

Proper 29 (November 23, 2014)

Last Sunday in the Church Year

Christ the King Sunday

“The Head That Once Was Crowned with Thorns” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #532)

### “The Joy of All Below”

Already the strains of “Joy to the World” have permeated Walmart, Walgreens, and a wealth of retailers eager to help us expedite our gift buying for those on our lists. (How many shopping days until Christmas?) And as much as we can't wait to be part of the “joyful and triumphant” faithful on Christmas morning, all too often we are too tired, physically and emotionally, to celebrate the great day.

All too often we see the joy of this season merely in wrapping paper and ribbons enveloping packages, in smiles pasted on faces, in season's greetings focused on merry and happy rather than blessed. As much as we have a right to pursue happiness, we find it to be elusive, especially as cancer and other disease invade our lives and those of loved ones, as the fog of Alzheimer's disease perplexes victims and caregivers, as Ebola crosses borders and threatens many, as violence erupts and disrupts our communities, as the loss of a loved one— young and old—haunts our days, and the catalog thickens with our worries and concerns. So where is our joy?

Poet Thomas Kelly (1769—1855) knew about the perplexities of life and the wonders of joy, because his definition of joy begins with a fact: “The Head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now.” The writer to the Hebrews (2:9) remind us that Jesus was “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.” This Jesus came into our world, taking on our flesh and bone, and accomplished His redeeming purpose—our salvation. With His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus broke evil's power, defeated death's dominion, and brought life and immortality to light. That truly is the “Joy of all who dwell above, the Joy of all below.” Little wonder that “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” (Phil. 2:9-11). “The highest place that heav’n affords is His, is His by right.”

With His Ascension to the right hand of God, Christ is the “King of kings and Lord of lords, and heav’n’s eternal Light,” ruling our world with His love for our good. We are the recipients of His manifested love as He grants us to know His name—Jesus (Matthew 1:21, 23: “for He will save His people from their sins” and Immanuel, “which means, God with us”).

The God with Us is a reality for all Christians as “they suffer with their Lord below.” They will “reign with Him above,” because “their profit and their joy to know [are] the mystery of His love.” To us and all fellow Christians, “the cross, with all its shame, with all its grace, is giv’n.” In our Baptism we have been given “an everlasting name”—the name of our Lord who purchased us with His life-blood. That is not only our joy, but all “the joy of heaven.”

Because he was barred from preaching the Gospel, Kelly knew firsthand what can happen to those who confess and proclaim Christ Jesus and His death, resurrection, and ascension for our salvation. Yet “the cross [Christ] bore is life and health, though shame and death to Him: His people’s hope, His people’s wealth, their everlasting theme.” Because of Christ’s death for our salvation, His cross is our hope, wealth and everlasting theme. For when our “little while” on this earth is finished, the glory that we now see by faith we then will see in person as we “reign with Him above,” joining Him in the victory He shares with us. Then we will know how deep our joy in Christ is.

Henry V. Gerike  
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<photo of Henry>

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The Head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now;  
A royal diadem adorns the mighty Victor’s brow.

The highest place that heav’n affords is his, is his by right,  
The King of kings and Lord of lords, and heav’n’s eternal Light;

The Joy of all who dwell above, the Joy of all below  
To whom he manifests his love and grants his name to know.

To them the cross, with all its shame, with all its grace, is giv'n;  
Their name an everlasting name, their joy the joy of heav'n.

They suffer with their Lord below, they reign with him above,  
Their profit and their joy to know the myst'ry of his love.

The cross he bore is life and health, though shame and death to him;  
His people's hope, his people's wealth, their everlasting theme.

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Text: Thomas Kelly, 1769-1855

Tune: Jeremiah Clarke, c. 1674-1707

(Both text and tune are in the public domain)

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and copied for local use.]