

Evensong: *The Day Thou Gavest* (LSB #883)

 5th Lent Midweek

In the name of him who died that we might live with him both while awake and sleeping, dear friends in Christ: In this series of devotions on the evening hymns, thus far we've looked at four: two that were quite familiar, and two others that weren't as well known to us. But all of them have carried many of the same themes; like divine protection during the vulnerable hours of night, how Christ is our light in the darkness, forgiveness for sins done during the day, requests for peaceful sleep, and how the daily cycle of lying down to sleep and rising again is a picture of death and resurrection. The hymn before us tonight comes from a different mold entirely. It has almost none of those themes, and picks up another that makes it fairly unique.

As you can see from the notes at the bottom at the bottom of the page, it was written by John Ellerton. He was a pastor in England in the 19th century. He wrote quite a number of hymns, the vast majority of which were specifically for children. Ellerton believed that one of the best ways to teach the faith was to set it to music and have the children sing it. And even though he wasn't a Lutheran, that's a very Lutheran idea.

This hymn, like several others we've looked at, is cast in the form of a prayer directed to the Lord; but it's different in that this prayer has no petitions. It doesn't really ask the Lord for anything. It only gives him thanks and praise for what he has done and continues to do – and then goes on to describe in detail what that is. So, in a sense, it's more proclamation than it is prayer. By singing it, we're reminding ourselves of what God is doing that we ought to be thankful for. Now, to tell the truth, I normally hate it when someone uses the pretext of prayer to preach, like when someone is asked to pray before a meeting of a government body and uses the occasion to beg the Lord's forgiveness for all the evil and ungodly decisions the elected officials who make up that body have made. That person isn't really praying to God. He's using the platform of prayer as a pulpit to tell the officials how messed up they are. That's just wrong. But in the case of tonight's hymn, prayer as proclamation works.

And to fully appreciate what's being said in this hymn, it's helpful to consider what was going on in the world when it was written, which was during the second half of the 19th century. It was the time when the British Empire was at its peak. Britannia ruled the waves and British colonies spanned the globe. They were everywhere: Hong Kong, Burma, India, Australia and New Zealand in the east; Palestine and Suez in the Mideast; South Africa and Gibraltar; and in the New World Canada and several islands in the Caribbean like Jamaica and Barbados. Then the people of England and the British Isles said with great pride that "The sun never sets on the British Empire". The poet Rudyard Kipling said it this way: "Take hold of the wings of the morning, and flop 'round the earth 'til you're dead; but you'll not get away from the tune that they play to that bloomin' ol' rag over head." The idea was that at any given moment someplace on earth the Union Jack was being raised to a rousing chorus of *God Save the King*.

What Ellerton did was to take that idea and apply it to a far greater and more expansive kingdom: the Church of Jesus Christ. In this hymn he describes how the sun never sets on the Church. When the sun is going down here, it's rising on other members of Christ's kingdom – so that the Church really is in constant 24 hour operation. The prayers and praises of God's people rise continuously to his throne of grace from at least some corner of the globe. And that really is the major thrust of the whole hymn, so I'm not going to take it apart line by line like I have some of the others we've looked at. Instead, I'd like to just highlight a few phrases here and there to coax out some of the richness of the ideas being expressed.

Take the first line: “The day Thou gavest, Lord, is ended”; simple enough, but it reminds us that each *day* we have is an undeserved gift of God. He *gives* them to us. And they are precious commodities that we usually take for granted. We thank the Lord for the good he does for us each day, but rarely do we think to praise him for the day itself. In this life we are allotted only so many of them, so it’s right that we recognize them for the treasures they are and use them in God pleasing ways. It’s also a blessing to us that each day comes to an end. We need the time for rest and recovery – to back off the hectic pace of our lives. And I don’t know about you, but as I’ve gotten older I find myself more frequently thinking when the end of the day comes ‘round, “I’m glad *that’s* over.” When “darkness falls at the Lord’s behest”, I’m usually ready to welcome it.

The second part of the first verse speaks of the daily pattern of prayer: “To Thee our morning hymns ascended, Thy praise shall sanctify our rest.” It emphasizes how each day should begin and end with a time of prayer and praise. This was the Lord’s instruction to his people Israel. Each day at first light and at sunset a priest would enter the Holy Place in the temple and offer up prayers before the Lord at the altar of incense. The people were encouraged to pray also at this time, adding their prayers to that of the priest who prayed on behalf of all. It’s a practice that Christians today do well to continue. Jesus, our great high priest, never stops making intercession for us. It’s good that we follow his lead.

In the second verse we note how the Church unsleeping is ever keeping watch. Several thoughts emerge here. First is vigilance. That we must keep watch reminds us that we’re in a war. Like soldiers on duty, somebody has to keep a look out for the enemy while others rest. And we know Satan’s game. He is constantly trying to deceive us, tempt us to sin, or destroy us by causing our faith to fail. When and where he can he uses brute force and persecution to destroy God’s people. The world is full of dangers. So it’s fitting that we rely on the promise that God hears and answers the prayers of his people, and that we use prayer to keep ourselves and our brothers and sisters in faith throughout the world safe. That speaks of our duty. While we are sleeping, others are praying for us. It means we owe it to them to pray for them when we’re on watch. You may have noticed that tune of this hymn is in the style of a lullaby; but we are not to be lulled by it into inactivity.

The mention in verse three of “each continent and island” and how the dawn leads them into light each day suggests a subtle mission theme that permeates the hymn. It’s not only the light of the sun that reaches the far flung corners of the earth, but also the light of Christ. In fact, when this hymn was written there was a frenzy of mission activity going on in the world, and not just by the British. Part of what was driving it was a popular notion about something Jesus said. He said, “The Gospel must be preached in all the world, and then the end will come.” Some people took that to mean that as soon as message of the Gospel arrived at the last place on earth where it had never been heard, Jesus would return in that instant. So they pushed mission work not so much to save the souls of the lost, but to hasten the day of Christ’s coming. Yes, it was foolish and wrongheaded thinking – and really kind of selfish. The truth is that Jesus wants to make Christians of every race and language, and bring them to maturity by incorporating them fully into the life of his Church and by nourishing them there. The goal of missions is not to see how many can be reached with an abbreviated Gospel half an inch deep; but to save as many as possible and bring them to the fullness of life in Christ.

Along this same line, the daily rotation of the earth that ensures light and dark comes to each point reminds us that the Church is a moving target. Places like Europe were once almost entirely Christian, bright with the light of Christ; but now the sun has pretty much set on them. Very few faithful remain. Meanwhile in Africa, which was once rightly called the Dark Continent, it’s the dawn of a new day. The Christian faith is spreading rapidly there. You may be surprised

to hear that in Kenya alone there are more confessional Lutherans than in all of the United States. We can only hope that they'll keep praying for us since the sun seems to be well past its zenith here.

But the kingdom of God, the Church, is not confined by geography or national boundaries. It exists wherever the Word of God is being rightly proclaimed and the Sacraments are being performed in accordance with Christ's instruction, for there the Holy Spirit is calling people by the Gospel, enlightening them with his gifts, sanctifying and keeping them in the one true faith. *Where* that happens may change; but *that* it happens will never change, for Jesus himself promised that the Church will exist on earth until the time of his return, and that not even the gates of hell can prevail against it.

And this is the powerful and hopeful theme of the last verse: the kingdom of God founded upon his holy word remains, while the proud kingdoms of men rise and crumble into dust. I doubt that many British citizens who lived at the time of Thomas Ellerton recognized how prophetic this verse was for them. Today there is no British Empire. And on what little is left of it the sun very definitely sets. The balance of world power has shifted. If there is anything like a global empire today, it's largely in the hands of the United States – has been since the end of the Second World War; but this too will pass. And I think we're seeing clear signs of it already. But no need to fear: for we are citizens of the kingdom that is guaranteed to endure and flourish until the very end when Christ our Lord returns in glory. Then, as the hymn assures us, every knee shall bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!