

Ps 30:1,7
 Ps 57:1,2
 Ps 37:1,2,3
 Ps 62:3,4
 Ps 73:8,9
 Galatians 5:1-15
 Psalm 62
 LD 11.30

Yarrow, January 10, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Last Sunday, with Q & A 29, I drew out for you that Jesus' saving work does not benefit us only for the life to come; instead, His work touches the very here and now of our daily existence. That's because the problems of this life are a result of our fall into sin; death and all that leads to death—including sickness and accident, adversity and tribulation—are God's response to our sin in Paradise and sins of today. Jesus, though, has taken away "the cause of our eternal hunger and misery, which is sin." So there is no curse of God left for God's own in the grind of this life; God is instead my caring Father who leads me in wisdom from where I am to where He wants me to be—and that road along which He in wisdom leads me can include discipline from God intended to make me grow in Him. This is the gospel that touches the here and now of daily existence: Jesus is my Saviour *today*.

The second Question & Answer of our Lord's Day seeks now to flesh out the significance of that gospel. The Catechism asks: "Do those who seek their salvation and well-being from saints, in themselves, or anywhere else also believe in the only Saviour Jesus?" We can fill in the blank: do those who seek a sense of well-being in alcohol in fact believe in the only Saviour Jesus? Are those Christians who seek their happiness in money or holidays acting consistently with their confession that Jesus is their Saviour? If I need alcohol in order to have a sense of well-being, if I need a spouse in order to be happy, if I need material comforts in order to feel content, do I then in effect believe in the only Saviour Jesus? Those are the questions of this part of our Lord's Day.

The answer of our Lord's Day is a breath-taking No. The Lord has told us in His Word, and so we confess it in our Lord's Day, that Jesus is a *complete* Saviour, and so those who seek salvation, well-being, happiness via any means other than Jesus alone "in fact deny the only Saviour."

I preach to you the gospel of the only Saviour as source of well-being in daily life. I summarise the sermon with this theme:

JESUS ALONE PROVIDES HAPPINESS FOR THIS LIFE AND THE LIFE TO COME

1. The historical background to this confession.
2. The challenge for today in this confession.

1. The Historical Background

May a person who confesses that Jesus is Saviour seek a sense of well-being in alcohol, in money, in sex, etc, etc? To give the question some colour, to focus the question, I think it worthwhile to look for a moment at the historical background to Question & Answer 30. Why did Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus include this Question & Answer in the Catechism they wrote for the Elector of the Palatinate? As we draw out the answer to that question, please

remember that the Elector wanted a Catechism in order to instruct and comfort the common people of his kingdom – people like you and me.

These little people had been taught through the generations that God was a vengeful judge, hating and punishing sin. So –the Roman Church had taught these people– something had to be done if you wished to escape God’s punishments, *both in this life and in the life to come*. What had to be done? Simple, said the church to the people of the land: in order to appease this just and vengeful God, you must *do good works*. By doing good works you could stay on God’s good side, keep God happy with you, and so keep the way open for divine blessings both in this life and in the life to come. The people were taught: that Jesus is Saviour is fine and dandy, but if you want happiness in this life and in the life to come, if you want God’s favour to shine upon you, you must keep God happy through your works.... So you had to say your prayers so many times a day, and you had to go to mass so many times per week, and you could buy an indulgence from the local indulgence merchant, and through means of activities as these your conscience would be relieved of its burdens, you’d know God was happy with you, and you could receive a sense of well-being and of His blessings in this life....

But we know what happened. Try though they might to keep oneself in God’s favour through works, the common people did not come to the point where they felt happy and content, felt God’s hand of blessing upon them.... Here was a slavery, here was an oppressive exercise in futility; by good works one could not achieve a sense of happiness, a sense that holy God was pleased with you.

By the grace of God, the Reformation swept through Europe. Persons and families for years enslaved to the notion that a sense of well-being, a sense of God’s pleasure depended on themselves, were set free from this slavery with the glorious gospel of Q & A 29: Jesus is Saviour, Jesus Christ has taken our sins away and so satisfied the justice of God! So there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

This, now, is the gospel the Elector of the Palatinate wanted his people to hear and to know and to believe – so that they might have comfort, might have a sense of well-being and peace in the struggles of daily living. And that’s what the Elector got; Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus wrote Q & A 29 in the Catechism the Elector asked them to write.

But see: the two men, and the Elector with them, were not satisfied with that. They added also Q & A 30. Why? Because the matter of how one receives a sense of well-being in this life had to be spelt out in more detail. These little people of the Palatinate had been fed the leaven of Roman Catholicism for years and generations, and so the gospel confessed in Q & A 29 had to be more precisely focused on the specific habits of the people. It was in them still –they’d been raised with it– to seek God’s favour by appealing to saints for help, by sweating at good works, etc. But if Jesus the Saviour delivered from sin and its consequences, what concrete implications does that gospel have for asking a saint for a share of his extra good works? Was there still room for that thought? In practice, the people thought Yes. Hence the question: do those believe in the only Saviour Jesus who seek a sense of well-being from the good works you borrow from saints? Do those believe in the only Saviour Jesus who seek God’s favour through buying some indulgences?

The people of the Palatinate received a clear NO in answer to that question. The Lord's Day is insistent: anyone who seeks his temporal or eternal well-being through the good works of himself or another, or through the buying of indulgences or some other such gimmick, *does not really believe that Jesus alone saves from sins and the consequences of sin*. That is simple Scripture. Paul faults the Galatian saints –they believe in Jesus Christ– for thinking that they need to do a particular set of works in order to gain God’s favour (in Galatians 5 it’s being circumcised), and he says to

them, “you have fallen from grace” (5:4). Yes, it’s that simple: the implication of confessing the wealth of Q & A 29 is that I do *not* seek to make God happy with me through any action on my part, I do *not* seek to obtain a sense of well-being, of divine approval, through anything I do. If I somehow do not find in Jesus all that is necessary for my salvation –both for the life to come as well as for this life– then I in fact deny the only Saviour Jesus. Then I remain stuck in my sins, I live still under the load of God’s wrath on sin, and so face not heaven but hell. That’s what Paul says; “you have fallen from grace.”

Q & A 30, then, was a *call* to the people of the Palatinate to *make sure* that they looked for salvation and well-being not to saints or themselves or anywhere else, but that they looked for God’s favour only through Jesus’ blood. *This Q & A is a call to self-examination:* I say that I believe in Jesus; am I then in fact also consistent, banking on Jesus *alone*, seeking my daily well-being and my eternal salvation with no one else, nothing else?

With that bit of history in mind, we move on now to our second point: the challenge for today.

2. Today’s Challenge

In the time the Catechism was written, the people took God’s presence seriously; they knew God was real, was everywhere present all the time. They also saw a connection between the struggles of this life and the God of heaven and earth; they knew from Scripture that God was responding to the things they were doing. So, in the face of their sins, they set out to appease this God, make Him happy with them through good works, and so obtain His blessing for their daily lives – a sense of well-being.

Our times are different. Society teaches us to think of God as absent from the nitty-gritty of this life. That’s our society, and so we too are conditioned to divorce religion from daily struggles. So when we have a problem, be it with marriage or work or health or the tax department, what do we do? In typical, 21st century, western mentality, we cast about for ways and means how *we* can solve the problem. The habit of our day has grown onto us: we look within *this* life to find ways and means to solve the problems of this life. So: your marriage doesn’t glow? Seek a counsellor in town. You can’t make your payments? Tell your tale of woe to some Government agent. You’re distressed because you see no purpose in life, don’t like yourself and your lot, can’t handle the crisis you’re in? Find a drink, a drug, a girl – it’ll give relief, drown your anxieties.... That’s how our society seeks salvation and relief from troubles today, seeks a sense of well-being.... And we in the church are learning to do the same.... In the congregation are brothers and sisters convinced that the way to a sense of happiness and well-being is to have a nicer car, or to have one up over a brother, or to win the heart of that particular girl, or to find the right doctor to work healing. Like the people of the Palatinate, it’s in us to seek our sense of happiness and well-being from some thing we can do....

Since that’s the case, congregation, it is imperative for us to realise that God is not far from this life; always and in every moment we are confronted with God. The God who controls all things has His hand so much in all that happens that it’s not ultimately with the unpleasant neighbour that we have to do, or with the pressures of sickness or loneliness; in every trial we face in this life it is first of all dealing with *God!* Always is He *here*; never are we outside of His nearness. Ps 139: “if I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me...” (vss 8ff).

That is why, congregation, it is so foolish, in the face of the trials that be, to fail to consider *Him*. To bank on own strength to solve the problem, to turn to a government support agent to help

us handle the problem, to drown the problem under a flood of alcohol: all have this one fundamental error in common, and that is that salvation from the pressures of the problem is sought *in the wrong place*. Sickness, struggles, strife: it all comes from *sin*, is God's response to sin, and that's why in the midst of sickness and struggles and strife it is to *God* that we must turn; we're dealing with *His* hand of pressure.

That is also why the first thing the Christian must do in the face of trials is to go to God in prayer. It is with God that we have to do, it is He Who sends this trial on our path, and that is why we must ask God for *His* answer to the problem He set before us. And God's answer, brothers and sisters, is invariably this: 'I gave My Son to take your sin away. Now, My child, will you believe, in the face of the trial I put on your path, that there is still no condemnation for you? It's My promise to you in the covenant signified and sealed to you in holy baptism; will you *now* believe that you are safe in My fatherly hands, will you trust that *I* will carry you, that *I* provide relief? OR will you today, in the heat of your trial, decline to believe My covenant promises to you, decline to entrust yourself to Me, and instead seek relief from the pressures through devices of your own making?

You see, congregation, every affliction is a test from God, a test as to whether we seek our help in the name of the Lord, yes or no. That is: every trial confronts me with the question whether I believe that Jesus in fact is Saviour, whether I believe that the Son of God in fact paid for my sins so that there is no condemnation for me, believe that even in the pressures of this life God is my Father for Jesus' sake and so I'm totally safe with Him. That's the question that God lays before me every time I think I have evidence that God is angry with me: do I in fact believe that the crisis I'm in is the work of my loving Father prompting me to greater growth in Him? Do I believe that my Father has the answers for my question in His Word, and the only way to well-being and relief in my trial is to seek *His* answers? OR do I think in terms of God being detached from my circumstance (He doesn't really involve Himself with the nitty-gritty of daily life), think in terms of *me* needing to find my own answers to my problems? Each affliction is a test: do I pursue happiness and well-being by leaning on my own capacities, leaning on the capacity of my lawyer, on the liberality of support agencies, on the strength of my mind, my money, my mouth, my muscles? That's the question: do those who seek relief from life's troubles from government or their own abilities or the bottle believe in the only Saviour Jesus?

The Lord's answer, brothers and sisters, is categorical. It is with God that we have to do, every moment of our existence. So it is to God that we need to turn, time and time again, for relief, for help, for well-being. Every time we fail to do that we in effect deny our own confession, deny that Jesus in fact is Saviour, is so complete a Saviour that "those who by true faith accept this Saviour must find in Him *all* that is necessary for their salvation." It just will not do to think that Jesus gives salvation for the life to come, while the bottle gives a sense of well-being today. It just will not do to think that Jesus reconciles to God, and meanwhile depend on your clever mind or smooth tongue or good connections to obtain relief from the problems God sends in this life. It is with God that we have to do, no matter the circumstance, and so always, always it's to Him that we need to turn – and then seek His favour through the saving work of Jesus Christ. And then, with our hand in His, walk the way He has specified in His Word – and trust that He will ensure that not a hair falls from our heads unless it serve for our good. That trust – Jesus has reconciled me to God and so I'm safe in His gracious hands – prompts the very sense of well-being and peace that the Elector of the Palatinate wanted for the people of his realm.

This does *not* mean that there is in this life no place for seeking help from support groups or doctors or counsellors. Help from those around us is a gift of God's grace. But I trust, congregation, that you recognise that there is an *order* in things. Neither support groups or counsellors or lawyers or any such thing can provide relief from my trials, for it is first with God that I have to do; my trials

come from Him. And to have a good relation with God: that's a question of whether my sins are forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ. As long as God remains angry with me, I can throw all the money and resources and beer of the world at my problem, but I shall not get out from under God's anger. And as long as His curse remains on account of my sins, my problem shall ultimately not go away; as I solve a problem in one area of life, His curse shall express itself somewhere else. It is only when I am reconciled to God through the sacrifice of *Jesus* that the *curse* is gone from the problems I face. And that reconciliation through *Jesus'* work produces a sense of peace, well-being, salvation – for there is *today* no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

And then, once that forgiveness is there with its resulting peace, then, congregation, I'm also able to *accept* what the Lord in wisdom has put on my path. For when I know Jesus as my Saviour, then I know God as my Father, yes, then I see a loving Father at work in my life, a Father who gives me what He in wisdom determines I need. So I don't despair at my trials, and I don't strike out in desperation to solve the problem this way or that way. Instead, there's a *peace* from God that settles, that comforts; I know I'm safe in Father's gracious hands. That peace, that contentment: that's the sense of *well-being* described in the Lord's Day.

And when that peace is there, a peace rooted in the work of Jesus Christ, then, congregation, *then* we may count on the blessing of the Lord as we seek to make use of the opportunities that God places on our path to solve the needs we have. Prayerfully, in keeping with the instructions of God's Word, we then may make use of our minds, our money, our mouths to overcome the troubles we face, may use resources in the church, in the community, etc. But, we understand, using these resources is then no longer a matter of seeking to *obtain* well-being; we *have* well-being, peace in our hearts *in the midst of* our troubles, a state of "no condemnation" because of the work of Jesus the Saviour. And because we have that well-being, we may work with the opportunities the Lord places on our path, opportunities to improve our lot in life.

This, dear congregation, is the thrust of David's words in Psalm 62. The urge of the whole psalm is to lean on God, and God alone, in the trials of life. Fill in how you will what David's trial was; the psalm is so vague that any suggested difficulty will suffice. But David's answer is always the same: "My soul, wait silently for God alone, For my expectation is from Him." Politicians, lawyers, business men: on the scales they are lighter than vapour. Oppression, robbery, riches: they're any empty hope. Relief, peace, well-being, salvation: *it comes from God alone*. So:

"O people, trust this God of grace,
Pour out your heart before His face
And hope at all times for His favour."

The people of the Palatinate long ago had this gospel set before them in the words of our Lord's Day, to their comfort and well-being. The saints of Yarrow confess the same today – to our comfort and well-being.