

To Jordan Came the Christ Our Lord

This hymn, which comes from late in Luther's life (1541), is classified by the *Lutheran Book of Worship* as an Epiphany season offering. That is fitting, although it was originally conceived by Luther to support musically the teaching of the Catechism on the sacrament of Baptism. The Baptism of our Lord marks the epiphany or manifestation of the mystery of the Holy Trinity at the inauguration of our Lord's messianic ministry. The Voice from heaven attests Jesus' Sonship and seals this attestation with the anointing of the Spirit in the figure of the dove who in turn drives Jesus into battle with the unholy spirits. In Luther's hymn it is just this coordination of Baptism and the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit which is taken up from the gospel narrative and developed in the patristic tradition. Indeed, what is striking is Luther's grounding in this hymn of the baptismal death of the sinner and resurrection of the believer in the narrative theology of Trinitarian advent.

Notes on the Text: LBW # 79; WA 35: 468; ELW omits this hymn. For the history of the composition and reception of this hymn, see Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) 135-41.

The word spoken by God the Father to Jesus the Beloved Son and sealed with the anointing of the Spirit in the figure of the dove (verse one) becomes the same word spoken to every Christian in sacramental baptism (verse two), as if to say: "You, too, are my beloved son/daughter here united with your brother, Jesus Christ, by sharing in the Spirit His death and resurrection." This mediation of Christ's filial relation to God as Father to the believer's new relation to God is possible because, as verse three shows, Luther's narrative interpretation of the Baptism story connects it with the Transfiguration story to anticipate the Easter vindication of the Crucified One. Jesus is not refuted! He is not defeated! He is risen! So He proves indeed to be God's gracious Word of mercy to all humanity. Therefore, *Hunc audite!* Listen to Him!

It is the Father who reveals the man Jesus as the beloved Son and thus directs our attention to Him by the sending of the Spirit— an *epistemic principle* to which Luther returns in the final verses when he contrasts the perspective of unbelieving reason to the new eyes given in faith. Luther thus holds to what might be called "perspectivalism." As vision is determined by perspective, the knowledge of God is determined by the perspectives of belief and disbelief at the announcement (kerygma) in the name of God: "You, too, are my beloved son/daughter here united with your brother, Jesus Christ, by sharing through the Spirit in His death and resurrection."

All critical thinking distinguishes between reality and appearance. But predominantly in our Western tradition we have done this in Plato's way: behind the flux of sense experience there is a true, intellectual, unchanging reality which is the true object of purified, mental knowledge. Luther breaks with this Platonism, though not with critical thinking. For him, all down to earth perspectives are true so far as they go. Apart from lying, they are true expressions of anyone's particular take on things from their limited finite perspective. As such finite perspectives, however, creatures are tempted to claim more for their vision than it really can or does represent, as if they possessed universal, or scientific, or expert knowledge of the whole. But a perspective on the whole would be God the Creator's perspective, not a creature's. In fact, all human perspectives are finite and partial. Only God knows the whole, which

is still in the making, the Reign that He promises to bring, the Reign that Jesus in His messianic ministry inaugurates, the Reign into which the Spirit brings the baptized.

Unbaptized human reason truly sees the crucified man, rejected, betrayed, abandoned by all and, seeing what it truly sees, says, “This is the end, this is the whole sum of the matter.” But that is only part of the story. It is not the whole of the matter. If faith sees in this same crucified man the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, it is seeing Jesus in what can only be God’s own perspective, as the beloved Son of the Father’s own eternal and boundless compassion, the *prolepsis* (revelation in advance) of the end of history (the Last Judgment, the denouement, the revelation of the whole).

That Christian faith according to Luther sees things in a new and divine perspective is something astonishing. In the interim verses three through five Luther spells out *the new subjectivity* of believers bequeathed by baptismal union with Christ, as if to say: “You too are beloved children, unconditionally objects of God’s eternal favor. As such, you too are anointed with the Spirit to rise up as new subjects in life long battle *against* the unholy powers and battle *for* the healing of the nations. So believers see *the world*, beginning with their own *selves*, in the new perspective of reconciliation in Christ: in spite of sinfulness passionately loved, damaged but being healed, hopelessly ruined yet nevertheless still to be redeemed. Such seeing in the Spirit is not a spectator sport. It grips believers with the divine passion which does not leave them dead in their sins but spurs them on to new lives of resistance to the way things are.

A corresponding warning is issued in verse six. It is a warning against despising baptismal grace and persisting in Adam’s old subjectivity: “Their striving saves them never, their pious acts do not avail.” Every surprisingly with Luther, it is the “religious” person, the one who persists in striving and working to merit grace, who is revealed as the enemy of gift freely given of a new subjectivity in Christ. The gift of grace freely given is not an idea or a doctrine. It is not a principle or an insight. The gift freely given is the new humanity, palpable in the Person at the center of Trinitarian advent, Jesus Christ. This gift takes hold of us in union with Him, in the new subjectivity Luther calls faith. First and foremost, Spirit-given faith knows Jesus Christ aright. As the latter day Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught, Jesus Christ is “the Man for others.” It is His work, expressing His Person, which is truly good and truly gift. Thus one can participate in this good work of Christ alone first of all *only* as a *recipient* of it, dying with Christ to sinful self-seeking and religious self-assertion in order to arise in His Spirit to His new life for others. This reception of union with Christ is what sacramental Baptism is and effects, where and when it pleases God.

Unfortunately, ever since the Reformation the conflict about Baptism has revolved around the alternatives extremes of sacramental rebirth on account of the infusion of infant faith on the one side and on the other the believer’s baptism as her outward testimony to an inner conversion experience. In historical truth, when provoked by the emergence of the latter stance in the offensive practice of re-baptizing adults, Luther affirmed the former – at least as a possibility. He did so because he wanted to preserve the gift-character of the sacrament of Baptism, even though this led him to affirm things that seem psychologically unreal and which in truth became the basis for vast abuse in so-called *Kulturprotestantismus* (“acculturated Protestantism,” see further below). Most “mainline” Protestants in

North America hold some awkward combination of the two views: we baptize infants because of the parents' faith, or we regard baptism as an act of dedication of the infant to God, or as a rite of passage welcoming babies into the world. All these nice thoughts amount to incoherent compromises progressively stripping Baptism of the Christological and Trinitarian content that Luther's hymn so robustly attests.

We ought to have enough of the spirit of Luther left in us to see that all of these latter compromises lend truth to the observations made by critics that historical Lutheranism with its cheap-grace, blank-check practice of baptizing children, no questions asked, has lost its prophetic edge and become a religious sacralization of "this world," not transformative but conformist. Exasperation with this *Kulturprotestantismus*, especially after the failure to reckon deeply with the sins of the Lutheran church during the Nazi era, led Karl Barth late in life to reject infant baptism as the root of compromised Christianity in the modern period. Certainly, "believer-baptism" is no less prone to such abuse, as we North Americans know. In evangelical and free churches, the experience of being "born again" has become as routinized and conformist as infant baptism, producing, as it has through our historical experience, "born-again" slaveholders or segregationists. In *either* case, we are missing something important to which Luther points in connecting Baptism with the advent of the Holy Trinity.

Let me put it this way: it does not matter psychologically or biographically whether one comes to faith before or after sacramental baptism because whatever way (psychologically speaking) we come to faith in the Christian sense, it is always by the Spirit's speaking and giving us to hear truly the very same Word that is dramatically and publically enacted in sacramental Baptism, namely that Jesus with His cross gives us as a gift His own filial relation to God. The choice between infant and believer's baptism turns attention away from this one Word of God which we are to hear, trust and obey in life and in death to some supposedly normative order of religious or psychological experience. But what really matters is that the faith to which one comes is the faith of the *Holy* Spirit, cleaving to the *Son*, directed to the *Father's* reign and glory. What matters is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, to us as to His Father, of which our weak faith is at best but an echo and reflection created by the same Spirit who led faithful Jesus through the cross to the crown for us and for all. Psychologically, people come to Christian faith in all sorts of ways, as many ways as there are people, just as the gospel Word of God is communicated in an infinite variety of ways: not only in the sermon of the Eucharistic gathering, but in reading, in conversation, by experiences of Christian community or vivid examples of sanctified living, giving flesh and blood experience of unanticipated and unmerited mercy, and so on.

All of us, however, need instruction and formation of this faith and that instruction and formation is what sacramental baptism both gives and accomplishes (if and when we do not arbitrarily separate baptism and "confirmation," i.e. chrismation, anointing with oil as a sign of the gift of the Spirit). To get serious about this, however, will mean breaking with the bad (and today outmoded) habits of *Kulturprotestantismus*. It would mean getting used in our post-Christendom situation to adult conversion and thus the need to offer life-long Christian learning in serious catechesis, as in the ancient Church, or in today's Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. Unfortunately, one fears, we are so desperate for dues-paying members that under the guise of "inclusiveness" we "take 'em in, no questions asked," claiming a market niche in grace so cheap you can't give it away. But in his hymn,

Luther puts together what we have torn apart: “Go out to every nation and bring to them the living Word and this my invitation. Let everyone abandon sin and come in true contrition.” Inclusive gospel invitation and a fiery repentance melting and remolding us belong together, when the point of sacramental Baptism is inclusion in the holy Life of the Trinity.

Four-Week Teaching Plan

Week One: Study Mark 1:9-12 and its parallels in Mt. 3:13-17, Lk. 3:21-22, and Jn. 1:29-34. Connect the epiphany of the Trinity with the inauguration of Jesus’ messianic ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit to do battle with the unholy spirits. Ask how Luther puts this Trinitarian advent to music in verses 1-4.

Week Two: Study Romans 6:1-14 and compare with Luther’s explanation of sacramental baptism in the Small Catechism. Explain how for Luther sacramental baptism is the Spirit’s once and for all, yet daily reiterated, enactment of Christ’s death and resurrection in the believer, as in verse 5.

Week Three: Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of infant baptism and believer’s baptism and the specific ecumenical offense of “rebaptism.” Introduce Luther’s defense of infant baptism from the Large Catechism (Kolb & Wengert, pp. 462-4). Ask how verse 6 might apply to us today.

Week Four: Introduce the distinction between the perspective of faith and disbelief according to verses 6 and 7. Explain why “faith” includes (all!) our (variegated!) psychological experience but is more than that as the personal presence and work of the Spirit of Jesus and His Father.

Sermon Outline

A sermon based on “To Jordan Came the Christ our Lord,” could utilize the Gospel reading for that festival day, using Romans 6: 1-14 as the second reading. The sermon could teach Christ’s baptism as the inauguration of His messianic ministry and the revelation of the Trinity in its coming to us (vs. 1-4), the implications of this coming of the Trinity for mission (vs. 5), and the alternative between unbelief and faith that this advent creates (vs. 6-7).

Select Bibliography for Further Study

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