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Homiletics

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INTRODUCTION

The sermon that takes the liturgy seriously gives concerned attention to the Propers for the day. There is always double significance in the historic Propers for the worshiper. For one thing, it is important to note and to comprehend what it is that the Lord is saying in the Word that reaches us in the Scriptural verses. For another thing, it is vital to understand and to undertake the things that we as worshipers are to be saying to God and to one another as we utilize the words of the Propers. The liturgical movement and the revival of interest in Biblical studies have done much to improve our involvement in the values of these historic Propers.

There are other elements in every service that serve as do the Propers—the sermon itself is a “proper” for the day; and the hymns selected for the Sunday’s service are a particular sequence of “propers.” A church body which has used a specific hymnal for a generation and is in the process of developing a new worship book is in a fortunate position to consider its use of hymns in its worship. If the selection of hymns has been made consistently on the basis of what the congregation “knows” or “likes,” it may soon find itself discarding books that have been only half-used—worn out, perhaps, as far as the binding and half its pages are concerned, but unsung (and probably unwept) as far as half its hymns are concerned. On another level of worship, it may be true that the hymns which have been used and reused have not really been *sung*, not meaningfully, not worshipfully, over the last 10 years. Their very familiarity has made it possible for the congregation to make a loud noise but with little consciousness of the “to the Lord” direction of their singing, and with little awareness of the hymn’s message to themselves or to one another.

This issue of the **CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY** presents two examples of material the pastor might employ for utilizing the sermon as a burnisher of the hymn

Propers in the service. For the celebration of the Holy Communion, of course, such a sermon would be designed to serve a broader purpose than simply to elaborate on the meaning of a hymn or to freshen its message. All the concerns of the liturgical sermon would deepen its application and focus its material on a goal for life or for faith. In other services, however, the sermon which brings out the message of a hymn would be totally helpful in itself, and the development of the content of a number of hymns would result in a beneficial series of sermons. Prof. Alfred von Rohr Sauer’s material might be used with benefit in many pulpits in this year’s Cantate week.

As a church body concerns itself with the selection of new hymns for a new book it will become aware of areas that need new words for corporate prayer and praise. The deepening awareness of the church’s involvement in social problems, of its integral relationship with all of God’s creation, and of its responsibility as God’s mission to the world will result in both the demand for and the composing of new hymns. When parishes are helped to become aware of the possibilities for such new songs for a new age, their worship consciousness is bound to be increased. They will begin to sing the hymns they do have with a new awareness of content and style. A sense of expectation will begin to develop that can only bring about a better use of the new hymnal when it makes its appearance. There is always the danger in the use of experimental forms that the taste of the average worshiper is encouraged in its demands for what it likes. This danger will probably materialize as a reality only when the taste of the clergyman permits the less-than-good materials to be employed in the services. But the possibility of mistakes does not cancel out the many values that will result as pastor and people together experiment carefully and reverently with new forms, new modes, new materials, new hymns with which the Most Holy can be worshiped and the people of God built up in faith and mutual

love. As the Commission on Worship makes new musical and liturgical materials available, there should be a churchwide stimulation of the corporate worship life of the congregations. There will be additional value in the common experimentation with materials suggested for common use in the whole church. The very awareness of the widespread use of the materials will result in a new sensitivity to the unity we share with one another.

As a sample of how the sermon can assist in such experimentation and such worship development, this issue includes a description of a service arranged for Cantate Sunday in Immanuel Lutheran Church of Amherst, Mass. It is not only an illustration of how hymn and sermon can together become significant Propers in a given service; it is equally helpful as an illustration of how in new forms the sermon may divide itself up among the other Propers instead of being held together in one 20-minute spot. Since the accents here are on the utilization of the hymn for its message and for its use as a channel of worship and since the illustration serves to show how the sermon can divide itself and remain effective as a proclamation of the Word, this report is given in the first-person description of Rev. Richard E. Koenig, who developed and conducted the service. The description should be helpful for those who have the Word to proclaim to a particular people in particular circumstances somewhere in the week of Cantate Sunday 1968.

GEORGE W. HOYER

"THE NEW SONG"

My description of this service and sermon will not convey the effect the participation of the congregation created. I reduced the verbal statements to a minimum and let the hymns create their own effect. This proved a powerful and effective method for focusing on the particular problem the sermonic words outlined. Both as an illustration of the dilemma the church faces in relating justification to the secular problems of humanity and as a technique for exposing other questions

and commenting on them, I believe this technique proves effective.

The Sunday was Cantate Sunday. The sermon topic was "The New Song," but I used the day to highlight a theological issue which threatens to tear the church apart. I began by quoting Johannes Hoekendijk to the effect that we ought not sing in church since singing makes the service disjunctive with everyday life. I disagreed with Hoekendijk, but pointed out that many people are questioning not that we sing but *what we sing* in church.

I then proceeded to have the congregation exposed to two sets of hymns. I asked the choir to sing "Rock of Ages" while the congregation read the words. Next, I had a soloist sing "Just as I Am." Then I had the congregation join in the singing of "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." I concluded this section by pointing out the Biblical and explicitly Gospel-centered character of these beloved hymns.

Following the great hymns of the evangelical tradition, I had the choir introduce the second set, with "We Shall Overcome." This was followed by a soloist accompanying herself on a guitar singing "Blowin' in the Wind." The congregation followed with a new hymn by Elizabeth Patton Moss, "From Hearts Around the World, O Lord," stressing peace. We sang it to the tune "Wo Gott zum Haus." I pointed out that these hymns were great hymns of humanity, righteousness, the struggle for justice and peace, and, in that sense, just as Biblical as the first set.

I made the statement that together the two sets make a great hymnal, for "faith without works is dead." The purpose of justification is the creation of the new creature whose faith works by love.

The problem I pointed out develops when the accents of these two sets of hymns are not held together. The second set is not found in any Lutheran hymnal, of course. But the fact of concern is that one has to look hard to find good hymns of social con-

cern anywhere in the Lutheran hymnals now in use. This reveals an obvious blind spot. On the other hand, secularist Christians are singing the second set as if the first did not exist. Their Gospel has become entirely the second table of the Law. I argued that this was a disaster because the Gospel reduced to social concerns alone becomes a new law which will break our hearts as surely as the Law did for St. Paul and Luther. The tragedy of our century is that we can envision righteousness but cannot perform it. Hence, the two sets of hymns must be held together.

A full-faced viewing of the whole Christ will prevent us from dividing that which ought to be one. The Servant of the Lord serves in order to reconcile men to God *and* man to man. When we take the Gospel whole and Christ whole, we will not divide what belongs together.

Amherst, Mass. RICHARD KOENIG

NEHEMIAH 9:6

HYMN No. 39

PRAISE TO THE LORD!

Hymn 39, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty," is a good example of the freedom with which the authors of our best Christian hymnody approached the Biblical text that formed the background for their hymns. The 17th-century poet Joachim Neander based his familiar hymn of worship and praise on Neh. 9:6. It cannot be questioned that this verse has a doxological accent, but its context suggests more of a penitential tone. Moreover, the literary category to which Nehemiah 9 belongs is that of a creed, or confession of faith. Among the great creeds, or confessions, of the Old Testament this chapter is the last in point of time. But it is also the first creed to mention specifically two significant themes of the Old Testament's history of salvation, the creation of the universe and the covenant at Mount Sinai.

When did such a creed with first-time references to Creation and Sinai come into being? Adam Welch called this chapter "a litany written for the worship of Northern Israel on the occasion of a day of fasting, confession and prayer" not long after the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. If this is correct, then the Chronicler who prepared his history of Israel about 350 B.C. inserted the older credal summary of Nehemiah 9 at the end of his work. Stylistically, however, this creed reminds one very much of the literary technique of the Book of Deuteronomy. So it is quite difficult to fix a date for the preparation of the creed.

What this creed shares, however, with other earlier creeds of the Old Testament is the summary of Yahweh's great redemptive acts on behalf of His people. The five major themes which the people of God sang about in their ancient worship rites are all included here in succession: the Patriarchal Period, the Deliverance of the Exodus, the Wilderness Wanderings, the Covenant at Sinai, the Promised Land. The review of these five motifs is prefaced by the praises of God the Creator and is followed by references to the people's apostasy and hope. The creed of Nehemiah 9 is applicable to any period when the people of God are in distress. It is especially applicable to our own time when vast segments of our American population are still constrained to lament, "We are slaves this day in the land that Thou gavest to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves."

To return to hymn 39, the hymn writer Joachim Neander did not feel bound to adhere to the sequence of salvation history as outlined in Nehemiah 9. He used verse 6 as his text, to be sure, but then he followed his own plan in extolling the great Lord of creation and preservation. In each of the five verses of his hymn he drew on a number of psalms or prophetic texts to give breadth and depth to his work. For the almighty kingship

of God in verses 1 and 2 he turned to enthronement psalms like 97 and 99, which stress divine lordship and sovereignty. In calling upon his soul to join the throngs of other worshipers he took his cue from Ps. 103:1. The summons to psalter, harp, and music to sound forth is based on the psalm of the many musical instruments, 150.

In verse 2 the beneficent reign of the Lord is described in terms of one of the most beautiful covenant passages of Exodus (19:4) in which Yahweh says: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself." The Lord keeps His own as they want to be kept, namely, dwelling in His own secret place and abiding under His protective shadow—the image is Psalm 91:1. Stanza 3 focuses attention on the physical well-being of the individual child of God, making direct allusion to the well-known verse of Ps. 139:14 "I will praise Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Gratitude for good health in the same verse calls to mind the Healer of all our diseases in Ps. 103:3. The "what need or grief" echoes the "de profundis" lament of Ps. 130, and the shielding wings of His mercy are the protective pinions of Ps. 91:4.

In verse 4 the poet comes right down into the hustle and bustle of our ordinary work-

day and sings the praises of Him who establishes the work of our hands upon us, yea, of Him who establishes the work of our hands (Ps. 90:17). The streams of His mercy from heaven take us back to the prophetic word in Is. 45:8: "Drop down, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness." As we ponder the love with which the Almighty befriends us, we are really saying with the author of Ps. 8:3-4, "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and stars, which Thou hast established, what is man, that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?"

In the fifth and final stanza Neander comes back to Ps. 103:1: "Let all that is within me bless His holy name!" But on the basis of Psalm 150 he extends his summons to "all that hath life and breath" to join in the doxology. The English translation loses two significant accents of the German original: He is your light! Do not forget! which draws on Ps. 27:1, and the "Lest we forget" motif of Ps. 103:2. Still Catherine Winkworth's English paraphrase provides a fitting note for closing the hymn: "Let the Amen Sound from His people again." Thus the congregation is called upon to voice its approval and to join the individual in concluding his hymn of praise.

A. V. R. SAUER