

Lent Vespers 4
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Concordia Lutheran Mission
Terrebonne, Oregon

“Christ Prays for the Eternal Well-Being of the Church when He Prays for the Success of the Gospel.”

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word.

St. John 17:20

Introduction

Here Christ prays for us today 2000 years ago on the Eve of His Passion. How can one not be convinced God does not care for him when God prays for him 2000 years ago! For while Christ is about to ascend the Cross and to suffer and die, He thinks not of Himself in His High Priestly prayer, but of us today some 2000 years later. For Christ says He prays not only for the Apostles there with Him on the Eve of His Passion, but also for all men who come to faith through the Word of the Apostles, for men of all time, which would include us here today.

And for what He prays is that we come to faith and remain in faith through God’s Word and Sacraments, which is the Word of the Apostles, the Apostolic Office. The Apostolic Office is God’s Word and Sacraments, the Gospel. Through the Gospel men come to saving faith and are sustained in the saving faith unto life eternal and the resurrection of the body.

Christ on the Eve of His Passion prays for the eternal well-being of the Church when He prays for the success of the Gospel.

I. “Their Word” is the Apostolic Office of Christ’s Word and Sacraments.

A. Christ’s Passion forms the Gospel, i.e. God’s Word and Sacraments.

Last week we saw that God’s Word can indeed sanctify because God’s Word is the Almighty’s Absolution of the sinner. And God’s Word also can and must sanctify and save because Christ in His High Priestly prayer prays for its success to do so. Jesus prays:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word....¹

Here Christ prays on the Eve of His Passion in His High Priestly Prayer for the success of the Apostolic Office of God's Word and Sacraments. The Apostle Paul writes:

Husband, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it: That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.²

Here we see again that God's Word and Sacraments are intimately intertwined with the Passion of Christ because they are fashioned by His Passion. In the case of Holy Baptism, Christ gave His life, Shed His Precious Blood, and died on the Cross in order to save us through the Blessed Waters of Holy Baptism. Luther writes:

[H]oly baptism was purchased for us through this same blood, which was shed for us and with which he paid for sin. This blood and its merit and power he put into baptism, in order that in baptism we might receive it. For whenever a person receives baptism in faith this is the same as if he were visibly washed and cleansed with the blood of Christ. For we do not attain the forgiveness of sins through our work, but rather through the death and the shedding of the blood of the Son of God. *But he takes this forgiveness of sin and tucks it into baptism.*³

When we see Holy Baptism, we see the Passion of Our Lord.

Likewise, and obviously so, we see the Passion of our Lord in the Sacrament of the Altar. For the Holy Communion is the Last Will and Testament of the Son of God. The Apostle St. Matthew writes:

And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave *it* to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.⁴

¹**St. John 17:20.**

²**Ephesians 5:25-27.**

³*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, p. 325.

⁴**St. Matthew 26:27-28.**

Here is a benefit and a boon to men that takes place *only because Jesus would die*. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

For where a testament *is*, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament *is* of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.⁵

Luther writes:

You see, therefore, that what we call the mass is a promise of the forgiveness of sins made to us by God, and such a promise as has been confirmed by the death of the Son of God. For the only differences between a promise and a testament is that the testament involves the death of the one who makes it. A testator is a promiser who is about to die, while a promiser (if I may put it thus) is a testator who is not about to die. This testament of Christ is foreshadowed in all the promises of God from the beginning of the world; indeed, whatever value those ancient promises possessed was altogether derived from this new promise that was to come in Christ. Hence the words “compact,” “covenant,” and “testament of the Lord” occur so frequently in the Scriptures. These words signified that God would one day die. “For where there is a testament, the death of the testator must of necessity occur” (Heb. 9[:16]). Now God made a testament, therefore, it was necessary that he should die. But God could not die unless he became man. Thus the incarnation and the death of Christ are both comprehended most concisely in this one word, “testament.”⁶

And regarding the Absolution, Christ died on the Cross in order to absolve men of their sin and save. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures ...⁷

And this forgiveness for which Christ died on the Cross He gives to us through the Gospel. The Apostle St. John writes:

Then said Jesus to them again, Peace *be* unto you: as *my* Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on *them*, and saith

⁵**Hebrews 9:16-17.**

⁶*Luther's Works*, Vol. 36: 38.

⁷**I Corinthians 15:3.**

unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained.⁸

The Lutheran Church confesses:

Moreover, the power of the keys administers and presents the Gospel through absolution, which [proclaims peace to me and] is the true voice of the Gospel. {German: The word of absolution speaks peace to me and is the Gospel itself.} Thus we also comprise absolution when we speak of faith, because *faith cometh by hearing*, as Paul says Rom. 10, 17. For when the Gospel is heard, and the absolution [*i.e.*, the promise of divine grace] is heard, the conscience is encouraged and receives consolation. And because God truly quickens through the Word, the keys truly remit sins before God [here on earth sins are truly canceled also before God in heaven] according to Luke 10, 16: *He that heareth you heareth Me*. Wherefore the voice of one absolving must be believed not otherwise than we would believe a voice from heaven.⁹

When we see God's Word and Sacraments, there we see the Passion of Our Lord because He died in order to save us through His Word and Sacraments. Luther writes:

Christ came into the flesh to be with us in Baptism and at the Holy Supper.¹⁰

B. "Their Word" is the Apostolic Ministry of God's Word and Sacraments.

Remarkably, Judas' betrayal on the Eve of Christ's Passion teaches us once again that God's Word and Sacraments are the Apostolic Office or Ministry of God's Word and Sacraments. St. Peter, quoting **Psalm 109:8**, speaks of Judas' betrayal, fall, and his replacement in the Apostolic Office:

For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take.¹¹

⁸**St. John 20:21-23.**

⁹*The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII. (V.).39-40, Triglotta, pp. 261.*

¹⁰*Luther's Works, Vol. 30, p. 268.*

This Hebrew word here used for Judas's office comes over into English as bishop, i.e. overseer, and correlates to the Office of Pastor. The Apostle St. Paul states:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers [bishops], to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.¹²

Again, the Apostle St. Paul identifies bishops to be pastors:

This *is* a true saying, If a man desire the office of bishop, he desireth a good work.¹³

¹¹**Psalm 109:8.** “Now in order that what is judged here about bishops may be more rightly understood, certain things from Scripture and from testimonies of the true antiquity must first be repeated. The terms *episkopos* [bishop] and *episkopee* [office of bishop] are found used of the ecclesiastical ministry in the apostolic writings (Acts 1:20; 20:28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; 1 Peter 5:2). These terms were, however, taken from the use of everyday language and were adapted to the ministry of the church because it has the duty of administration and inspection. ... The apostles accommodated these words more willingly to the ecclesiastical ministry because they were at that time generally known from the Greek version of the Old Testament. For the words *paqad*, *pequdah*, and *pequdim*, which mean visitation, inspection, office, care, administration committed to someone, a duty demanded – these the Greeks translated *episkopein*, *episkopee*, and *episkopos*. In Numb. 31:14 the officers of the army are called *episkopoi*; in Judges 9:28 Abimelech had Zabul as his *episkopos*. 2 Kings 11:15 speaks of the captains who are *episkopoi* over all the army. There also guards were placed over the house of the Lord [2 Kings 11:7]. This is explained thus by the Greeks: He placed *episkops* over the house of the Lord. In 2 Chron. 39:12 the inspectors of works are called *episkopoi*. Num. 4:16: The office or duty of Eleazar in the tabernacle of God is called *episkopee*. Thus in Ps. 109:8 the office of Judas is called *episkopee*. I have noted down these examples which I had observed, in order that consideration might be given to the source from which the apostles took this term, the peculiar emphasis of which can also be gathered and understood from these passages. Jerome translated it *superattendens* (superintendent), Ambrose *superinspector* (overseer).” Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent, Part II*, tr. Fred Kramer, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971, pp. 700, 701, underscore added.

¹²**Acts 20:28**, underscore and amplification in brackets added.

¹³**I Timothy 3:1.**

And the Apostle St. Peter likewise identifies himself as a pastor:

The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight [bishoprick] *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind ; Neither as being lords over *God's* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.¹⁴

What, then, is the difference between an Apostle and a pastor because both administer and oversee the same Apostolic Office of the Word and the Sacraments? In the first place, the Apostles differed from pastors because they were witnesses of Christ's Life and Work, as St. Peter has just noted.¹⁵ Finally, the Apostles received direct Divine, doctrinal revelation and

¹⁴**I Peter 5:1-3.** "The question, however, is what rank in the ecclesiastical ministry the office of bishop is and what the duties of a bishop are. We can complete the explanation of this question more briefly because it has been treated *ex professo* by Jerome. He shows and proves that at the time of the apostles, bishops and presbyters [elders] were one and the same, or that one and the same person was both presbyter and bishop, one of these being a term for his office and dignity, the other for his age. For Paul says (Phil. 1:1) that in that one church there were bishops and deacons. In Acts 20:17 Luke says that the presbyters of the church at Ephesus were called out. When Paul has assembled them, he calls them bishops ['overseers,' KJV and RSV; Acts 20:28]. In Titus 1:5ff. Paul speaks of appointing presbyters in every town. And as he explains what kind of presbyter ought to be ordained, he says: 'For a bishop must be blameless.' In 1 Peter 5:1-2 Peter, addressing the presbyters calls himself a fellow presbyter and ascribes to the office of presbyters *to episkopei* ['oversight,' KJV]. that the same ordination was common to [bishops and] presbyters Jerome shows from 1 Tim. 4:14, which speaks of the laying on of hands of the presbyters." Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent, Part II*, tr. Fred Kramer, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971, pp. 701, 702, underscore and amplification in brackets added.

¹⁵Likewise we see this eye-witness requirement in the selection of St. Matthias to fill Judas's bishoprick according to the command of the Lord in **Psalm 109:8**. "For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take. Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us. Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection." **Acts 1:20-22**.

Judas' great sin was not his betrayal of Christ, grievous as that was, for all sins against the Son of Man shall be forgiven. "And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it

taught it. Hence, the work of the Apostles was attested by signs, wonders, and miracles. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.¹⁶

Martin Chemnitz writes:

shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speakth against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come.” **St. Matthew 12:32.**

Judas’ great sin was to despise the Gospel, to reject forgiveness, apart from which forgiveness salvation is impossible because iniquity heaps upon iniquity exacerbating and compounding the condemnation. “Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous.” **Psalm 69:27-28.** “And yet, if someone refuses to acknowledge the sin and to stop it, but persists in it, you cannot forgive him—not on your account but on his, because he refuses to accept the forgiveness.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 21, p. 153. “This indeed was a terrible turn of events: that one of the disciples of Christ becomes the betrayer of Christ. Judas was no ordinary Christian; rather, he was in his fourth year of studies in Christ’s school. He had heard many outstanding sermons from Christ, and he had witnessed many divine miracles accomplished by Christ. Indeed, he himself had proclaimed Christ’s teaching and had confirmed it with miracles, as we can conclude from Matthew 10. Even so, he is brought to the point where he betrays His [sic] Lord and Master and leads Him to the *Blutbank* ... [‘bed of blood’, footnote of translator]. Terrible it is that Solomon – to whom God the Lord appeared and gave such a wise and understanding heart that the likes of him never preceded nor came after him, 1 Kings 3 – reached the point in his old age that his heart bowed down to foreign gods. However, it is even more terrible that Judas, who for such a long time learned divine wisdom from the Son of God Himself, at last so completely turned himself away and in ultimate despair fell into eternal damnation. [The experience of Judas] should indeed wipe the sleep of [false] security from our eyes; namely, that we somehow can never succumb to the delusion that it is impossible to lose the grace of God and the promise of life even though we do whatever we please. Not so! We obviously know that the Devil was kicked out of God’s kingdom and Adam out of Paradise; how then can there not be security [cock over-confidence] in this world?” The Rev. Dr. John Gerhard, *A History and Explanation of the History of the Sufferings and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the four evangelists*, tr. Elmer M. Hohle, ed. David O. Berger, Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 1999, pp. 75, 76.

¹⁶**II Corinthians 12:12.**

Is one, therefore, immediately to believe all fanatics when they claim that God has appeared to them, that the Lord has spoken to them, that the Father has given them this commission, and that they are thus stirred up and moved by the Spirit? ... By no means. For God has forbidden this with an express warning. Jer. 14:14. But God endows those whom He calls without means either with the gift of miracles or with other testimonies of the Spirit with which to prove and confirm their call. Thus Moses established his call before Pharaoh with the gift of miracles, Ex. 4:1 ff. Therefore Paul also calls signs, wonders, and mighty deeds proofs of the apostolate, 2 Cor. 12:12. Christ speaks of these, Jn 5:36; Mt 10:8. But one should not believe false doctrine that leads away from God and conflicts with the Word, even if miracles follow it. Dt. 12:1 ff; Mt 7:22-23; 24:23-24; 2 Th 2:9.¹⁷

A pastor, however, is not witness of Christ's Work but a confessor and receives no direct doctrinal revelation but merely teaches and administers the received revelation of the Apostles in order to feed the flock of God with the Word of God, the Gospel.

“Their Word” for which Christ prays in His High Priestly prayer is the Apostolic Office of God's Word and Sacraments, the Public Ministry of the Gospel. The Lutheran Church confesses:

But let us speak of the word *liturgy*. This word does not properly signify a sacrifice, but rather the public ministry, and agrees aptly with our belief, namely, that one minister who consecrates tenders the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as one minister who preaches tenders the Gospel to the people, as Paul says, I Cor. 4, 1: *Let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, i.e. of the Gospel and the Sacraments.* And 2 Cor. 5, 20: *We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in God's stead, be ye reconciled to God.* Thus the term *leitourgia* [liturgy] agrees aptly with the ministry.¹⁸

II. Christ Prays for the Eternal Well-Being of the Church when He Prays for the Success of the Gospel.

¹⁷Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, & Sacraments, An Enchiridion*, p. 31

¹⁸*The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV. (XII.): Of the Mass, Of the Term Mass.* 80, 81, *Triglotta*, p. 411, translation in brackets added.

And Christ prays for us today who are gathered around “their Word” of the Apostolic Office of God’s Word and Sacraments:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word¹⁹

Here we see, powerfully, that Christ thinks not of Himself on the Eve of His Passion, of His Agony and Death on the Cross but a few moments away, but rather of us here 2000 years later. *This point deeply impresses upon us that God cares for us because even 2000 years before we were born He was praying for us!*

And Christ prays for the success of the Gospel because our faith and saving faith for all men comes through God’s Word, as Christ says, “they which shall believe on me through their word”. Hence, St. Paul the Apostle writes that faith comes through the hearing of the Word:

So then faith *cometh* by hearing; and hearing by the word of God.²⁰

And this faith saves:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.²¹

So, in the Apostolic Office of God’s Word and Sacraments, not only do we have the Word of the Almighty blessing us with saving faith, but also the prayer of the Almighty that the Gospel succeed and enjoy great success. One cannot have a greater formula for success and confidence that God is solicitous of our needs in all circumstances through His Word and Sacraments than His Word and His Prayer effecting and sustaining our faith. And, again, God was thinking of all men, including us here today, some 2000 years ago – even before we were born He had our eternal well-being in mind. The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper writes:

¹⁹**St. John 17:20.**

²⁰**Romans 10:17.**

²¹**Ephesians 2:8-9.**

The high-priestly office of Christ embraced, in agreement with the Old Testament type (Ex. 30:7-8; Lev. 16:12-13), ... also the offering of intercession for men. ... Christ intercedes (a) for all men, also for the wicked, just as He also bore their sins. Example: Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (*intercessio generalis* [general intercession]). He intercedes (b) as Head of the Church particular for the believers. Example: John 17 (*intercessio specialis* [special intercession]). The purpose of His supplication for the unbelievers is that they may obtain the forgiveness of sins gained for them; He prays for the believers that they may retain the forgiveness of sins gained for them.²²

The Apostle St. Paul, reflecting Christ’s High Priestly prayer writes:

For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.²³

Salvation is easy, as we’ve seen earlier in Lent when we learned again in Christ’s High Priestly prayer that salvation is simply as easy as learning Who God is and What He has done for us in Christ. So trials and difficulties in life arise not from God, but from the world, our own flesh, and the devil. In that case, God is especially the Savior of those that believe, as St. Paul writes, because believers are beset by the assaults and abuses of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Christ, through His High Priestly prayer, prays that the faith created in us by His Almighty Gospel will remain unto life everlasting.

Christians, therefore, of all times, whether good or bad, overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil through the Apostolic Office of God’s Word and Sacraments to gain life eternal. The Apostle St. John writes:

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God

²²*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 382.

²³**I Timothy 4:10.**

day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.²⁴

Why doesn't the Apostle St. John write that the saints overcame the devil by the Blood of the Lamb alone but instead adds "and the word of their testimony"? The "word of their testimony" is the Apostolic Office, those who *witnessed* (hence, testimony) what Christ taught and did²⁵, as we've seen already. So, here we see the effect of Christ's prayer: *Christians overcome the devil and crush his head because of Christ's Prayer that they who came to faith through His Word remain in that same faith and not depart from the Word nor faith.* Jesus prays:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word....²⁶

Luther writes:

We ... might well inscribe this text in letters of pure gold, as one that refers to us in particular. For all that He had said before might still sound as if He had only His apostles in mind, even though He had indicated that it was to extend further when He said, "As you sent Me into the world, so I am sending them into the world" [John 17:18]. Yet so that a fainthearted conscience might not have any occasion to doubt and say, "To be sure, He prayed for the apostles and the Jews (to whom they were sent); but where does that leave me?" ... therefore, He anticipates this question and so names and includes us Gentiles as well and embraces all Christendom until the Last Day in the prayer, ... so that it extends throughout the whole world, wherever the apostles' Word and preaching reaches and is received in faith, no place or person excluded. ... This is our confidence and comfort, treasure and jewel. For us Gentiles there is surely no more comforting passage in Scripture than this one.²⁷

²⁴**Revelation 12:9-11.**

²⁵“And ye are witnesses of these things.” **St. Luke 24:48.**

²⁶**St. John 17:20.**

²⁷*Luther's Works*, Vol. 69, pp. 101, 102.

Christ in His High Priestly prayer prays for the well-being of the Church of all times and in all places when He prays for the success of the “their Word”, i.e. the Gospel, the Apostolic Office of God’s Word and Sacraments.

Conclusion

Because Christ in His High Priestly prayer prays for the success of the Apostolic Office of God’s Word and Sacraments, He also prays for the well-being of the Church, both now that we come to faith through the Word and that we remain in faith through that same Word, and, forever, because that faith in which He preserves us yields for us life everlasting and the resurrection of the body.

Amen.