

What the Lord Needs

In the name of Him who came to save his people from their sins, dear friends in Christ: As I'm sure you're aware, an *oxymoron* is a rhetorical figure formed by the pairing of contradictory or incongruous terms. And there are many familiar oxymorons that we use in our speech every day. A good example is "Numb Feeling". Another that's sadly become popular in our time is "Same Sex Marriage". But consider the following more humorous examples: "Genuine Imitation Leather", "Gourmet Pizza", "Temporary Tax Increase", "Comfortable Underwear", "Pet Cat", "Extra Money", "French Resistance", "Non-stop Flight" (think about it), and what have to be two of my favorites, "State Worker" and "Short Sermon". Some time back I read in a consumer reports magazine that a certain SUV was determined to be "Crash Friendly". Honestly, would you really want to drive a vehicle that was friendly to crashes? In any case, my point is that we use oxymorons all the time. You might even combine several in a single sentence to say something like, "We used "Paper China" and "Plastic Silverware" at the church "Pot Luck" (and yes, there were three oxymorons in that sentence).

The reason I bring this up is that today's Gospel reading contains what seems to be an oxymoron. It occurs twice in the passage. It happens when Jesus tells his disciples to go into the village and loose a donkey colt and bring it back to him. "If anyone asks why you're untying the colt", Jesus tells them, "say that the Lord has need of it". Then, later, as they are untying the colt, its owners ask what's going on. The disciples reply, "The Lord has need of it." "The Lord needs": think about that. The Creator and King of the whole universe, who called the galaxies and everything in them into existence, needs something that belongs to one of the creatures he made. Specifically, he needs to borrow a lowly donkey to ride for a half hour or so. Does that make sense? "The Lord needs?"

Imagine stepping out of your house some morning and finding someone you don't know attempting to start your car: "Hey! What are you doing?" "Don't worry", the person sitting behind the wheel replies, "It's okay. The Lord needs it." I'm guessing that you wouldn't find that to be a very satisfactory answer. "What do you mean the Lord *needs* it? I tell you what; if he does need it – which I rather doubt since he can whip up anything he wants out of thin air – he can come tell me personally. I'd be more than happy to let him have it. But for the time being, step away from the car. But don't go anywhere. The police will be here in a few minutes." No, none of us is going to accept "the Lord needs it" as an excuse. But in a wider sense, how is it possible for God to *need* anything? God is by definition a being who is entirely self-sufficient. He is the source of all things. He's the one we turn to in order to fulfill *our* needs. And a lot of wrong-headed ideas have been spread around the church by people who teach that the Lord *needs* something from you, be it your praise, your worship, your devotion, your time, or your money. God *needs* none of it. But on the other hand, I think we'll all agree that it's doubtful that Jesus would have told his disciples to lie to the owners of the donkey colt – which means that he really did need that particular animal for his entry into Jerusalem. And with that in mind, this morning I'd like to consider what seems to be more than just an oxymoron, it seems to be a theological impossibility: the Lord's *need*.

You may have noticed that I've already hinted at one of the Lord's needs, and that is his need to be truthful. We take it as certain that if Jesus says he has a need, then he does – even if we cannot understand how that could be. Because the Lord must be truthful, we can be sure that whatever he says is true. So if he says something is going to happen, then it needs to – or to say it another way, the Scripture cannot be broken. You recall that when Peter tried to

defend Jesus with his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told him to put his weapon away, telling Peter that he had to be arrested: "How else will the Scripture be fulfilled?" Jesus asked. He is telling Peter, "Don't fight this; it *needs* to happen because God said that it would."

In today's Old Testament lesson, God speaks through the prophet Zechariah describing the events of Palm Sunday, "*See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey...*" There you go: God has spoken. That settles it. Jesus needs to come into Jerusalem on a donkey, so he needs to get one. Now you may be thinking, "Yes, but that's still not a real need. He could still simply zap one up out of nothing and fulfill the prophecy." The truth is that it's not that easy, and I'll explain why in a bit; but first I want you to see that the necessity of keeping his word and fulfilling prophecy does indeed place real needs on the Lord. And that takes us back to the first promise and prophecy the Lord gave us. When our first parents fell into sin, God promised to save them. The Lord knew in advance what he would need to do. And every time he confirmed the covenant he made with his people he was reminding them of what he had already said, "I will do what I need to do to save you; and you can be sure of it, because I cannot lie".

But this need the Lord has to save mankind is more than a need to be truthful; it's a part of his very being. Even if he never spoke a word or made a promise, he would need to save mankind from sin. That's because God is love. That's who and what he is. And love gives. Love gives self-sacrificially. When God created mankind, he already knew what he would need to do to save us from sin. So in the act of creation he already committed himself – that is, he imposed requirements on himself, things he would need to do to rescue us from eternal death. His promises to save us flow from his *need* to save us, not the other way around.

Imagine a couple who has their child kidnapped and held for ransom. I ask you, do they *need* to have their child back? Someone might argue, "Well no, not really; they could get by without the child". In a sense that's true: their personal survival is not dependent on it. But as long as there was a way to get the child back, wouldn't they *need* to do whatever it took? And if that's a need of sinful human parents, then how much more does God our Father need to have his lost children back? A few weeks ago, we again heard the story of the prodigal son. In it, God the Father is portrayed as a man in anguish over the absence of his son. What do you suppose he would have done if he heard that his son was being held prisoner by evil men? And here we're all God's children bound by Satan, tied up and held hostage, as it were. Didn't God *need* to send someone to untie us and bring us to him? Absolutely. Because of who God is, he needed to save his children.

And God had another need. He had the need to save us in a way that would preserve his integrity and justice. He couldn't simply say, "It's bad that you sinned against me, but let's just forget about it." That would be unjust. He had already declared that the payment for sin was death. To change that standard would be dishonest – something God can't be; but beyond that, even if he had not declared it, it would be wrong for him to turn a blind eye to sin. A righteous, holy God could not do that. No, to save us he needed a way that would satisfy the demands of his own Law.

This, as it turns out, led to more needs; because to save us, he had to take our needs onto himself. What do you need? Parents who raised you, food, clothing, shelter. So did Jesus. When our Lord entered his creation and became a man for us, he shared in every need we have. He needed a mother and a father. He needed someone to feed him and take care of him when he was sick. He needed someone to teach him to walk, to strap on his sandals, and to read and write. He needed friends. He needed to work and earn a living. But couldn't he do

miracles? Yes, but as a rule he couldn't use them to satisfy his personal human needs. In order to *die* for us he needed to *live* like the rest of us: dependent for all his needs on his Father in heaven. Jesus only used his miraculous powers to prove his messianic claims and to teach spiritual lessons, and even then only after he had begun his public ministry, after he had already lived more than thirty years with all the needs of everyday life. So as he came to Jerusalem that day, he really couldn't just zap up a donkey. He didn't have to prove his messianic claims. He had already done that. The whole crowd was saying that he was the Messiah. And as far as teaching a spiritual message is concerned, his telling us that he had needs just like the rest of us teaches more of a message than reminding us again that he is the Creator.

No, he needed to tell us that all our needs are his – especially on this day. Because as he entered the city the people began to chant Hosanna, Son of David, Hosanna! *Please save us now!* And that was our greatest need: salvation. We were lacking God, and righteousness, and life. Those were our needs. And so he took those needs on himself. He gave up his perfect union with God the Father, and his righteousness, and his very life so that he could lack the same things we lack, and have the same needs we have. What he needed as he hung on the cross was God's compassion and mercy and love (just like we do). But because he hung there for us, these were the very things he could not have because *we* don't deserve them. He got instead what God's Law said we needed because of our sin: to be cut off, abandoned, and damned. But by so doing, he secured for us what we needed: reconciliation with God, life, and salvation.

You might think that when he rose from the dead he stopped having needs, but that's not the case because even now he continues to share our needs. In Baptism he unites each one of us to his own body. And because we are members of his body, the needs we have are his own. This is not just pity or sympathy. When you are hungry, or lonely, or in physical or spiritual pain, so is Christ. He tells us so in Matthew's Gospel where he turns to the saved and says, "I was hungry, sick, naked, alone, in prison, and you answered my needs when you cared for the least of these my brothers." He bears our pains and sorrows. He suffers our needs with us. And because of this, we know that we never will have needs greater than we can bear. When the going gets tough, he shifts the weight his way, and provides the strength we need to endure whatever hardships come our way.

And the Lord has another need: he needs your willing service – not because he can't get things done without you; but because he loves you and wants you to share in his joy: the joy he has when he satisfies the needs of others. The disciples untied and brought to Jesus a donkey colt that had never been ridden. What do suppose would happen if *you* attempted to ride an unbroken donkey through a shouting crowd? How long do think you'd be able to hold on before he threw you off? And yet this donkey peacefully (shall we say gladly?) submits to Jesus and has the honor of bringing him to the people Jesus needs to save. In a similar way, we have been released from our hard bondage to Satan and to our own untrained, stubborn, and rebellious hearts, and now have the opportunity to bring Jesus to people who need him. So we willingly give ourselves over to him, recognizing that since Jesus has taken care of all my needs by taking them on himself, now I need to serve and follow him; not because I'm being forced to, but because he's changed my heart and I want to.

And so he sends us out to the world, to the places we live and work, and he says, "You're going to find people who are tied up – they're tied up with worries, and concerns, and all kinds of needs. They're tied up with their sins and its tragic consequences. They're tied up with all the demands of hectic, modern life. They're tied up with wrong-headed ideas about God that makes them think that he imposes more needs and demands on them, instead of taking those

needs and demands on himself. Release those people. Untie them and bring them to me. And if anyone asks why you're doing that, tell them, 'The Lord has need of them'."

So as we go on our way, we look for those people who are bound, and we find them, just like the Lord has said. And we untie them by telling them about what seems to be an oxymoron: a God who has needs. He has a need to be true to his word, a need to love the people he created, and a need to seek and to save the lost. We untie them by telling them about their Savior who saw their needs and took them upon himself, and who *humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross! Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!