ones who do not. It isn't that God must somehow be encouraged to pay attention to our needs. Rather, we must learn what those needs actually are. God knows our situation. We are the ones who often have mistaken ideas about things. It isn't that prayer changes things. Rather, we need to be changed. By nature our eyes are drawn inward upon ourselves. We are the center of our attention. God would have it be otherwise. Thus, God would teach us how to pray.

As mentioned earlier, Christians have but one prayer. The constant plea of the redeemed is summarized in the third petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done." For the faithful there is nothing beyond God's will. Nothing else is needed. In addition the Christian desires that his will be conformed to God's. That God's will be accomplished is his fondest wish, and his greatest necessity. And what is God's will? To have mercy. In every age and in every situation of life God's will remains the same – to be merciful. The Holy Spirit seeks to guide us into seeing our need for that mercy. That's the essence of prayer. With that understanding we can pray for our families, our fellow Christians, our nation, our neighbor – even our enemies – as we should. Always it's the same prayer – that God's merciful will in Jesus Christ be accomplished for us, in us, and through us.

Understanding this we can pray with complete confidence. "Ask whatever you wish," Jesus says "and believing, you shall receive." Our faith that God's will is to be merciful rests upon His Word. The entire Liturgy has moved us in this direction. The General Prayer does not follow the sermon simply by accident or for convenience. Instead, everything to this point – and especially the preaching of the Gospel – everything has prepared us to pray as we should. Through preaching we are led to see God as *Pater Noster* (Our Father). We are shown the One who 'wills' to be merciful. And even more than that, the proclamation of the Gospel has shown us the Father who 'willed' His Son to be our Savior. Jesus is the mercy of God, and the God who is "for us" invites us to pray His will be done in us.



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### 13. THE HOLY COMMUNION

In the prologue to his Gospel St John declares: "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us . . ." This is, of course, a reference to the Incarnation. The Word who is both with God and is God took on human flesh. This is Jesus, the Christ. He is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity made visible in human form. Jesus is God. He speaks. He can be touched. He becomes hungry and eats; He grows tired and sleeps – as a man. And yet, He is not simply man. He is man's atonement. He is the very Lamb of God, the One Who takes away the sins of the world. He is the eternal Lamb, the sacrificial Lamb, Who bleeds and dies for the sins of all men.

The words of Jesus accomplish what they declare. He is the Word through whom creation was spoken into existence and His word remains forever powerful. We see this clearly in the Lord's Supper. Through His word He unites Himself to earthly elements. With the words of institution He enthrones Himself upon the altar. No longer do we gaze upon mere bread and wine. At His speaking He, too, is there. The Body and Blood of Christ become a present reality for His people. The consecrated elements do not become the Body and Blood of Jesus at the moment you receive them. Rather, Christ is there already. He, Himself, is placed in your mouth and upon your lips.

The Liturgy contains a profound progression which you may never have given thought to. Holy Communion is celebrated after the sermon has been heard, not before. This is not by chance. This is the proper order. Were the Supper to precede the sermon you would not know of your Lord's saving work for you. You would not have heard of His passion and death which has atoned for your sins. You would not have been told of His sacrifice for you. Preaching brings to you the life-giving Word of redemption – that Jesus is God's eternal sacrifice Who has borne your sins and their punishment, thus reconciling you to your Heavenly Father.

And yet, in preaching you only hear the words of Jesus. Wonderful words, to be sure, but still only words. In the Holy Supper, by contrast, Jesus – the Word – takes on flesh. What previously came only to your hearing now comes to you in the physical, bodily presence of the Only Son of God. First you hear Jesus speak His mercy into your ears: then that mercy is physically given into your mouth. The eternal Body and Blood of Jesus become part of you. First you hear of your forgiveness, your salvation - then you taste it. The same Jesus Who created within you a new life in Holy Baptism; the same Jesus Who heard your confession and declared you forgiven; the same Jesus Who preached forgiveness and life into your ears in the sermon - this same Jesus now gives Himself wholly into your mouth. It is a miracle virtually beyond comprehension. The whole Christ unites Himself to you. By your eating and drinking He is neither divided nor diminished - ever. The One whom heaven and earth cannot contain hides himself under the form of bread and wine and comes to you. Truly there is mystery here for a lifetime of meditation and wonder. The Holy God comes to and is received by sinful men. Not for destruction, but for salvation. In utmost humility God deigns to become one with you.

In the Lord's Supper we see another reason for the presence of the crucifix on our altars.

Even though our Lord Jesus was "crucified, dead and buried," and even though "the third day He rose again," He always remains the sacrifice for our sins. The Son always remains the One Who is sacrificed before the Father. In the seemingly contemptible weakness of crucifixion and death He conquers sin and hell. His glory is in the shame of crucifixion. His power manifests itself in what appears to be absolute helplessness and defeat. It is this Body and Blood which you receive. That which was once offered upon the altar of the cross is now given to you. Here is the culmination of the Divine Service for here is the ultimate service of God to man. God dies so that you may live. And His living body is given to you so that you may never die.



## 14. THE POST-COMMUNION CANTICLE

A parishioner once remarked to his pastor: "After communion there really isn't much left." Unwittingly that individual had said a great deal. With the celebration of the Lord's Supper the Divine Service quickly draws to a close. In the Sacrament we have glimpsed the Heavenly Jerusalem. While still on earth we have participated in the heavenly banquet. We have feasted in the company of angels. The faithful departed have been our companions at this festal board. We have knelt with the saints. For a few moments heaven and earth have overlapped. We have received life from Him Who is the Life. The One Who is the Way has fed us in the way of His sacrifice. He Who is Truth has given the substance of our salvation into mouths cleansed by the truth of forgiveness. What more could we possibly want?

The Nunc Dimittis places the song of Simeon (Luke 2) on our lips. Holding the Christ in his arms, this righteous man spoke the words we now sing. "Salvation has come to me," he declares, "I can now depart in peace." So it is with us. We, too, have received our salvation. We, too, can depart. St Augustine described the matter this way: "When the great Sacrament has been partaken, a Thanksgiving concludes all." We are much like the disciples on Maundy Thursday. After receiving the Lord's Body and Blood their service concluded in this manner: "When they had sung a hymn they went out into the Mount of Olives." Similarly we take our leave.

Two concepts stand before us in this canticle. First, the Lord's Supper is a very personal matter. We, "thy servant" (singular) ask God's peace upon ourselves. And yet, the entire world remains in our view. We have received not just our salvation, but the "Salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people" is here. Invited into the presence of God to receive His gifts, time has stood still. Now, however, the clock begins ticking once again and we prepare once more to take up our various vocations in the world.



## 15. THE BENEDICTION

Having begun with the Gospel, the Divine Service concludes the same way. In the Invocation we heard the dominical words with which we were baptized. The Invocation introduced God to us as the Holy Trinity. Inherent in that introduction was God's promise

to act for us. God comes in and with His name. This He has done, is doing now, and will continue to do. Our liturgy is a timeless order in which this "coming" of God takes place. It is within the liturgy, after all, that we hear of the Divine Son Who takes our sins upon Himself and becomes the atonement whereby we are reconciled to the Father. Moreover, this gracious Word comes to us through the power of the Holy Spirit Who becomes our tutor in the faith. In essence the Benediction brings us back to the beginning of the service, to the Invocation. In this way each Divine Service prepares us for the next.

As the service concludes God directs us once more to Himself. The Benediction leads us back into the Old Testament. From the book of Numbers (6:22-27) we hear the blessing which God spoke through the mouth of Moses – the words by which the sons of Israel were to be blessed. This is entirely as it should be. All who have been reborn by the baptizing, faith-creating word of God constitute the new Israel. All these St Paul describes when he declares; "Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham." (Gal. 3:7)

The Benediction speaks Trinitarian language. The Father blesses us in all things. From Him comes the life which animates us, both in body and in soul. The Son's face shines upon us as our *Pascha* – our Passover lamb whose blood cleanses from all sin. We are Jesus' delight. He delights in taking our death into Himself and bestowing His life upon us in return. That our sins might be placed upon Him was the eternal plan of the eternal Godhead; a plan which was forever accomplished in Jesus' crucifixion/resurrection. It is to this atonement that the Holy Spirit constantly points us. We are directed always to the One whose countenance is lifted over us from the cross and Who declares our peace by His words "It is finished." The Benediction bespeaks the God Who goes through death to bring life; the God who takes our death into Himself, bestowing eternal life in return.



## 16. THE AMEN

Mention has already been made of repetition in the liturgy. Words and phrases which reoccur catch our attention. So it is with the "amen." This word appears fifteen times during the Order of the Holy Communion (page 15) in The Lutheran Hymnal. Most significantly, it is always placed in the mouth of the people.

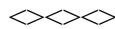
The significance of "amen" belies its humble appearance. This is not simply a churchly way of saying "the end." It isn't that something must conclude all prayers and "amen" has become the code word of choice. Rather, "amen" belongs to the faithful and becomes the hand whereby they claim for themselves what God is doing in the liturgy. Dictionaries typically define "amen" in terms such as, "so be it" or "may it be so." In the liturgy God places words in our mouths which describe what He has done – what He continues to do – for us. "Amen" receives those activities of God as our own.

When, for instance, the Christian attaches his "amen" to the Lord's Prayer he claims for himself all those petitions offer. "May your name be made holy to me." "May your kingdom come to me." "May your will, in heaven and on earth, be done for me." "May that bread which is needful for the day be given to me." On and on it goes. "Forgive me."

"Do not tempt me." "Deliver me." The "amen" of a Christian is like a child's eager hand which grasps hold of what is set before it.

A seminary professor once lectured his liturgics class in this manner: "Gentlemen, never step on the voice of the people!" To the students it seemed an odd thing to say. After all, how can one step on a "voice"? The advice, however, was good and proper. What the professor meant was simply this: "Gentlemen, allow your people to claim what rightfully belongs to them. Don't rush them. In the liturgy God's blessings are placed before them like courses at a banquet and the faithful need time to take what is theirs." Specifically the professor was urging that ministers act with greater solicitude. The congregation sings its "amen" as a claimant of holy things. The pastor, by his actions, should indicate his recognition of this. He shouldn't be walking around, or turning to face a different direction, or doing something else. Rather, he should simply and quietly wait until the congregation has finished receiving the gifts meant for her.

Following the Benediction this action of receiving Holy things becomes very pronounced. The end of the Liturgy is met with a three-fold "amen". This is both reception and confession. All that God has declared to the faithful during the Divine Service they claim. Moreover, they make their rightful claim while confessing the Holy Trinity. The activities of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit pass before the eyes of believing souls and are recognized in turn. For a final time God has spoken and His people have responded. Now, with the Gospel as the last thing they have heard the redeemed are ready to resume their vocations in the world. The Divine Service has ended. Nothing more ought to be said. No announcements; no directives to go and do something should be added. Instead, just as the Gospel began the liturgy so it concludes it. The cycle of God's grace has kept, is keeping, and will continue to keep His people.



## CONCLUSION

This essay began by reminding you of your place in the heavenly worship of God. Week after week you gather with angels and archangels. You are joined to all the company of heaven when you appear before the altar. You become part of an on-going liturgy – the on-going Divine Service of God. Truly the most meager congregation is filled to overflowing at each Divine Service. We are surrounded by heaven itself. This is the constant reality of Lutheran worship – Lutheran liturgy.

The Church of all ages is one. We do not trace our existence back only to the Saxon immigration of the 1840's or the Ninety-five Theses of 1517. Our history is far older. Our life passes back through the Apostles, back through the prophets and patriarchs. Indeed, the Church has existed since the Garden of Eden. Adam was the first pastor. Eve was the first congregation. The first man was given responsibility for teaching the first woman how the true worship of God would be maintained. That order has not changed.

So where does this put us in our day? The Church in the year 2000 stands where she has always stood – in constant communion with God and in opposition to the culture which surrounds her. The world is always turned in upon itself. By contrast, the Church is

always turned outward toward God. The Church knows but one Lord and seeks after Him alone. He has the gifts she needs. He has the words of eternal life. He has the promise of forgiveness which guarantees her well being, her salvation. The Church does not liturgically disembowel herself at the fickle altar of cultural relevance by attempting to become attractive to the world. Whenever she chases after such significance or pertinence she finds only a chimerical fantasy that destroys her. Wherever this temptation is acceded to she finds herself led from one mirage to another. The church catholic knows this. In her liturgy she recognizes this. The Church knows herself to be holy and beautiful in God's eyes and with this she is content. She has no interest in the world's approval.

The liturgy of the Divine Service places us where we belong. With all the company of heaven we gather before the throne of the Lamb and there receive His gifts. This is timeless worship, and in this timelessness we enter the "real-time" of God.

+Dominus vobiscum+

The Reverend Dean M. Bell

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