



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Deliver Us for Thine Honour

Isaiah 1:10-20

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It's not easy to know what to think of the events that are taking place around us right now. There's no shortage of people in the media writing about it. And there's even less shortage of people sharing their thoughts—which are often less than thoughtful—on social media. It's unavoidable, but I've been trying to avoid it anyway—and probably not succeeding very well. But what I've found remarkably grounding in the midst of all this is our daily praying of the Litany. Prayer itself is an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, but the Litany in particular, its deprecations and suffrages, are all rooted in and express a firm belief in the *fact* that God is in control no matter what and that, by the mercies of Jesus, we can run to him for help. And it's not just whistling in the dark. The Litany—and other prayers like it—remind us that we are appealing to the God who, for our sake, humbled himself to share our form and to die on the cross. This is the grounding we need in troubled times. That God is sovereign, not as some distant governor of the cosmos, but as the one who knows our suffering, cares deeply about our welfare, and who truly walks beside us. Think about it. We not only have Jesus himself, God Incarnate, sharing our nature, but he's given us his own Spirit. In Greek the Holy Spirit is often referred to as *parakletos*—the helper who comes alongside us.

In the Litany we pray: By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation...By thy Agony and Bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension; and by the Coming of the Holy Ghost, *Good Lord, deliver us.* That litany of the life and

ministry of Jesus—all of it—is the ground on which we appeal to him for deliverance, remembering his loving and merciful grace.

But something really jumped out at me as we were praying the Litany a few nights ago. It's probably because I hit on this point in last week's sermon and because this has been a point that Exodus has reminded us of as we've looked at the Lord's calling of Israel to be his people. What jumped out at me was that prayer in the final suffrages: "O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them." And the response is, "O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thine honour." It calls back to the promises of God. We're heard them, our forefathers in the faith have handed them down to us, and they are now the basis for our appeal to the Lord for deliverance. We don't talk much about honour anymore in our culture, but the idea here is that the Lord brings honour on himself, not only amongst his own people, but before the witnessing people of the world, when he makes good on his promises.

I touched on this last Sunday as we looked at our Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel. Israel had been defeated by Babylon, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed, and the people carried off into exile. There they were, the people to whom the Lord had promised: I will be your God and you will be my people. They lived in the land he had promised them. His presence was manifest in a cloud of glory in the temple. And suddenly everything he'd promised to them had been taken away. What happened? Had the Lord stopped being faithful? Because they knew the Lord, that wasn't a conclusion they could make. They knew he was sovereign. That was a non-negotiable, too. And so the Lord spoke to them through the prophets. They were the people called to bring honour to his name, but they'd failed to do so. And he reminded them that there were two sides to his covenant with them: If his people would honour him, he would bless them. But—and this was the bit they chose to ignore—if his people dishonoured him, he would curse them—he would discipline them,

that the watching nations would know him and know his faithfulness.

Think of it in terms of parents and children. A good father blesses his children when they do what's right. But when a father continues to bless his children when they misbehave, he dishonours himself. People watching chalk him up as a fool and as a bad parent. You don't reward children for doing wrong. No, a good father disciplines his children when they misbehave. And so the Lord disciplined his people, removing them from the land he'd promised and taking away his presence from them.

In our Old Testament lesson today, from Isaiah 1, the Lord addresses Israel again, to explain why they were defeated and exiled. Look at verse 10:

**Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Give ear to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!**

This is way beyond your mother angrily calling you and using your full name. The Lord speaks to Israel, but he addresses his people as Sodom and Gomorrah. They've been *that* bad. They were a holy people, but their life together had become so unholy that the Lord addresses them with the names of the cities he destroyed in the days of Abraham, with names synonymous with idolatry and sin. But what has Israel done? Look at verse 11:

**"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings
of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.**

The Lord is through with Israel's sacrifices. But what happened? These are the sacrifices that the Lord instructed his people to make. Well, the issue isn't the sacrifices themselves. The problem lies in the hearts of the people.

**"When you come to appear before
me,
who has required of you**

**this trampling of my courts?
 Bring no more vain offerings;
 incense is an abomination to me.
 New moon and Sabbath and the
 calling of convocations—
 I cannot endure iniquity and solemn
 assembly.
 Your new moons and your appointed
 feasts
 my soul hates;
 they have become a burden to me;
 I am weary of bearing them.
 When you spread out your hands,
 I will hide my eyes from you;
 even though you make many prayers,
 I will not listen;
 your hands are full of blood.
 Wash yourselves; make yourselves
 clean;
 remove the evil of your deeds from
 before my eyes;
 cease to do evil,
 learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 correct oppression;
 bring justice to the fatherless,
 plead the widow's cause. (Isaiah
 1:12-17)**

The worship of the Lord is a good thing, but it becomes an abomination to the Lord when his people's hearts are impure. Israel paid lip-service to the Lord. They did the easy part of the *torah*. They made their sacrifices—they went through the motions of worship—but they worshiped false gods alongside the Lord, they broke his commandments, they abused orphans and widows. Israel was supposed to be a place where the Lord's rule was on display before the nations. It was to be sort of a microcosm of the world set to rights—or at least a foreshadowing of that future hope. But Israel did just the opposite. Instead of the nations seeing Israel and praising the Lord for what they saw, they mocked both Israel and the Lord. Israel brought dishonour on the name of the Lord.

Brothers and Sisters, are we guilty of the same? A couple of weeks ago, a friend who pastors in Washington, D. C. began writing about how the Church might respond to a government-ordered shutdown. He was ahead of the curve on that one. He knew that in October of

1918, during the Spanish Flu epidemic, the churches of Washington were closed for a month by government order and so he went back to look at what the pastors of a century ago had to say about the situation. He's been sharing with many of us what he's found. One sermon stands out in particular, preached by Francis Grimke, the pastor of Fifteenth Presbyterian Church. Grimke was someone who understood the sovereignty of God. He also understood the goodness, faithfulness, and mercy of God. He said this in a sermon preached in November 1918, on the Sunday the churches were allowed to reopen:

"I...know that large numbers of people have regretted the closing of the churches. I hope that now that they are opened again, that we will all show our appreciation of their value by attending regularly upon their services. It would be a great calamity to any community to be without the public ministration of the sanctuary. There is no single influence in a community that counts for more than the Christian church. It is one of the institutions, particularly, that ought to be strongly supported; that ought to be largely attended, and that ought to have the hearty endorsement and well-wishes of every right thinking man and woman within it. It is a great mistake for anyone to stand aloof from the Christian church. Everybody in the community ought to have a church home, and ought to be found in that church home Sabbath after Sabbath."

Based on what the preachers of Washington were writing and preaching at the time, the end of the Spanish Flu epidemic brought a renewed appreciation for the Church and, especially, for its public gatherings of corporate worship.

What I'm seeing today in our community seems to be the very opposite. Last Sunday I saw a post in a local community group on Facebook in which someone lamented the fact that churches are closed while cannabis

stores are open. The post garnered several hundred comments in just twenty-four hours and they were discouraging to read through. One or two were supportive of the original comment, but the hundreds of others were mostly foul and offensive—and mostly blasphemous—rants against Christianity and the Church. The really troubling thing about many of these "critiques"—if I can call them that—is that there was some truth to them.

Brothers and Sisters, there will always be people who stand opposed to Jesus and his Church no matter what we do. But the mission of the Church is to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord *and to live out our lives in full allegiance to him so that we bring honour to his name*. It's not hard to see that we've been guilty, instead, of too often shaming the name of Jesus. Jesus promised that we would be persecuted for the sake of his name, but we are, I think, more often not persecuted for the sake of his name or for standing up for his word, but mocked because we're hypocrites, mocked because we're jerks, and mocked because of our compromises. We name Jesus, but we do shady business. We name Jesus, but we treat people poorly. We name Jesus, but we trust instead in money and politics. And sometimes the people out there see it better than we do.

Friends, God is not mocked. He will not allow his people to bring dishonour on his name forever. The Church is the means he has chosen to spread the gospel. The Church is the means he has chosen to bring honour to his name. And if we do the opposite, as he did with Israel, he will discipline us to get our attention and to get us back on track. As I said last week, I cannot but think that his warning and chastening hand is at work in the shuttering of churches across North America. It could be worse. What we're experiencing is only temporary, although I think there will be some long-term ramifications. But if we do not heed the Lord's warning, worse could happen to us. And yet, as I look around, I think most of us are trying to carry on, as best we can, as if it's business as usual.

¹ *Some Reflections Growing Out of the Recent Epidemic of Influenza that Afflicted Our City* (1918), p. 9.

I rarely break from the lectionary or a book study to address current events in my preaching, but even I am stunned. I listened to dozens of sermons this past week and almost no one I listened to addresses these issues. Most carried on with whatever they were preaching before. I watched service recordings of pastors that are typically enthusiastic and happy-clappy and they didn't miss a beat, despite performing with their bands to empty churches, just as happy-clappy as ever. It calls to mind Israel in the Second Temple period, after the people returned from their exile in Babylon. They rebuilt Jerusalem and they rebuilt the temple. They carried on with their sacrifices and offerings. But the ark—the Lord's throne—was gone. The holy of holies was empty. But they carried on anyway. The high priest would enter with the blood on the Day of Atonement and sprinkle the blood where the ark had once been. But at least the Jews of those days, as much as they carried on with what their forefathers had done, knew that something was horribly wrong. They grieved the fact that the Lord's presence had left them. And many of them fasted and prayed, longing for the Lord's return.

I'm not, these days, seeing that sort of grieving over the situation we now find ourselves in. I sat in a clergy meeting on Friday and none of this was discussed. Instead, the closure of churches is being treated as a technical hurdle. Pastors and vestries are looking for ways to keep things as much like business as usual as possible. I've had countless articles come my way and their emphasis is pretty much on two things: How do we keep people's attention when they can't come to church and how do we keep their money flowing in. It's not that those things aren't important in their own ways, but no one seems to be asking, "Is the Lord trying to get our attention?"

There's a prayer in the liturgy for the Visitation of the Sick in the Prayer Book that, I think, sums up how we should be approaching these days we're in. It goes like this:

"Hear us, Almighty and most merciful God and Saviour; extend thy accustomed goodness to this thy servant who is grieved with sickness. Sanctify, we beseech thee, this thy fatherly correction to him; that the sense of his weakness may add strength to his faith, and seriousness to his repentance: That, if it shall be thy good pleasure to restore him to his former health, he may lead the residue of his life in thy fear, and to thy glory...through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Grimke closed his sermon with these words:

"It is a good time for those of us who are Christians to examine ourselves to see exactly how it is with us, whether the foundation upon which we are building is a rock foundation—whether our faith is really resting upon Christ, the solid Rock, or not. And I still feel that one important function of this epidemic will be lost if it fails to have that effect upon us, if it does not lead to careful heart-searching on our part."

Brothers and Sisters, we need to search our hearts. We need to ask if we are bringing honour to the name of Jesus, or if because of our sins or half-hearted allegiance to him, we cause his name and that of his Church to be mocked by the world around us. The Lord will not let us go on forever with half-hearted faithfulness.

But Isaiah reminds us that there is good news for the repentant. Look at verses 18-20:

**"Come now, let us reason together,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has
spoken."**

Brothers and Sisters, we live on the other side of the promises of Isaiah. In the Messiah Jesus, the Lord has returned to his people. By the mystery of his holy Incarnation; by his holy Nativity and Circumcision; by his Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation...By his Agony and Bloody Sweat; by his Cross and Passion; by his precious Death and Burial; by his glorious Resurrection and Ascension; and by the Coming of the Holy Ghost he has washed our crimson sins away and made us white as snow. And yet, as the people who have God in our midst, not in a tent, but by the Spirit and in our very selves, it is, I think, an even more grievous thing for us rebel against the Lord than it was for Israel. I pray that we would take seriously our Lord's "fatherly correction". I pray that, knowing the Lord's promises, we would be moved to repentance and that our faith would be strengthened—that we would let go of everything else and give to Jesus our full and whole-hearted allegiance. I pray that with the rest of us live we would devote ourselves to the gospel work of bringing honour to the name of the Lord.

Let us pray:

O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them. O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thine honour. Amen.

² Ibid., p. 11.