

In the name of our Mighty Savior, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we began this series of Lenten devotions on the evening hymns I mentioned that one of the reasons I chose this theme is that so many of them, as lovely and inspiring as they are, are virtually unknown to us because we simply don't have many evening services and thus few opportunities to sing them. Maybe that's what should change, I don't know. There is something wonderfully different about the services we hold when it's dark outside compared to those on Sunday morning. They have a contemplative quality to them; a slower, more peaceful feel. If you're a veteran of our evening services you know what I mean. The Compline service we use is especially nice. It's a favorite of mine and I know it is for some of you as well. I wish more people would take advantage of these opportunities and discover what they're missing. I've even thought of holding evening services at other times of the year – but shorter, without a sermon; just a couple hymns, a psalm, a short reading or two, and a few prayers. Fifteen to twenty minutes max. I wonder if anyone would think it was worth the drive over to the church and back. Something to think about ...

But anyway, last week we began with a hymn that is fairly familiar: *Now the Light Has Gone Away*, which we saw was nothing more than a child's bedtime prayer set to music. Though quite brief and uncomplicated, it nevertheless says what needs to be said by a faithful child of God to our Heavenly Father at the close of the day.

Tonight we have for our consideration a far meatier hymn that's unfortunately less familiar – at least it is to us. As you can see from the information on the bottom of the page, it's a very old hymn. We know for sure Christians have been singing since the 7th century and probably for some time before that. It's believed to be an expansion of even older hymn called the *Phos Hilaron*, that is, "the *Joyous Light*"; a version of which appears in our Service of Evening Prayer on page 244. I'll ask you to turn over there for a quick look. This one dates from the end of the second century. Let's speak it together. As we do, listen for how this short hymn is sort of the backbone of the hymn we're looking at this evening. "Joyous Light of Glory: of the immortal Father; heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ. We have come to the setting of the sun, and we look to the evening light. We sing to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: You are worthy of being praised with pure voices forever. O Son of God, O Giver of life; the universe proclaims your glory."

Like I said, around the sixth or seventh century, someone (we don't know who) took this then well known liturgical piece and expanded it to nine stanzas – in Latin, naturally. Later translators reworked it in English and chopped it down to the five verses we have in our hymnal.

You probably noticed the hymn's unusual meter (11-11-11-5). The timing takes some getting used to also. Overall though, together with the melody, it has a feel that is at once restful and majestic. But I wonder if anyone picked up on something else that makes it rather strange for a hymn. Did anyone notice something odd or care to hazard a guess? [The answer is the lyrics don't rhyme – but nobody ever seems to notice because the words are so good.]

All right, getting into the hymn itself, this one makes it clear from the very start: it's a hymn of praise to the Lord Jesus. If I had a complaint about the majority of evening hymns, it would be this: they tend to be rather generic. They say things about God and creation and day and night and what not; but they don't specifically mention Jesus. Not this one. In the first line Jesus is identified as the Christ, the Savior of our fallen race, the Light of the world, and the mighty God who created heaven and earth. It presents Jesus as the one who separated the

light and the dark on the first day of creation, naming the light day and the darkness night. And it recognizes him as the creator of the stars that illumine and adorn the night sky like billions of precious gemstones. The first two articles of the Creed are right here: Creation and Redemption. And Jesus is given full credit for both, which is why it's fitting that we address a hymn of praise and thanks to him.

The second verse begins with our time setting: we've come to the end of the day. The sun is going down – which is described as a mirror image of the sunrise which will surely come in the morning. That, in turn, is called the pledge of resurrection. What it means is this: that night always ends and the darkness must flee at the rising of the sun is God's promise programmed into creation that the long night of death will one day end as well, and our bodies sleeping in the dust of the earth will rise again to new and eternal life. Just as sure as day follows night, so also there will be a resurrection, when, as the prophet Malachi foretold speaking of Jesus' return on the Last Day: "Then the Sun of righteousness will arise bringing healing on his wings."

It's worth noting here also that the movement from darkness to light is a consistent biblical theme. At the beginning of creation, the earth is in the dark. But then God speaks, revealing himself through his Word, and brings it into the light. And then as the days of creation are described, it always goes, "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day", and so on. The darkness always comes before the light, which is why the ancient Hebrews reckoned sunset as the beginning of the day. By their method of determining time, it's Thursday now and will be until sunset tomorrow (Thursday *night* comes before Thurs-*day*: darkness *then* light). God's revelation of his plan of salvation in history comes the same way. Think of the Old Testament period as the night when Christ was only seen in types, shadows, and prophecies; but then in the New Testament we get the full disclosure. Now we walk in the light of Christ. On an even grander scale, we can see the present age as the night of sin and death as we wait for the dawning of the eternal day and the full glory of Christ to be revealed. Then as we read in Revelation, the city of God will need no sun to shine on it, for God himself will be their light, and the Lamb shall be their lamp.

But retuning to our hymn, and the second part of the second verse, now that the sun has set the stars are appearing. They are described as more than ornaments; now they are choirs, which suggests that they are singing. It reminds us of how the psalmist wrote, "The heavens declare glory of God and the sky proclaims his handiwork". And how when speaking to Job the Lord asked him, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth ... when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Again in the psalm we recited earlier (Ps 148), the sun, moon, and stars are called upon to praise the Lord. The idea is that all the various components of creation praise God precisely by doing what they were designed by him to do. Nothing does it quite as beautifully, though, as the night sky. And if you've ever been someplace without any artificial light around, when you can really marvel at the overwhelming splendor of stars in their vast array, you know what I mean. They truly do sing God's praise even if we can't hear the song.

This leads us into the third verse. The notion is this: because this song of the stars is now bursting forth upon us, we too join them and the rest of creation in praising Jesus. We're praising him for all that he has done, and done so well: our creation, our redemption, and our ongoing sanctification. Not specifically stated, but perhaps implied, is that we too worship Jesus most when we do what we were created for – namely to love and serve our neighbors. Yes, our hymns of praise are good and right; but our real worship takes place in our various vocations, when we do the work the Lord has given us to do to in the service of others. That is our true worship of the Lord.

The fourth verse of our hymn is a prayer directed to Jesus that we ask him to hear and answer. First, we ask for the forgiveness of sins committed this day, recognizing that we can only do so in view of the atonement Jesus made for us upon the cross. That's what we next ask him to strengthen our weak hearts with: pure and steadfast faith that holds firmly to his word of pardon. And having settled the most important concerns of our spirits, we ask for rest and soothing comfort for our bodies as well, worn out as they are from the day's labor.

And then finally, in the fifth verse, having turned all of our cares over to the Lord, the hymn ends with a statement of faith. "Though bodies slumber, hearts shall keep their vigil" – the idea is that even when we're not awake, our trust in Christ remains alert. We don't lose our faith while sleeping. It's a gift of God that keeps our hearts in touch with him while our minds and bodies rest. And what this faith is keeping us in is the peace of Jesus – the one who said, "Come to me you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." It's the peace he gives that passes all understanding; the peace that comes of trusting that he's taken care of everything for us and that he will continue to love, protect, and care for us forever. So no matter what may happen to us in this age, he remains for us the Light in the darkness, and he will surely bring us to the light of the endless day. There we will ever give him our praise. And thus the hymn ends as it began: a song of worship to our Mighty Savior. There's no better way to end a day, and no better way to come to the end of our earthly lives. Thanks be to Jesus. To him be all honor and glory forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!