

Cantate, the Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2009

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✠ Jesu juva ✠

THE SPIRIT'S NEW SONG

John 16:5-15; James 1:16-25; Isaiah 12:1-6

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

Today is Cantate Sunday, a Sunday that traditionally has something to do with singing. The name is Latin for the first words of the Introit for today from Psalm 98. There we are enjoined to “Sing unto the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things...” Six times in the Psalms we are told about singing a new song, and once in Isaiah: “Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise from the ends of the earth.” Questions about music and singing naturally come to mind: Is this a divine command for perpetual creativity and innovation in the realm of the musical arts? Is this a directive to periodically jettison that which is for one reason or another determined to be old music? And what is the content of the new song? What is to guide this music that Christians are instructed to sing?

Many have used Psalm 98 and the other “new song” passages to “prove” their right to be innovative in worship. They claim that this is part of the Holy Spirit’s continued activity in the Church, inspiring individuals to write new music, and enlivening the congregation through the singing of these new songs. All that is old is become questionable in terms of use. That was fine for back then, but today we need a new song, like the Psalm says! And the content of this new song, must of course, be praise for God. And so the terms “praise” and “worship” abound, and people’s hearts are warmed, imagining that what they are singing is, for the moment, the new song both David and Isaiah envisioned. But then the new song grows old, and must be replaced by a newer song, and likewise that one eventually by a still newer song.

None of this is at all what David or Isaiah had in mind when they spoke of the new song. The music they speak of is new not because of its age, but because of its message. The new song is the song of God’s salvation for His people: “Oh, sing to the Lord a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory. The Lord has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations. He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” And so also Isaiah directs us to sing in the Old Testament lesson for today. And what prompts his call for the Church to sing? “O Lord, I will praise You; though You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be

afraid; For YAH, the Lord is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation." The new song of the Christian is the Spirit given song of Christ.

Yes, while the Spirit's role in the creation of the "praise and worship" music is at best questionable, He has clearly inspired this song. For where Christ and His Gospel are declared, the Spirit is certainly at work. Listen again to our Lord's promise to send the Holy Spirit: "I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment... when He, the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is mine and declare it to you." Do you see how the Spirit's work is centered on Christ Jesus? The Spirit is sent by Christ, guides into the truth of Christ's Word, convicts by that same Word, declares the things of Christ, and thereby glorifies Christ.

Indeed through the power of the Holy Spirit working in the Word of Jesus, our Lord Jesus is truly present with us. Again, Isaiah declares: "Cry out and shout, O inhabitant of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel in your midst!" It is to our advantage that Jesus ascended; for now, His humanity having been changed and glorified so that it shares in the aspects and power of His divinity, He is no longer bound by spatial limitations. He can be present in many places at once, for indeed He now fills all things, just as He has since the beginning in His divinity. But the issue is never whether or not Jesus is everywhere; the issue is always where does He promise to reveal Himself and give His blessings. That revealing and giving happens where the Spirit is active. And where is the Spirit active, but in the things and activities to which Christ has attached His promise; namely in His Word and in His sacraments.

Moreover there is a Trinitarian shape to this giving of Jesus. Jesus sends the Spirit to us. But Jesus is first Himself sent by the Father. And the Word Jesus delivers to the Spirit for us to receive, is first delivered to Him by the Father. In John 12, Jesus said: "I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak." Likewise in John 14: "The word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me." And so today, describing that which He has in turn given the Spirit to declare, He says again: "All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you." Through Christ's Word and Sacrament we receive this powerful giving of the Spirit and we receive and are made one with Jesus; and in Jesus we are united with the Father.

None of this was possible under the old covenant, the covenant of the Law, but only under the new covenant in Jesus' blood. Yet these operate side by side to this very day. The one brings despair, the other hope. In old the Spirit is operative convicting of sin and judgment. By the new He convicts of righteousness. The old condemns us, revealing our sin and threatening the wrath of God. The new declares the mercy of God: "though You were angry with me, Your anger is

turned away, and You comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation.” This new covenant, as I have just said, is the covenant that is confirmed by the blood and death of Christ. This is the new covenant that brings forgiveness of sins with its proclamation. This is the new covenant that gives new and abiding life in Holy Baptism. This is the new covenant that brings salvation through the eating and drinking of Jesus in Holy Communion. And here the Spirit is at work bringing and applying Jesus’ saving work on the cross to us now. Here is the Spirit taking of what is Christ’s and declaring or giving it to us. This new covenant is not about anything else, not even so much about the Spirit Himself (though He is a part of it), or the Father (apart from Christ). It is all about Jesus. And only through Him does it connect us to the Father and the Spirit. Only through His cross are we reconciled to God. Only through His death is God’s anger turned away. And through His resurrection, His new covenant is shown to be valid and powerful for our salvation.

And here, again, we see the point of singing a new song. It has nothing to do with age, for indeed the new song is older in years than the old song. It has to do with the content. For the new song hymns Jesus. It is no coincidence that the next time we see the term “new song” used in the Scriptures, it is in the heavenly worship depicted in St. John’s Revelation. The new song is sung in the presence of the Lamb who was slain and yet lives: “Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.’” And again a bit later the song is mentioned as being the song of the redeemed in Christ: “They sang as it were a new song before the throne... and no one could learn that song except [those] who were redeemed from the earth... These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.” Rev. 14:3-5.

And why do they sing only of Jesus? Our Lord Himself gives the answer, again in Revelation chapter 21: “Behold, I make all things new... It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.”

This is the new song taught by the Holy Spirit to the faithful. It is the song of Him who makes all things new by accomplishing our salvation. It is the song of Him who gives to freely drink of water that perpetually satisfies, the water drawn from the wells of salvation, flowing from the pierced side of the Savior. It is the song that can be chanted only by the Faithful, for it is their confession of faith in this world. They have received the Spirit’s work, and thus have received their Lord Jesus.

And having received, they must sing Jesus before men. Having received through proclamation they will in turn, by the power of the Spirit, bring forth in confession. And the song and confession is nothing but Jesus. Where the Spirit is active, Christ is present. Where the Spirit is active, Christ is declared. And where the Spirit is active, salvation is bestowed.

So let us joyfully by the grace of Holy Spirit, and with all the saints of old, continue to sing this new song; the song of Him who makes all things new. "Oh, sing to the Lord a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory!" Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧