

## Divine Service Part II

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Last week we looked at what is called the preparation for the Divine Service, this week we will examine what is called the “service of the word.” Christ, the very Word of God made flesh, who spoke everything into being in the beginning, is still the Word speaking things into being – faith, His Body and Blood, forgiveness – speaking now through His called servants. He is the living Word still coming down from heaven.

After the absolution, the forgiveness of sins delivered into your ears, the Service of the Word begins with the Introit. Introit is Latin for entrance. It is during the reading of the introit that the pastor enters the chancel, that space which in the temple would have been called the holy of holies. It was closed off to everybody with a veil, behind which no one could go except the High priest. It now stands open, torn asunder when the Word made flesh died upon the cross. Christ's death destroyed those things that separated us from God, sin and death.

Now the chancel is that precious place where God meets His children. They are invited to come to Him and He blesses them. In response to the introit are halleluias, we rejoice that God's people can approach the throne of God's grace.

We also respond with the words of the Gloria Patri, Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. Of ourselves we may not have the words to express appropriate thankfulness for what we have just received in the Absolution, but God's Word does, and it is with God's Word that we respond.

We are also further emboldened to continue asking God's mercy in the Kyrie, knowing we will receive it. We continue in scriptural thanks and praise in the Gloria in Excelsis – God to God in the highest – it is a confession of what God has done for us in Christ, taking away our sins, and granting us the Holy Spirit that we might believe and confess this great gift of God's mercy.

Following this, the pastor greets the congregation as the one called by God to serve them as His servant, “The Peace of the Lord be with you.” They in turn bless Him – “and with Thy Spirit” – that is, God's Spirit be upon you also.

"Let us pray," is the pastor's invitation to the congregation to join in prayer. While the pastor alone may speak the words of the prayer, we all pray together. The congregation's response of, “Amen,” is their affirmation of the prayer. Amen means, “yes, let it be so.” Whenever the word amen is spoken, whoever says it is saying, “this is also my prayer, Lord God, let it be so.” Where is it appropriate to say amen? Whenever you desire what was spoken, to be done.

Do you want this prayer answered? Amen!

Take eat, this is my body, given for you. Amen!

Take drink, this cup is the new testament in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Amen!

When we say ‘Amen,’ we are claiming that which we are amen-ing as our own.

The Collect of the day is a prayer that collects together the theme of the day in a specific pattern. It has an address to whom it is speaking, a short phrase of rationale for the coming request, then the petition or request itself, based upon that rationale, the benefit or goal toward which the petition is directed, and finally a termination – usually doxological in nature.

At this point, the congregation is to be seated so they might hear God's Word. First the Old Testament lesson is read. The Old Testament has as its central theme, Christ and Him crucified – it always points forward to God's Christ. The Gradual (read responsively) is a passage of Scripture that bridges the Old and New Testaments – often taken from the Psalms. An Epistle lesson is next, and it is usually didactic, that is, instructional, teaching us about our life in Christ, and what Christ has done for us.

Following these two readings, we respond with the triple alleluia. Why triple? We are praising God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – for the work accomplished for us. It is anticipatory to the Gospel lesson.

At the Gospel lesson in the Divine Service, it is customary to rise. This is not liturgical gymnastics, nor is it done so that you do not have a chance to fall asleep. Our position of standing is a posture of reverence. Gospel lessons are accounts from the very life of Christ, and have the pride of the highest place in the readings of the Divine Service.

All three readings are God's Word. All three have places of honor. Some congregations have lay readers, but when they do, they only read the Old Testament and the Epistle lesson. In doing so, there is an unspoken announcement that somehow, those portions of Scripture are of lesser importance than the Gospels. What is the center of all Scripture, Old Testament, Epistles, and Gospels? Christ! Do we dare delineate between them as if some were less important than others? No, of course not, all are God's Word.

Following the Gospel, at least in Divine Service setting three, we confess our faith. The Spirit, at work in the word we have heard, has confirmed that faith within us. We have learned of that faith from the Scriptures which make us wise unto salvation. You will notice that there are two creeds we use most often. We could get into a discussion of why these creeds evolved, but that is why you are invited to Bible Study, for there is the place for more in depth discussions. It is the place of the Nicene Creed to be the more festive, so it is prominent in those services at which we CELEBRATE the Lord's Supper. On the other hand, the Apostles' Creed is the creed of our baptism – our daily Creed – the everyday speaking the faith.

Following the Creed is a hymn that precedes the sermon. It reflects the theme of the day, and teaches more concerning it.

Many are those that see the sermon as the highlight of the service, and indeed it is important, Dr. Luther himself stating that the omission and abuse of preaching as two of three serious abuses that had crept into the church. It is important. I personally say a number of prayers before preaching. I have, for many years, prayed a prayer Luther wrote for before the sermon which asks that God's Word proclaimed in the sermon might change our hearts and be indelibly etched there.

Many believe that the purpose of the sermon is simply to impart wisdom. Many people believe that it has the sole purpose of teaching people how to live more holy and God-pleasing lives. Indeed, we pray that such might happen. But dear friends, if you are simply *more holy* or *more God-pleasing*, then you are still not perfect. You need to be more righteous than the Scribes and Pharisees, you are to be "perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect."

I can tell you what to do, and I can tell you what you should not be doing. You will feel the guilty weight of your sins. Try as you might, you and I are not perfect. Like we said earlier, we are poor, miserable, sinners.

But confessing that truth is where we need to be. Our confession in the Creed set the tone. God graciously created us and sustains us in this body and life, and then He gave His only begotten Son to redeem us – to purchase us back from our sins and death. He also gives us His Holy Spirit who works through Word and Sacraments to build us in the true faith to trust in Christ, not ourselves.

So, the sermon's main goal is to point us not to ourselves, but to Christ. In fact, Jesus gives us the purpose of the sermon. Just before departing from them and ascending into heaven, *Jesus said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you."* (Luke 24:44-49)

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins is the purpose of the sermon, or as we heard a couple weeks ago, Law and Gospel. Sinfulness is exposed so that Christ's work for the forgiveness of sins might be proclaimed. It is all about Christ crucified for you – it is all about forgiveness, about God's wrath against sin being gone, and that you are now a child of heaven – one of God's saints. Amen – let it be so, just as the pastor proclaims.

It is for this reason that God's undershepherd proclaims the vatum upon God's people. It is not a wish, so there is no "may" in it. It is a direct quote from Scripture, it is God's Word and bestows what God proclaims in it, the peace of God which passes all understanding does keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

God's people respond singing the offertory, by the way, an Old Testament passage from Psalm 51. It is saying, "yes Lord, what we have just heard in the sermon, accomplish in us. Remove those sins from our life, and the desire to do them. Make us abide and rest in the peace which has been delivered in the Gospel." And we do this by singing, Create in me a clean heart, O God... Amen. So let it be to us.

We further respond joyfully with the gifts of our offerings – giving back to God from what He has graciously given to us. And in our joy and confidence of God's grace, we raise up our prayers and petitions to Him in the prayer of the Day.

What a gracious gift it is to have God's Christ, the very Word made flesh come to us, speak to us, and bless us in the Word. Amen.