

The Third Commandment — Worship. (The Kyrie)

Text: Exo 20:8

Suggested Hymns:

185, 506, 504, 320, 457

1) Our Inadequacy To Cope With Life

2) The existence of a personal God

3) The willingness of God to help us

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Exodus 20:8, ^s ***Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The person who wants to feel at home in the liturgy of the Western church must know a few Latin words and at least one Greek term.

The term “*Kyrie eleison*” is Greek, and both the phrase and the usage come to us from the Eastern church, in which Greek to this day is the official language. The term “*Kyrie eleison*” means Lord have mercy upon us.

In that section of the church liturgy, in early times, there was said, somewhere near the beginning of the Mass, a litany in which the Lord was prayed to for all sorts and conditions of people.

The clergyman would read phrases in which certain classes of people were mentioned, and after each phrase the people would respond with a *Kyrie*, hence: For the peace and welfare of the world: *Kyrie eleison*. For the holy Christian church: *Kyrie eleison*. For the bishops and priests: *Kyrie eleison*. For the sick: *Kyrie eleison*. For those who are travelling: *Kyrie eleison*. For young children: *Kyrie eleison*. For those who have gone astray: *Kyrie eleison*, etc.

This ancient usage is mentioned because some people mistakenly suppose that the *Kyrie* as we have it today in our liturgy for the Holy Communion service is a confession of sins. It is nothing of the kind, as may be seen at once from its use at Matins, at Vespers, and in the Suffrages.¹

At the Communion service the confession of sins is made at the beginning, and the absolution pronounced. After this there is no further confession; but there are

repeated pleas for the continued favour of God to all persons in every circumstance of life.

The first of these is the *Kyrie*. It is the remnant of the ancient deacon's litany of the Eastern church. After the introduction of the service by the Introit, the *Kyrie* is the first prayer we utter. "*Lord, have mercy upon us and upon all people. Give us whatever we need, wherever our path may lead.*"

This prayer, like all prayers, is based on three assumptions: (1) Our inadequacy to cope with life; (2) the existence of a personal God; and (3) the willingness of God to help us. Let us consider each of these in turn. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Our Inadequacy To Cope With Life

There are few things more evident to anyone now alive than the first of the assumptions, that is, that we are unable to deal successfully with the situations that confront us one after another with tireless persistence. The truth of this is written on the face of history.

Just look back at the two world wars and the many since then and even before then. In times of peace we think that the world is ours, to do with it as we wish. But all too often peace is short lived and mankind fails time and time again to avert conflicts. Just look at the Old Testament.

Wars today occur despite the best brains in the world trying to do what they can to prevent them. Even with the best will in the world, to understand the intricate problems involved in conflicts and to formulate some solution conflicts are rarely averted. The result of all wars is that the effects will be felt for generations.

Today the problems of the world are enormous. What do justice and wisdom demand should be done? Well, there is certainly no lack of proposals. Politicians, economists, philosophers, journalists, and professors of political science all have suggestions to make. The man on the street adds a few of his own.

Most of this is well and good, but there is one thing we should not fail to do. All of us from our leaders down to the everyday citizen, remembering the mess we have made of things in the past and seeing the enormity and complexity of our present problems, should realise that our little minds and puny souls are inadequate to deal with it victoriously.

This means that all of us, every day, with persistence and increasing volume, should cry out, "*Kyrie, eleison. Lord, have mercy upon us!*"

2. The Existence Of A Personal God

Such a cry presupposes, in the second place, a belief in a personal God. The *Kyrie* is always threefold (one petition to the Father, one to the Son, and one to the Holy Spirit), or it maybe ninefold (three petitions to each Person of the Trinity).

It is this faith in the Holy Trinity that gives validity to our plea for help. We Christians are apt to take this for granted, so familiar have the many Trinitarian expressions in our liturgy been to us.

But consider for a moment the plight of a man who has no faith in the God to whom we pray. Thomas Huxley, for example, once bluntly said, "*I cannot see one shadow or tittle of evidence that the great unknown underlying the phenomena of the universe stands to us in the relation of a Father — loves us and cares for us as Christianity asserts.*"

And, indeed, the facts of nature and of history are powerful arguments to support the thesis that there is nothing beyond cold, mathematical logic and uncompromising cause and effect. They suppose that there is no God above it all with a merciful heart and a listening ear.

Those who think the most, think they know this best. The universe which science has discovered is a vast machine. Its wheels turn relentlessly and remorselessly. The winds are pitiless and the stars are cold. Not only is nature indifferent to our cries ... she shrieks against the Christian Creed. History shrieks even louder than nature.

The earth has been soaked again and again with blood. Pyramids have been built of human skulls. Empires have risen only to sink in smoke and agony. Races have flourished for a season and then vanished into oblivion.

When a person looks at the vast expanse of human history and sees the tombs of empires and races at his feet, and the vast slaughter-house of history, it is not easy to say with a voice that does not falter, "*I believe in God the Father Almighty.*"

It is not easy for people to believe in the God of their fathers, which no doubt is the reason why so many no longer do so.

Yet the Christian hope persists; indeed, it becomes stronger as the soil in which it lives becomes more barren. It has always been so; there have been other times in which faith was difficult, and in those times the ring of it always grew triumphant.

St. Paul said that ***“that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.”***² This is certainly not a rosy picture of the universe. St. Paul continued,²³ ***Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.***

But this redemption will surely take place, ***the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.***³

Meanwhile¹⁶ ***The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,***¹⁷ ***and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.***⁴

Therefore we cry, *“Kyrie eleison! Lord have mercy.”* Our lives are stamped with the cross; but we have the promise of the crown. This is our faith — faith in God who is our Father because we are the brothers and sisters of His Son and have received His Spirit into our souls. Without this we are of all creatures most miserable. With it we overcome the world.

3. The Willingness Of God To Help Us

This brings us to the third assumption underlying the *Kyrie*: that God is merciful.

This has already been implied; but it ought to be heavily underlined that our great reason for thinking, that there is an ear open to our prayers, and a heart eager to respond is Christ. First and always, Jesus Christ.

Let us cling to the fact of Christ, in these times with so many evils around us, remembering ***that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.***⁵

There is nothing else big enough to stand against the faithless despair to which everything drives us. But that is big enough; a historical fact, a living Person - Jesus Christ, a consummated redemptive action which nothing and nobody can overthrow.

Many things can obscure it if we will let them, but God can and will overrule these inclinations to doubt if we put our wills in line with His. For He is a gracious God, who wants to have us all to be saved. From that intention of His, made manifest in Christ, we draw the assurance that we shall be heard when we cry, "*Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy upon us.*"

Perhaps you have been wondering what all this has to do with the Third Commandment. It has this to do with it: the one institution on earth that stands for the truths of human inadequacy and divine grace is the Christian church, and whoever subscribes to these truths will inevitably be found in that church.

If a person is in the institution, he will be in the building, saying with his fellow worshipers the *Kyrie*, "*Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.*" The reason why so many people no longer go to church is that they are not impelled to do so by a sense of acknowledged failure and of the need for God's mercy.

And the reason for this is that, in spite of the ghastly mess we have made of things, people continue to believe in their own ability to handle their own affairs properly.

The truths which the church preaches are not palatable to human vanity. It is much more comforting to be told that the collective goodness and wisdom of man, given sufficient time, will establish an order of peace and happiness. It is more comforting, but it is not true.

St. John put his finger on the matter when he wrote to the church at Laodicea, as we read in Revelation 3:17, ¹⁷ "***Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' -- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.***" One wonders to what depths of deprivation mankind will have to be reduced before it learns the lessons of helplessness and dependence.

Your presence here every Lord's day testifies to your acknowledgment of your need of a merciful God. Nor is this acknowledgment something which you make grudgingly, for you know that the loving-kindness of the Lord is great toward us. You have seen beyond your own incompetence to the utter adequacy of Jesus Christ.

That surely does not make your *Kyries* painful to utter. You speak them out of a firm confidence that help is available and that it is the kind of help which we may have in the Saviour of all people.

In short, you know the truth, and the truth makes you free — free of the haunting suspicion that, no matter what you do, you are doomed to unending failure. There is no final failure to those who are in Christ Jesus. When we turn to Him for mercy, when we let Him teach us and help us, we can do all things well. ***“This is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith.”***⁶

To the extent that you believe these things will you keep the Third Commandment. For the Lord’s day is the weekly reminder of God, of our need of Him and of His readiness to supply our need. In the church His grace is given through the old but by no means worn-out means of Word and sacrament.

If you feel that you need this, you are here; if you are like the Laodiceans — complacent and self-sufficient — you will be busy with other occupations, distractions or lazily resting in bed. Rest assured that divine truth will not accommodate itself to your vanity. It will continue to say to you that you stand in the need of God’s mercy, and whether you accept it or not, will continue to be true.

Sunday, as you know, was chosen by the early church as the Christian holy day because it is the day of Christ’s resurrection. No more significant choice could have been made. We are by nature a defeated people, the victims of our own folly, pride, greed, and lust. The human race is constantly destroying itself. What refreshment it is, then, to believe that there is One who could not be destroyed, whose name is Jesus, who as the champion of the whole race met our enemies and overcame them! What a radiant thing it is to be alive in Christ, members of His living body and partakers of His victory!

There is no need for anyone to live a defeated life. Every person should be alive in God through Jesus Christ, our Lord, looking forward to the time when He shall have put all enemies under His feet and reign unopposed as King of kings and Lord of lords. This is what Christianity does for a man. It puts a new song in his mouth, a joyful song of praise to Him.

Scripture says in Colossians 3:1-4, ***“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. ³ For you died, and***

your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

Seek them every Sunday. Seek them every day. Seek them in season and out of season. You need all the help you can get. And you will get all you need if you continually cry the *Kyrie*, “*Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.*” Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Hymnbook - Matins p33, Vespers p 43, Suffrages p 91-94

² Romans 8:22

³ Romans 8:18

⁴ Romans 8:16-17

⁵ John 3:17

⁶ 1 John 5:4