

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

The Lord promises to hear your prayers. “Ask, and you shall receive” He says. Consider the miracle – the God who made heaven and earth, the God who gives all creatures their daily bread, the God who has the heavens as His footstool, desires to hear you. He wants you to pray. He wants you to pray to Him.

Prayer properly understood is worship. It acknowledges the God to whom you pray as being able to hear your prayer. It is to ask God believing that you will receive, and then it is to thank God for hearing and giving. That is worship in the true sense. And it is pleasing to God.

Just as importantly, it means that you believe that the God to whom you pray is powerful, able hear your prayer, able to grant your prayer, able to control the events of your life and of the life of the world. So the act of praying is also a confession. It is a confession that you believe in God. If you did not believe in God, prayer would be pointless.

To pray is a confession that you believe that God hears prayer, but more personally it is a confession that God hears your prayer. Prayer is the natural response of faith to the love of God. He loves you, you pray to Him. And in mercy, in His great love for you, that is exactly what your Lord promises.

On this day, on this joyous day when we gather once in the presence of God, as we enter anew this glorious place God gave to our fathers in the faith, as we enter once again into the holy space where God has promised to be present, as we come together anew to receive God’s Gifts as His chosen people, the simple fact that we are together here before Zion’s altar is proof that God hears prayer.

We have endured our own little Babylonian captivity. We have understood in part what exile means. We have been convicted by the Apostle’s Words “Let us not... forsake the assembling of ourselves together”, and yet we have endured that conviction out of love for our neighbor, out of our striving to keep the Fifth Commandment, and in an effort to honor our fathers in the civil realm.

We have gone without, we have denied ourselves, hoping to protect ourselves and others. And in our time of separation, we prayed. We prayed that God would be merciful, that He would protect us. We prayed for the edict of our return, the dictates of secular authorities unconcerned with the souls of those they govern. Just as in the sixth century B.C., so also now: God has heard our prayers. Thanks be to God, it has pleased the Lord of the Church that we are returned to gather in His Name where He has promised to be.

God has promised “Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.” Although this Nave has been empty for seven weeks, nonetheless He was near you unceasingly, faithful to His promise. He was near you that you call upon Him. He was with you always, as He has promised to be. He was near you by the indwelling of His Spirit. And by His Spirit He led you to pray, and the answer to your prayers is before you this day – according to His will you will soon kneel at this altar and receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Thanks be to God!

Both the Prophet and the Apostle have a warning for all those who would pray to the only True God. The Prophet warns “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts...” The Apostle warns “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”, and “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless.” God has never promised to hear the prayers of an unbeliever. Sin clouds the heart and the soul. Sin separates you from God.

The wicked way leads the sinner far from God’s Way. The unrighteous man thinks unrighteous thoughts, which bloom into unrighteous acts. Such acts are against the clear Word of God. To hear the Word of God and to sin is not truly to hear the Word of God. It is to deceive yourself, as the Apostle teaches. It makes your religion worthless.

For the religion that leads to sin is not the religion of the One True God. So consider yourself. Consider your thoughts and your acts. And do as the Prophet bids every sinner: “... let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” For the Ways of God are not like the ways of fallen men. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

According to His Divine Way, the Way of Love, the manifestation of His holy thoughts was to come forth from God the Father, to take on Flesh, to suffer Himself to be blasphemed, falsely accused, arrested, and crucified. His Ways are not like our ways. He gave Himself for you. He died for the forgiveness of all your sins.

He left that dark tomb empty, victorious over sin and death. That is how He had mercy on you, by serving your sentence, by suffering your punishment, by conquering the greatest of your enemies, that you might return to Him. For by the Blood of Christ, you are abundantly pardoned.

It is the same Christ that promises “the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God. I came forth from the Father and have come into the world.” That is the sum and substance of faith. In His great mercy, God grants you the same faith through the washing of regeneration. By that faith the love you have received is the love you extend to others. That includes self-quarantining to help others remain healthy.

That love is not the work of fallen men. It is the work of God through His redeemed. God gives you His Spirit, the Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies you, the Spirit that leads you to pray “Our Father, who art in heaven...” You call upon Him in prayer, asking Him as your loving Father.

In the Upper Room, before His arrest, the Lord taught His disciples “I leave the world and go to the Father.” He would show His great love for them by going away. He would show His great love for them and for you, by submitting to crucifixion. And His boundless love and its uncontainable power is manifest in His glorious resurrection on that first bright Easter morn.

He did ascend into heaven, and is seated at the Right Hand of God the Father. But the risen and ascended Christ is still with you always, as He has promised. He is with you as His salvific, life-

giving Blood is streamed into you. He is with you as His precious Body is placed into you. He answers your prayers.

In Christ, His Name is hallowed among you. His Kingdom comes among you when He gives you His Holy Spirit. His good and gracious will is done indeed without your prayers, but in love it is done among you also. He provides for you. He forgives you. He strengthens you to forgive others. And He leads you not into temptation, but in His Way of Salvation. He delivers you from evil as He grants you faith now, and at the last.

And He bids you pray in His Name, which is the prayer of you who bear His Name, that Thrice-Holy Name scribed upon you in your baptism. He invites you to pray in His Name, which is to pray according to His will, which is always best for your salvation.

He bids you pray more, pray again, rejoice alway, pray without ceasing, giving thanks in everything, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Hear, then, the Words of your Lord: "Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."

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