

## **“Into the Presence of the Lord”**

For those of us who love the Morning Prayer Service, the *Venite* on page 9 is a very familiar part—so familiar, in fact, that we may go sailing right through it, without looking at what the words say and what they mean. So today I want to take a careful look with you at this important part of our Prayer Book and of our Morning Prayer Service. If you would open your Prayer Books to page 9, so that you can follow as we go through. And you will see that the title of this, in the English pronunciation, is the *Venite*. Actually, it is a Latin word which, in the Latin, is pronounced *Wenite*. It is the same word that Julius Caesar used when he said, *Weni, wedi, wici*, “I came, I saw, I conquered”. *Advent* contains the same root word, which means “O come”. The *Venite* is a psalm with 9 verses, but it is actually a composite psalm, made up of parts of two psalms. The first 7 verses are the first 7 verses of Psalm 95, and then to it are added the 9<sup>th</sup> verse and the 13<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 96, to make this composite psalm. But we study it as we would study any psalm.

When we study any psalm, we begin by reading the first verse, because the first verse of a psalm states the theme:

“O come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.” That’s the theme, and everything else that follows is a development of that theme. You’ve seen this before, in the familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”, everything else in that psalm follows on that theme: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures”, “He lead-eth me besides still waters”. So when we study a psalm, the first thing we look at is the theme. “O come, let us sing unto the Lord.”

The second thing we look for when we study a psalm is the structure of the psalm, the way it is put together, because the structure of the psalm helps us to understand the meaning of the psalm. And one of the ways we define the structure is by looking at those things in the psalm that are repeated. If you look at the first words of each of these verses, you will see that certain things are repeated throughout the psalm. First of all, the first phrase “O come”, right there at the first line, and then you go a little more than half way down and you see it again, “O come”, and then, right below that, “O worship”. The repetition helps us to define the parts. Also, another word that is used and repeated twice in the first of three sentences, you see that word? It is the word “For”, “F-O-R”. And you notice, each time the word “For” occurs, it comes after one of those “O come” phrases. So this repetition defines the three parts. Three times you get this combination of “O come”, followed by “For”, in the sense of “Because”. “O come, let us sing unto the Lord”, followed by “For the Lord is a great God.” “O come, let us worship”, followed by “For he is the Lord our God”. And “O worship the Lord”, and “For he cometh”. Those three combinations define the three parts of the *Venite*. And you will notice that the first of these three parts is slightly longer than the other two parts put together. That is because the first part is more inclusive; it is more discursive; it takes a little longer; while as you get to second and third

parts and the pressure is building up, it is more intense. Because what we are talking about here,

2

what the *Venite* describes, are the three steps in worship.

“O come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.” “O come, let us ...”, because worship is corporate. How many times have you said, “Won’t you come on to church with me?” Our ushers stand outside with the bulletins, “O come, let us wor-ship together”, for worship is corporate. “Let us heartily rejoice”—it sets the tone, doesn’t it? Worship is rejoicing. Rejoicing in what? “In the strength of our salvation”. What a wonderful phrase that is. Let us rejoice, not in some illusion, not in some vague hope, some good intention. We rejoice in the strength of our salvation. And then it expands on that same theme in the next verse: “Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving; and show ourselves glad in him with psalms.” When you come into this church on Sunday mornings, the Lord wants you to be giving Him thanks. The Lord wants you to be rejoicing, out of your faith in him, because—and now we come to the first “For” clause, “For the Lord is a great God; and a great King above all gods. In his hand are all the corners of the earth, and the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his and he made it; and his hands prepared the dry land.” The first reason we come to worship God is because He is supreme, above all powers. He is the Creator of the entire universe. And that word “strength” in the first verse is picked up again here, “the strength of the hills is his also”. You know, if you have been up in North Carolina, up in the mountains on the Blue Ridge Park-way and you look at those ranges and ranges of mountains in the blue haze, how strong they are! And where did the strength come from? It came from the God of our salvation!

Then we come to the second part: “O come, let us worship and fall down.” The King James translation has it, “Let us worship and bow down”. “And kneel before the Lord our Maker.” Worship involves the whole body. Not just the mind. Not just our thoughts, but our action as well. You know, our Lord, in Holy Communion, says, “This do”. Worship is more than just sitt-ing and being a couch potato and being entertained. As a matter of fact, we aren’t even the audi-ence. God is the audience, in Christian worship; and our service is service to Almighty God. He is the audience before whom we do our service. “O come, let us worship and bow down, and kneel before the Lord our Maker.” The story is told of the old New England sea captain, who was in port on a Sunday and went to what turned out to be an Episcopal Church. He was sort of bewildered by all this standing up and sitting down and kneeling. Later he told a friend, “I couldn’t figure it out, so I just cast anchor and rose and fell with the tide!” But the tide is the tide of our salvation. It is the tide of God’s Spirit lifting us up to Him. “O come, let us worship and bow down and keel before the Lord our Maker.”

The second reason. Earlier we talked about God as the Creator of all the universe. Now, “For he is the Lord our God, and we”—right here—are the people of his pasture.” This is our iden-tity. Without this identity, life becomes empty and futile. We are His people, “the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” Earlier we heard, “In his hand are all the corners of the earth,” and then it says, we are “the sheep of his hand”. Some years ago, up in Southern Mary-land, on the Sunday after Easter, Bishop Scheibler was preaching. The Sunday after Easter is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”, and he was speaking about shepherds and sheep. And as Bishop Scheibler pointed out, when we are referred to as sheep, it is not exactly a compliment. Sheep are among the dumbest animals in the world! In our Prayer Book we say, “All we like sheep have gone astray”. But how do sheep go astray? Dr. George Buttrick, up in New York City, asked that question years ago, and as Dr. Buttrick pointed out, when a sheep is feeding, he never lifts his head. He has his head down to eat, and as he moves from clump of

grass to clump of grass, he keeps his head down, without looking up. And the sheep gets to the end of the day, and he looks around and asks, “Where am I? Where has this day gone? And where is home?”

3

“All we like sheep, have gone astray”, but the Shepherd—the Shepherd—has come looking for us. “We are the people of his pasture”, we are “the sheep of his hand”.

The third part. Up to this time there have been two phrases, “O come”—“O come, let us sing”, “O come, let us worship”. There is no more “O come”, for the simple reason that we are here. Now, “O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let the whole earth stand in awe of him.” If our worship does not open us up to the beauty of God’s holiness, it is not full and complete Christian worship. The beauty of the holiness of God.

And then look at what comes next: “For he cometh.” The *Venite* begins, “Let us come”, “Let us kneel down”, “Let us worship”, but as we come to Him, He comes to us. “For he cometh.” But how does He come? “For he cometh to judge the earth, and with righteousness to judge the world, and the peoples with his truth.” This is a part of our worship. This is a part of our religion that sometimes makes us uncomfortable and sometimes makes us unhappy, that the righteousness of God is always connected to the love of God. The beauty of God’s holiness includes righteousness. We can never get away from the fact that Christian worship involves morality, and just in this exalted moment of our worship—“O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”—right away it turns to “What’s going on in the world? Where is the justice in the world? Where is the compassion in the world?” It looks at the hard facts of human experience. “How are things going in school? How are things going in business? How are things going in the world of politics?” We cannot escape this part of our worship. As Massey Shepard says in his *Prayer Book Commentary*, it is a characteristic of Jewish and Christian worship that it always involves morality. We always have to be looking at this matter of justice.

Even though sometimes we would rather have a religion that didn’t pay attention to these things. You know, the “feel-good religions” both in Biblical times—the religion of Ba’al was a feel-good religion. It ended in a sexual orgy. The religion centered around temple prostitutes, and like so many feel-good religions, it involved child sacrifice. The burial urns that were excavated at Megiddo had the bones of little babies who were sacrificed in a feel-good religion that separated itself from morality.

“For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth.” And He has come, hasn’t he? He has come in judgment. And when our Lord came, His severest judgment was for religious people who forget about morality, who want to have a religion that is separate from what is going on out in the world. A senior warden back in Maryland told me one time, “My wife has been slain in the spirit three times!” Hooray! There is nothing in Scripture about being slain in the spirit, but the Scripture wants to know about is what is going on out in the world? Where are our people suffering, and what are we doing about it? When our Lord came, this is exactly what He was looking at. His severest criticism was for religious people who avoid morality. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew, He says: Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees. You are hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore, yours shall be the greater damnation! Later He said, “Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, [you are] hypocrites!” (Just in case we didn’t get the point the first time.) “For you tithe mint and anise and cummin”—those were herbs and involved very fine points in the Law—you tithe all these little things, but you neglect the weightier matters of “justice and mercy and faith”.

“For he cometh, for he cometh to judge.” And He has judged us, hasn’t He? He has measured all of the iniquity of human life and human history. He has summed up all the evil of the world and measured it. And His measurement of our sin is the first thing we see on coming into

4

this church. For God’s measurement of sin is right there—the Cross—that is how evil man is—that sinful man would murder the Holy God. The first thing we see on coming into this church is the measurement of our sin, but the glorious Good News of the Gospel is that that same Cross is the measure of Christ’s redeeming Love. He sums up all of the total, all of the debt of sin, and with His own blood He stamps, “Paid in Full!” The same Cross that measures our sin, measures His eternal, redeeming Love. John Newton, the great evangelist who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace”, when he was 82, said, “My memory is failing, but two things I remember: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Saviour”. They are both in the Cross, the measure of sin and the measure of love. The righteousness of God is combined with the love of God, and together they are involved in the holiness of God. All combined right there in the Cross.

And this *Venite* leads us to it. “O come, let us sing.” “O come, let us worship.” “O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” For He comes, He comes to us on His Cross.

Back in the 500s, after the fall of the Roman Empire, in the start of the Dark Ages, St. Dominic founded Monte Casino; and he wrote his great monastic Rule that has influenced the development of Western monasticism down to the present time. In his monastic Rule, St. Dominic decreed that the monks would recite all of the psalms every week. This was St. Dominic’s concession to the frailty of human nature. Actually, he preferred to have all the psalms said every day, but he thought this was a little heavy, so he settled for every week. But, he insisted that the *Venite* would be said every day, as the first psalm said at the earliest of the seven daily services.

“O come, let us sing unto the Lord.” “O come, let us bow down and kneel.” “O worship the Lord.” The *Venite* brings us into the presence of the living Lord, who cometh and meets here with us, today, in pardon, in strength, and power, and whosoever receivest Him, whosoever believest on Him, hath His eternal life.

A sermon preached at All Saints Church, Pensacola, Florida, on Sunday, January 24, 1999, by The Rev. Hugh B. Hall, Jr.

