

Victory

Luke 10:17-20

(This address followed a performance of Bach's cantata BWV 44, and was part of a service attended by delegates to the Luther@500 Conference held in Melbourne in the preceding days.)

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The closing verses once more of the Gospel for the day which are verses 17-20 in Luke 10. This is according to an earlier translation:

“Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.” And He said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.”

Lord, sanctify us in the truth. Your word is truth. Amen.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, dear friends,

What a joy it is to be here with you, in a moment like this, which crowns a wonderful week at the Luther@500 [Conference]! Thank you for the invitation.

The test tells us that in Jesus God's victory over evil is finished, *fait accompli*. Its impact, its gravitational waves, however, are ongoing, they reach out and they reach us today!

The 70 whom Jesus sent out could hardly believe their eyes: the sick healed, and the evil spirits taking off at the mention of his name. And now those 70 are back eagerly telling him their surprise. And they're right, it was his name, it was Jesus, bringing health and freedom to people who were sick and possessed, in bondage and in bandages. It was him opening up a new reality. And these 70 disciples were on cloud 9 – as it were. They'd had an inkling of victory coming with those experiences.

But: Look out! To follow him further is danger. His path leads to Golgotha. Our Bach Cantata starts at that end, with hatred and rejection: ‘They will put you under the ban, they will put you under banishment’. Banish you! And ‘... whoever kills you...’ ! And the rest, as they say, is history! Not just ancient history though: not just Stephen, and Polycarp, and Edmund Campion, and many, many others... In the 1960's, Dr Hermann Sasse used to remind his church history students that the first half of the 20th century — the first *half* of the century — produced more Christian martyrs than all of the rest of church history taken together! A reality check that, for this new century too perhaps – decades already shot through with the grossest hatreds and terror, decades laced with unsubtle atheism and mockery, and all kinds of redneckery as well as child abuse (sexual and other), and with domestic violence, and with prenatal infanticide, ongoing, unchecked.

Jesus had warned the disciples, to follow him is to head toward the hill of crucifixion, toward God's notorious city that had already by his time shown real form in dealing with prophets and messengers sent. But we, we need to go with him. Cost what it may, we need to. Each of us with our little catalogue of vices and selfishness; ours, ours is the stuff that nailed him to the wood. Our life and existence come up in this reality check pretty quickly.

On the other hand, complacency is all around; it may well be our great danger in this lucky land, too. But ... we are on this stage. The Cantata has us there from the start, and the Choral: 'Ah, God, how much heartache do I encounter at this time' is a collective cry from all of us, all humanity, from below!

How low can you go? Well, we are going up now.

Now to the greater victory! Dear friends, you noticed how quick and brief the recitative [at # 5] that tells of the Deceived Deceiver: the Antichrist, with his deathly delusions about getting back in God's good books! That brevity seems to reflect our Gospel text with Jesus reporting that one cosmic and supercharged moment of victory, that lightning-flash fall-of-falls, Satan, our accuser, 'hurled' out, as Milton says, 'hurled... with hideous ruin and combustion down / To bottomless perdition'.

This God's success, dear friends, it structures and protects our being as believers, our reality, our hope, our joy in the face of every sorrow and storm and dark thing — like the joy of the 70 who told the Master of their bright days doing others good in his name. Because of Christ, God's victory goes not to the violent, but to the victim. Christ is victory for the victim. Thus the Lamb that was slain has redeemed us to God.

And now *die Freudensonne*, the laughing sun already shining! Have you ever heard anything more beautiful than that Aria at # 6? The wow-factor alone! Lucky people that we are to hear it. In Leipzig they might have heard this music once, if they were lucky. We can hear it again and again, each time the message of God's protective warm love enfolds the soul more dearly, more nearly, more tenderly. After every trial or storm, here is comfort.

Evil has not given up, though! Satan, the accuser, puts himself up as God's own marshal and law-and-order-enforcer. Crooked cop and corrupt! Whispers flattery, how good we are, how successful; or drives us mad showing up our sins and our stricken consciences. Wants us to try win heaven by shows of piety, orthodoxy, charity, tolerance, charisma, whatever. This tricky accuser loves to hide in the church, and deceive the people of God. But, in Luther's time the Word broke out again, broke through, and the laughing Sun shone out: saved by grace each one, the best and the worst, by Christ's costly work for us, Christ, the righteousness of God, our righteousness. This Word makes us right with God and brings us power to work God's works, to love one another, yes and also indeed to love our enemies.

How do we know this Word has come home to us? We hear we are here today, we received it permanently, life-changingly, in Baptism; and we taste it, we receive Grace in the Banquet of Communion. And with all that our names are inscribed, 'written in heaven'. Forever in God's good books are we. And there's the joy of all Christians, our names linked with the name of Jesus.

What follows for us here on earth?

I'd say, at the danger of sounding naïve or something, we may relax ... a little. With that verse of the great poet [of the Thirty Years' War] Fleming (a hard-to-translate line, really): '*Es gehe wie es gehe*'. 'Let it be as it will'. Your Father in heaven knows you and is striding out to meet you and embrace you, even if you are Mr Prodigal-Son or Ms Mary Magdalene! God's *Freudensonne* laughs. laughs to see you coming — and smiles, and welcomes you home, victorious! God's *Freudensonne lacht*.

And so we're drawn to the joy-lines of Lindemann in our hymnbooks (and there are so many of these sorts of wonderful lines):

'In thee we rest us, Naught can molest us:
World nor death nor evil foe.

We have protection
Neath thy direction,
Thou canst turn aside all woe ...'

And so on! Hallelujah!

Amen.

Peace be with you.