

The *Nunc Dimittis* (Song of Simeon) In the Divine Service and Other Practices Surrounding the Lord's Supper

As you think about our order of service, it is important to realize that the parts that make up the Divine Service were not randomly selected and sort of mashed together. Rather, each part serves a deliberate purpose. When the order of service is understood properly, it adds richness to the service that may not at first be apparent. As time and occasion permit, I would like to provide brief comments on parts of our service so that we might all have a better grasp as to the reason why we say and sing the things we do. It is helpful to look up these parts of the service in your hymnal as you consider their significance.

The First Sunday After Christmas includes the words Simeon spoke in the temple when he held the Lord Jesus in his hands; the very same words we sing after we receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord's Supper. This canticle is called the *Nunc Dimittis*, which is Latin for "Now let us depart," (Luke 2:29—32). Why is it that we sing the *Nunc Dimittis* immediately following the distribution of the Lord's body and blood? In the same way that Simeon held the Lord Jesus in his hands, rejoicing in the goodness and loving-kindness of God, so too do we Christians rejoice to receive into our mouths, to eat and drink, at the Lord's Command, his body and blood given in, with, and under bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins.

We rejoice to have this life and salvation in the Lord's Supper, for, as Luther says, **where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation**. We, too, sing the words spoken in the temple 2,000 years ago in order to highlight that this same incarnate Lord held by Simeon is likewise present for us in a most beneficial and saving manner. The Gospel of Luke records that the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon **that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ**. In this way we see that when Simeon says he can now **depart in peace** he ultimately has in mind that he can die in peace. We, too, who have received this same Lord into our mouths, can depart from the altar ready to die in peace, for our sins have been forgiven.

The form of our worship is done with deliberateness in order that the truth of our teaching would likewise be reflected in our order of service and the rest of our practices in the Church. To say more about the practices that surround the Lord's Supper will likewise help us to note the wonderful treasure that we have in this sacrament.

Before we pray the Lord's Prayer and the consecration of the elements with the Words of Institution, we sing the *Sanctus*, Latin for "Holy," (Is. 6:3) and the words of those who gathered on Palm Sunday: **Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest**, (Matt. 21:9) because the Lord Jesus, who is holy, comes to us sinners in the Lord's Supper in such a way as to be given for the benefit of the forgiveness of sins. It is also fitting to sing **Hosanna, Save or Deliver us now**, just before Jesus comes with his gift of the forgiveness of sins given in his body and blood.

It is likewise fitting and, indeed, necessary, to have the Words of Institution spoken at every Lord's Supper in order that we hear in the Words of Institution what we are to seek and receive at the Lord's Table, namely, his very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. These words are often chanted in order to add reverence to this special occasion within the service. The Word "is" is sung in a slower manner to emphasize that this bread and this wine are no longer mere bread and wine, but each respectively is likewise the body and blood of Jesus. Additionally, certain pastors may even choose to kneel between the consecration of the bread and the wine in order to highlight that something special has taken place in the consecration; that what is on the altar is no longer mere bread and wine, but the very body and blood of Jesus.

Additionally, the *Agnus Dei*, Latin for "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) is sung immediately following the consecration of the elements because the very Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, is now given in the bread and the wine to take away or forgive the sin of those who commune.

Additionally, each communicant hears the words "The body of Christ, given for *you*; The blood of Christ, shed for *you*," for the reason that while the Gospel is a universal proclamation, the body and blood of Christ distributed to an individual is for them and their benefit alone. The individual hears of and receives the forgiveness of sins given especially for that person even as the communicant next to them hears of and receives the forgiveness of sins given especially for that individual.

While the true treasure of the Lord's Supper is found in these words **Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins** and the command **Take eat; Take drink**, the other elements of the service, or particular practices of a pastor, seek to draw our attention and uplift the wonderful gift given in the Sacrament of the Altar.