

Proper 7 (June 22, 2014)

“Lord of Our Life” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #659)

“‘Peace, peace’, they say, when there is no peace!” [Jeremiah 6:14] So the prophet cried during the destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.), as local leaders pretended things were fine. (“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.”)

Over 2000 years later a German layman and church music director, Matthäus Apelles von Löwenstern, personally enduring the ravages of the Thirty Years’ War, pens the words of this remarkable hymn of trust and faith. Like Jeremiah he sees his neighbors, broken emotionally and financially in the midst of a horrific, ongoing conflict with no end in sight.

Two hundred years later Philip Pusey, embroiled in a great conflict where the Church of England is “assailed from without, enfeebled and distracted within”, finds strength in Löwenstern’s text and translates it into English.

We realize, of course, that these words are the fervent prayer of God’s people in all times and in all places. The Church and her people are always enduring nasty attacks from the outside secular world and apostasy and weakness from within her own ranks. Christians will always feel embattled and even disfranchised, as if they “are singing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.” [Psalm 137: 4]

The central image in this hymn is that of the Church as an ark—a large ship which serves as a strong shield and a solid defensive wall as the strong waves of the world’s hateful, powerful darkness surge relentlessly against it. The ark is a place of refuge and hope. It is not an offensive vessel; it does not seek to return evil for evil even in the face of terrible attacks. Indeed, in a stanza missing from most hymnals, the Church’s prayer is that its foes be pushed back and yet forgiven. Through a dove—the Holy Spirit—the Church offers the world an olive branch of peace, true peace which comes only through faith in Christ Jesus, a peace which the world cannot give.

The final stanza of the hymn unwraps this prayer for peace. It is a plea first and foremost for *spiritual* peace, a peace in our own hearts, where our own fallen human nature causes us to “struggle against sin in every form.” [Romans 7:23] That is the ultimate and common source of all the conflict in the world. Next we pray for peace in the Church itself, where, though given to us as a place for solace and strengthening, so often dissension creates “troubled souls” and doubt. Then we pray for *temporal* peace, peace in this world, a place of unending mistrust, hatred, and malice. The final sigh of this prayer is one of quiet confidence and hope—peace in heaven. We know that the day is coming when the ark will reach that other shore, and a greater light, where “that multitude which no one can number” will rejoice with us, those “whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in this Lord Jesus, we forevermore are one.” [Advent Bidding Prayer]

Amen, Lord Jesus. Come soon and grant us that peace!

Barry L. Bobb
Carmel IN



Lord of our life and God of our salvation,
Star of our night and hope of every nation:
Hear and receive your Church's supplication,
 Lord God Almighty.

See round Your ark the hungry billows curling;
See how your foes their banners are unfurling
And with great spite their fiery darts are hurling,
 O Lord, preserve us.

Lord, be our light when worldly darkness veils us;
Lord, be our shield when earthly armor fails us!
And in the day when hell itself assails us,
 Grant us your peace, Lord:

Peace in our hearts, where sinful thoughts are raging,
Peace in your Church, our troubled souls assuaging,
Peace when the world its endless war is waging,
 Peace in your heaven.

Original German text: Matthäus Apelles von Löwenstern, 1594—1648
Translated into English by Philip Pusey, 1799—1855, altered.
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[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded or printed for local use.]