

Worship for the sake of the World

the relevance of the liturgy in a world of evil

This study was presented at a retreat for interested church members held at Mannum in May 2006. It makes the case that public worship is an act conducted not just for our sake, but for the benefit and life of the world. First, three concepts are explored: ecclesia (church), leitourgia (liturgy), and the priesthood of all believers. These three aspects express the conviction that worship serves the public good. The main part of the study then examines The Service – Alternative Form in the light of this claim. It encourages the view that public worship is not just so that we can get something out of it, but that the world may benefit from our assembling together.

Introduction

When we come to church to worship, for whose sake do we worship? Think through some of the following:

- We worship for our sake
- We worship for the sake of our congregation
- We worship for the sake of visitors and inquirers who may be present
- We worship for God's sake
- We worship for goodness sake!

But do we worship for the world's sake? Do we worship for the sake, for the benefit, for the life of the world? That is the question this study explores. Does our worship and our liturgy have any "relevance" to a world burdened by the evils of war, AIDS, poverty, and environmental degradation?

Although we cannot address any specific world "evils" in particular, we will nevertheless look how some key parts of *The Service – Alternative Form* (hymnal page 58) have an outward and world oriented focus. My hope is that we can return to our congregational worship with the knowledge that our liturgy of word and sacrament, far from being irrelevant to the world at large, is actually doing the world a favour – *God's favour*.

What is the Church?

Before we explore our worship and liturgy however, we need to ask a deeper question: what is the church? Our understanding of liturgy is determined by our understanding of the church. Many of our contemporary questions and debates about worship (and other matters) revolve around this question. So let's first consider three important concepts concerning the church.

Ekklesia

The Greek New Testament word for church is "*ekklesia*", from which we get such English words as "ecclesiastical". It means "to be called out".¹

- In both the Old and New Testaments God calls his people out from the world: the Israelites were called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1), and called to be separate from their unclean, pagan environment (Leviticus 20:26).
- The Christian church is likewise called out from the world: "*Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 6:17; also 1 Peter 2:9-10).

¹ 'In Greece prior to New Testament times the term referred to citizens who were called out of their homes to come to a town meeting – that is, to an assembly or convention'. Peters, Ted, *God – the world's future*, 271

- Likewise, this also applies to each individual believer: “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world...*” (Romans 12:2).

But this standing apart from the world is not meant to be arrogant or judgemental. The church stands apart from the world in order that it may better serve the world. It needs a space to stand apart in order to do its work.² But what is this work?

Leitourgia

The answer, to use another Greek word, is *leitourgia*, from which we get the word “liturgy”. The work of the church for the sake of the world is liturgy. This may sound a little strange – isn’t the liturgy simply a set order of words and music? In most people’s minds, “liturgy” generally means a traditional form of worship. The original meaning of the word liturgy, however, is far broader: it means a *public and representative work*. Liturgy is public service on behalf of and in the interests of a whole community. When we worship, we are acting as public servants!³

The New Testament describes many things as *leitourgia*, although the English translation often gives no indication of this.

- The Old Testament sacrificial ritual at the temple (Luke 1:23; Hebrews 9:21; 10:11)
- Leadership in Christian worship (Acts 13:2)
- Proclamation of the gospel (Romans 15:16)
- Charitable giving and administration of money (2 Corinthians 9:12)
- The service of angels on our behalf (Hebrews 1:14)
- Most importantly, Jesus’ ongoing work of intercession in heaven is described as *leitourgia*. Jesus continues his work of “liturgy” on our behalf in God’s presence (Hebrews 8:2,6). And we as the church participate in Jesus’ liturgy as we pray for the world and conduct our worship on its behalf, as we will see below.

So then, the church is a community called out of the world in order to serve the world with its liturgy – the public and representative work of the people of God. And the nature of this public work is best understood by reference to a third concept – the “priesthood of believers”.

Priesthood of all believers⁴

In the Old Testament the role of the priest was to stand between God and the Israelites. They would bring God’s grace and his word to the people. They would also bring the people’s prayers and sacrifices to God.

But now the former priesthood has been set aside because Jesus has become our perfect high priest. He has entered the heavenly sanctuary to atone for our sins with his blood (Hebrews 2:17-18) and now prays for our salvation unceasingly (Hebrews 7:25). So, in the new covenant, the church has no need for an earthly priesthood – Jesus is all we need.

² ‘God’s people need a place “out of the world,” so to speak, in which to do this work. This liturgical requirement has given the community of God’s people its name: church. The word “church” comes from the Greek *ekklesia*, which means an “assembly called out.”’ Senn, Frank, *New Creation – a liturgical worldview*, 71-72

³ ‘The assembly is called out of the world to do its *leitourgia*, its public and representative work. When the assemblies of the Greek city-states were called out of the world to do the legislative work of the *polis*, it was in order to create some distance between the everyday world of business and commerce, where personal interests are paramount and a setting that would advance the common good – just as we expect our legislative assemblies today to have as little conflict of interest as possible when dealing with the common good....This analogy applies to the public work of the church’. Senn, 72

⁴ This term is often misunderstood when set against the office of the ministry. But the common priesthood as the Scriptures describes it has nothing to do with modern questions of the rights or roles of the laity and pastors. All the baptised, pastors and congregation together, constitute the priesthood of believers, regardless of whether the church is hierarchically or congregationally structured.

But the unbelieving world still needs a priesthood! And that's where the "priesthood of believers" comes in. The priesthood of believers describes what happens when the church shares in Christ's priestly ministry for the sake of the world. On the one hand, the priesthood of believers represents the world and its needs to God. On the other hand, they bring God and his grace to the world. The crucial thing to note is this: the people of God are not the church's priesthood. Rather, we are the world's priesthood. Together with Christ, we represent the world to God, and God to the world.⁵ And this is possible because through Jesus all Christians have access to God's holy presence (Hebrews 4:16; 10:19-25). Therefore we can serve as the world's priesthood by:

- offering ourselves and our bodies to God for holy service in the world (Romans 6:13; 12:1)
- offering praise to God on behalf of all people (Hebrews 13:15; 1 Peter 2:9)
- proclaiming God's grace to all people (Romans 15:16; 1 Peter 2:9)
- offering our prayers for the needs of all people (Revelation 5:8; 8:4)
- offering our money and material goods to help others (Philippians 4:18; Hebrews 13:16)

This is how St Peter describes this awesome privilege (1 Peter 2:4,5,9)

*4As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—
5you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

9But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Note that the priesthood of all believers describes the church as a whole, rather than individual Christians. The priesthood is a *corporate*, not an individual, reality. That is why it is expressed most fully in corporate worship.

To summarize everything so far then, the church is called out from the world so that it can engage in its priestly work of liturgy for the sake of the world. Let's now look at how some parts of *The Service – Alternative Form* puts this into practice.

(A) Lord, have mercy (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement, p.59-60)

In peace, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace from above, and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace of the whole world, for the wellbeing of the church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For this holy house, and for all who offer here their worship and praise, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

Help, save, comfort and defend us, gracious Lord.

Amen.

⁵ "The laity, therefore, are not the church's priesthood; they are the world's priesthood. The liturgy performed by them is on behalf of the world. Within this liturgy, the ministers of the word and the sacraments...preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, thereby equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11). They also preside over the church's liturgy. They do not, however, take away from the laity their liturgical role of praising God as representatives of God's creation, of praying for the world which cannot pray for itself, and of offering gifts from the creation for God's use, such as the bread and wine for the eucharist and resources to support the church's mission in the world". Senn, 46.

Early on in the service, after the preparatory rite of confession and absolution, the congregation exercises its priestly role with a broad ranging prayer for mercy. It is actually a shortened form of a much longer series of petitions that begins the main Eastern Orthodox liturgy.⁶ It anticipates the much fuller prayer of the church later in the service (see below). Take note of a few key features.

- This cry for mercy is not penitential – it is not a prayer for forgiveness - as we have just received absolution.⁷
- Rather, it is a beggar's cry (Matthew 15:22; Luke 17:13) with which we bring the needs of the church and the world to God in prayer. When we pray this prayer we are holding our begging bowls before God and crying: "Help us! Be merciful! Be kind!" And as we do so we are mindful of Jesus' words: "*Blessed are you who are poor*" (Luke 6:20).
- We pray this prayer for the world. The phrase "for our salvation" is not limited to those currently praying, but for the community and world at large.

So even though we have only just begun our service, the liturgy already reminds us that we are public servants. St Paul likewise reminds Timothy that prayers for the world are the first priority for the congregation at worship. He says:

1I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— 2for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

The word "*first*" could refer to several things: it's the first thing Paul tells Timothy about; it's the first thing that should take place in worship (as in the Orthodox service); it should have priority in our service. Whatever the exact meaning is, one thing is clear: *we should remember the needs of the world as we begin our service. We are the world's priesthood – we are engaged in public service.*

The key thought in this opening prayer is the word "peace". What is this peace?

- On the most practical level, "*in peace let us pray to the Lord*" reminds us that to be united in prayer we need to be at peace amongst ourselves. Our congregation that is divided by fights and squabbles cannot effectively join together in prayer (1 Timothy 2:8). That is why the 4th petition asks for God's assistance "*for all who offer here their worship and praise*". We are saying: "Help us, Lord, to carry out our public service well".
- The petition "for the peace from above" reminds us that we first of all seek God's heavenly peace.
 - Our prayers are based on the fact that through Christ we are at peace with God (Romans 5:1). We are not negotiating with a tough business partner or pleading with a distant monarch. When we pray for mercy for the world, God wants to listen to us.
 - What's more, in Christ God himself is proclaiming peace to the whole world. God is not at war with the world. The song of the angels is still sung: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men*" (Luke 2:14).⁸ Many Old Testament prophecies of Christ describe him as one who brings peace to the world and the nations (Isaiah 9:6; Zechariah 9:10).
 - This also means that our attitude towards a sinful world is one of peace. We are not fighting the world, nor are we on a moral crusade against the world. This doesn't

⁶ The first litany of the *Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*. This longer litany is available for use from the *Lutheran Worship Resources* CD. Note that the first communion liturgy in the hymnal, *The Service with Communion*, only has the "*Lord, have mercy*", without any actual petitions. For various reasons, this truncated form of the prayer for mercy has been the practice in the Western church.

⁷ In the Roman Church, and also in Lutheranism, there has been a tendency to regard the "*Lord, have mercy*" penitentially. This may be because the actual petitions dropped away early in its history.

⁸ In *The Service with Communion*, this verse is sung straight after the "*Lord, have mercy*" in the "*Gloria to God in the highest*".

mean compliance with the ways of the world (remember what *ekklesia* means!) – but it does mean that we are on the side of the world and its people. If we don't pray for the world, who will? That's what priesthood is all about.⁹

- In fact, the gift of peace is not something that can be hoarded for oneself. Notice that no sooner has the risen Lord Jesus imparted peace to his disciples - "*Peace be with you*" - than he sends them into the world - "*As the Father sent me, so I am sending you*". (John 20:19-21).
- However, we are not naive. Jesus himself reminds us that his peace is not as the world gives (John 14:27 and 16:33). His peace can often be a cause of division (Matthew 10:34).

(B) Hymn of Praise (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement, p.61-63)

This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God.

This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Power, riches, wisdom and strength, and honour, blessing, and glory are his.

This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Sing with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of all creation;

Blessing, honour, glory and might, be to God, and the Lamb for ever. Amen.

This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

For the *Lamb who was slain* has begun his reign. Alleluia.

This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Our first act of public service (liturgy) has been to stand in solidarity with the world as beggars. But now we change our tone. In *The Feast of Victory* we begin praising God for his glorious victory won through the death and resurrection of Christ.¹⁰ However, this act of praise is also an act of public service and an exercise of our priesthood. We don't just praise God for ourselves, but for the world.

Even without the music, one can hardly miss the note of triumphant joy in this hymn. It is based on several key passages in the book of Revelation (5:9-13 and 19:4-9). The theme of Revelation is that through the death and resurrection of Christ all the arrogant and ungodly powers of the world will finally be defeated. In fact, they are already doomed! Even if God's people are now oppressed under seemingly invincible world powers, they will be victorious through Christ. This victory of Christ is celebrated through worship – even more – this victory is brought about by worship!

So as we sing *The Feast of Victory*, we do so with the world in mind. When we attribute all blessing, honour, glory and might to the Lamb who was slain, when we announce that this Lamb has begun his reign, we proclaim to the world that its power is not absolute. In this hymn we dethrone the idols of the world, we challenge all rulers and powers who would play god, and we assert the lordship of Christ. Whoever wishes to claim our soul, whatever desires our ultimate allegiance, is put in its place. While there are people on this earth who can say "Jesus is Lord", Caesar has not achieved his end.

You can see then that in some situations, as in the original context of the book of Revelation, this is a highly political act! Yet it is also the greatest act of kindness – anyone else who takes God's place only creates a hell on earth - only when the Lord reigns will the nations rejoice (Psalms 96-99).

⁹ The author to the Hebrews reminds us that a holy life and an attitude of peace towards the world are not incompatible: '*Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy...*' (Hebrews 12:14).

¹⁰ In the traditional Service with Communion the "Glory to God in the highest", occurs at this point in the service.

Let's look at a few phrases in more detail:

This is the feast of victory

- The final age of God's victory is often described as a (wedding) feast (Isaiah 25:6; Luke 13:29; Revelation 19:9)
- The final feast draws our minds to the "feast" we are soon to take part in at the Lord's table.
- At that feast we also are celebrating and asserting Christ's rule over all powers. Even the demonic powers – powers which often animate and corrupt political and social structures – are subject to hearing our praise. St Paul tells the Ephesians of God's intent: *'that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...'* (Ephesians 3:10). Our church services are amplified in hell!

The Lamb who was slain

- Despite the triumphal tone of this hymn, we are nevertheless reminded that Christ's victory did not come about by earthly force or power, but by the cross. The Lamb's victory came about through suffering and weakness, just as it does for God's people. As Paul says: *"The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds"* (2 Corinthians 10:4)

whose blood set us free to be people of God

- This phrase takes us back to the first great redemption story in the bible, the Exodus. There the blood from the Passover meal placed on the doorposts set the Israelites free from their bondage in Egypt. Now the blood of Christ sets us free from the greater powers of sin, death and the devil (Revelation 1:5-6; 5:9-10)
- Revelation 5:9 especially reminds us that this liberating blood is for people of every conceivable ethnic, cultural and national group. There the heavenly hosts praise Christ and sing: *'with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation'*. There is thus no room in the Christian church for racism or bigotry or nationalism. We are on the side of all humans, and especially of those who are imprisoned, oppressed or held in some kind of bondage. The church will always have a heart for those who suffer some form of political or personal slavery, and we remember this every time we drink the blood of Christ at the altar.

Sing with all the people of God

- It is not just this current generation that sings this hymn – the whole communion of saints does: the Old Testament saints (Hebrews 12:1), departed Christians (Hebrews 12:23), and people from all nations and cultures (Revelation 7:9).
- Here the world is reminded that it cannot contain Christian worship. It spills over the edges of this current generation, as would happen when you try to pour a bucket of water into a thimble. We are not rattled by the world's demand that we become "relevant" to the latest social fad or political agenda. The church is here for the long haul, and we are most relevant to the world when we do what we were always meant to do: praise the *"one who is and who was and who is to come"* (Revelation 1:4).

And join in the hymn of all creation

- Here we are reminded that all creation sings a hymn of praise to its creator, although that praise is currently muted by the fall. It is not only people who are called to praise God: angels and the non-human creation also join in the hymn of praise to the creator and redeemer (Psalm 148). This emphasis is also apparent in other parts of the liturgy, such as the *'Holy, Holy, Holy'*.
- Part of our priestly role is to call every voice to join in creation's hymn. Just as the priests and Levites called and led the people of Israel in their worship, so the church, as the world's liturgists, issues an invitation to everyone in the world to join in the praise of God. *"Shout to the Lord all the earth"* (Psalm 98:4).
- But even when that call goes unheeded we do not forget the world. As the world's priesthood, we praise, bless, worship and magnify God on behalf of all creation. We don't sing our praise as

a holy huddle separated from the world. We represent that part of creation that does not yet give God “honour, blessing and glory”. Even if the whole earth fails to give thanks and praise, the liturgy of the church is one place where creation is doing what it was designed by God to do. And by doing so, we encourage the rest of creation to catch on, to get in on the act, and to join in. And we do so with the knowledge that one day all creation will bow down and praise the Lord.

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13)

How can it be otherwise when Christ is “the firstborn over all creation”, when “all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:15-16)?

(C) Offertory (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement, p.66-67)

Before we look at the next part of the liturgy in detail, let’s ask ourselves the question: How does the act of offering to God serve the world? How do we fulfil our priestly ministry, our public, representative service for the world, by offering our time, talents and possessions?

The most obvious answer to that question is that our offerings help the world in some concrete way. Our offerings have the purpose of supporting the work of ministry and mission (Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17-18). We also give for the poor and needy, as is best exemplified at Christmas with the ALWS appeal. It is a healthy reminder that for much of the history of the church the offerings have gone to such a cause (Matthew 6:2-4; Hebrews 13:16).¹¹ But whether the offering serves people’s spiritual needs (mission) or physical requirements (charity), we need to see our offerings as truly liturgical – as an act of public service.

There is a deeper way in which our offerings are an act of service to the world. When we offer our rather meagre financial offerings, God uses them to bring about preaching and ministry that bestows eternal life. When we offer bread and wine upon the altar (a very tiny expense!), God takes those gifts of earth and turns them into gifts of eternal life – our Lord’s body and blood! In this act we are again acting as the world’s priesthood, by doing what everyone was created to do – offering ourselves and God’s creation to him in thanksgiving, whereby we receive even more back from his hand (Luke 6:38; Matthew 16:25). When the church offers tokens of the old creation, a new creation is born in her midst – and that takes place nowhere else on earth. The church’s liturgy is the only place on earth where water, bread and wine can be vehicles of eternal life. The church’s liturgy serves the world by providing such a place.¹²

¹¹ A rather radical idea is mentioned by Senn, 40 ‘Gordon Lathrop has suggested that the Sunday collection be used “primarily or even only for the poor”. Other arrangements would then have to be made for the support of the church in its institutional needs, such as membership dues and user fees. The advantage of such a collection at the church door after the dismissal is that it would bring out the connection between the encounter with Christ in word and sacrament and the ministry of Christ in the world; or more specifically, the connection between liturgy and diakonia (both of which have been rendered by the English word “service”

¹² From the beginning of humanity, from Abel onwards (Genesis 4:3-5), humans have worshipped God by offering back to him some of what he has first given them. This is *not* a sacrifice of works by which we try and gain God’s favour. It is rather a sacrifice of thanksgiving. By doing so we acknowledge our confidence that God is the giver of all good gifts, and that he will continue to supply our needs. Hanging on to everything we have is a sorry sign that we do not believe God will continue meeting our needs. Even sadder is that when people do this they become enslaved by the very earthly possessions they think will give them life, whereas in giving to God we experience the freedom he intended us to enjoy as lords over creation (Genesis 1:26). As Jesus said: “*It is more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35). But God always seems to trump us with his grace. Those who offer right sacrifices to the Lord receive even more grace in return. When the Israelites offered their flocks and grain in sacrifice to the Lord, he used those earthly goods to pour many spiritual blessings back into their laps. By means of the daily burnt offerings, God continued to bestow his grace and favour on his people, as demonstrated in the Aaronic blessing, which followed and concluded the sacrificial ritual.

Let's look at one offertory in detail.

Let the vineyards be fruitful, Lord, and fill to the brim our cup of blessing. Gather a harvest from the seeds that were sown, that we may be fed with the bread of life. Gather the hopes and the dreams of all; unite them with the prayers we offer now. Grace our table with your presence, and give us a foretaste of the feast to come.

At first glance, it may not be apparent how this serves as an offertory, the song that accompanies the presentation of our offerings. But in the early centuries of the church, the offering that was brought forward consisted of actual food, from which a small portion of bread and wine was set aside for use in the sacrament. Today in many churches, the bread and wine is brought forward at this point. This offertory therefore looks forward to the celebration of the Lord's Supper – God's gift to us.

But how does this offertory engage us servants and priests of the world?

- We first pray for something that has been in people's prayers from time immemorial – a good harvest, first of the vine (let the vineyards be fruitful) and then of the field (gather a harvest from the seeds that were sown).
- But this is not just a prayer for "daily bread" (a purely human desire). It prays that the fruit of vineyard may "fill to the brim our cup of blessing", which is the way Paul refers to the blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). It also prays that harvest may in turn feed us with "the bread of life", our Lord's own reference to the gift of his body (John 6).
- Our prayer here is then that in offering the gifts of creation, all people may enjoy the greater gift of eternal life as bestowed in the sacrament.

The next part of the offertory has puzzled people. What are these "hopes and dreams of all?"

- All people have hopes and dreams. And many of these desires often border on prayer – except that non-Christians do not enjoy access to God's grace through Christ. Yet even outside of true faith, the human spirit with its dreams, hopes and longings gropes around in the dark for God (Acts 17:27).
- What we pray for in this offertory is that those hopes and dreams may be united to our prayers and brought into God's presence. We pray on behalf of those who struggle to do it for themselves. They may even want us to do it for them until that time comes when they can pray for themselves. Here is a very clear expression of our priestly role – representing the non-praying world to God by means of our prayer.
- And all the while we remember that Christ is uniting our feeble, inadequate and intermittent prayers with his own perfect, strong and unceasing prayer. So we can be the world's priesthood, because Christ is our high priest.

(D) Prayer of the Church (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement, p.67-68)

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Almighty and eternal God, we thank you for the many blessings of body and soul which you have given us, although we have not deserved them. Above all, we thank you for preserving your saving word and the holy sacraments. Keep the teaching of the gospel pure in your church throughout the world, and give us faithful pastors to preach your word with boldness and power. Help all who hear the word to understand and believe. Send out labourers into your harvest and bring to faith those who do not yet know you. Have mercy on the enemies of your church, so that they may repent and live. Protect your church in all trouble, and defend it against all danger.

Show your mercy to all the nations of the world. Bless our land and the people who live in it. Help those in government and positions of responsibility to maintain honesty and truth, justice and peace. Direct all schools and places of learning, so that students everywhere may learn truth and wisdom.

Graciously protect us from fire and flood, from war and disease, from famine and strife and from every kind of disaster. Support all people in their proper vocation, and help all those who are unemployed. Bless our arts and culture, our science and technology. Be with all widows and widowers, and provide for all children who have lost their parents. Help those who are sick and in need. And comfort those who are lonely and in trouble.

Bless us all as we gather here in your presence, and satisfy the needs of each person. Give us your Holy Spirit as we come to the Lord's table, and strengthen our faith so that we may receive the body and blood of Christ for our lasting benefit.

As we are strangers and pilgrims on earth, help us by true faith and a godly life to prepare for the world to come, doing the work you have given us to do while it is day, before the night comes when no-one can work. And when our last hour comes, support us by your power and take us home to your heavenly kingdom. We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Once again we stand in solidarity with the people of the world and their needs, as we did in the "*Lord, have mercy*", except this time in more detail. Again we look at 1 Timothy 2:1-6.

1I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— 2for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, 4who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 5For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.

The four words "requests, prayer, intercession and thanksgiving" express various aspects of our priestly duty on behalf of the world. From these words we see that we both pray *for* the world (as for another), and *on behalf* of the world (in their shoes).

- By prayer we use our access to God's grace, which the world does not enjoy or use, for their benefit.
- We make requests for the world as if those requests were our very own.
- We intercede for the people of the world, and stand in their place, as if their sins were our very own. We can even repent on behalf of our nation where it has erred.
- We give thanks to God on behalf of the world for the blessings the world enjoys.

The prayer of the church in Lutheran practice has traditionally fallen into three main areas: prayers for the whole church on earth; prayers for the world and nation; and prayers for local needs and concerns. It is by nature broad and wide ranging – it is a prayer for the world – although there is room for things closer to home. However, several things it is not. It is not primarily a time simply to pray for ourselves, even if those prayers are good and necessary. And it is never simply an opportunity to make announcements about who is sick and who is having a birthday. The prayer of the church is public service on behalf of planet earth; it is not the congregational bulletin board!

We particularly pray for public institutions and our leaders, as they are the ones charged with the duty of maintaining "peaceful and quiet lives". By our public prayers we help them in their public duty, and assist them to fulfil their proper responsibilities within their divinely given limits of power (Romans 13:1-7). However, our prayers for the world and its physical needs are bound up with the prayer for the spread of the gospel, for "*God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*". Humanity's immediate and eternal needs are always related. And without a peaceful society, mission work is hampered anyhow.

A question may naturally arise. What good do our prayers actually do when we look at the world around us? Violence and war, drought and famine, poverty and disease appear to be on the rise. Here we need to remember several things. First, we always pray by faith. We are not given the privilege of seeing a one on one correspondence between our prayers and the results of international politics. But we know that our prayers are most certainly playing a part in God's guidance and rule of the nations. A fascinating passage in Revelation 8:1-4 gives us a glimpse into the role that prayers play in God's judgement and salvation of the world:

1When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. 3Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. 4The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. 5Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

(E) Preface, Sanctus, Eucharistic Prayer (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement, p.69-72)

It is indeed right and good, Lord God, holy Father, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord (*preface for the day*) and so, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we adore and praise your glorious name:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might:
Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.**

All praise and thanks be to you, eternal God, holy Father, together with your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, who unites your people in love. We thank you for creating all things. We thank you for calling and rescuing your chosen people. Above all we thank and praise you for keeping your promise to the people of old and sending your Son Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection for our salvation we remember as he comes to us in this holy meal.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

(Words of Institution)

**Christ has died
Christ is risen
Christ will come again**

Send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen our faith so that we who receive the body and blood of Christ may live as true members of the body of your Son.

Amen. Come, Holy Spirit.

Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes as victorious Lord of all.

Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and forever. Amen.

The central emphasis of the Lord's Supper is the gift of our Lord's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. It is a gift for the faithful, for those who are baptised and believe, who know what they are receiving and why they desire it. It may seem, then, that at this point the liturgy does not serve the world, but only the faithful. Yet even here the priesthood of believers is engaged in liturgy – in public service for the sake of the world. Two points are worth looking at.

Thanksgiving

Observe how full of thanksgiving the prayers that surround holy communion are. From earliest times the Lord's Supper has been referred to as the "eucharist", which literally means "thanksgiving".

Now the prime defect and fault of fallen creation is that it is non-eucharistic – it does not rightly give thanks. St Paul writes of the fallen human race: *"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened"* (Romans 1:21). The result of this was quite catastrophic: *"Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised"* (Romans 1:24-25).

But as in the prayer of the church and in the offering, we give thanks. In the liturgy creation "gets it right" by once again becoming eucharistic. Here the church gives thanks. And not just in proud isolation, but on behalf of the rest of the world which is lagging behind in its thanksgiving. And when anyone joins us in this act, they too are joining in with a creation that is now functioning again as it should. In the act thanksgiving, the world is getting it right – and everyone is invited to give it a try for themselves. And as we also saw in connection with the offertory, we also use the gifts of creation rightly too. Rather than serving created things in an idolatrous fashion (Romans 1:25), we bring them to God so that he may use them as vehicles of grace and eternal life.

Hopeful anticipation

The holy communion liturgy looks forward to the coming of Christ to share with us the great feast at the end of time, already anticipated in the Lord's Supper here on earth. This reflects St Paul's word to the Corinthians: *"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"* (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Once again, we ask our central question: does this emphasis in the liturgy serve the world? It certainly does! We all know that what keeps a person going is hope. Sometimes the only thing that keeps a person from committing suicide is the hope of something to look forward to or someone to talk to. In the same way, the world is in desperate need of hope. Quite apart from the imminent threats of climate change, pandemic, fuel shortages, and increasing desertification and the resultant tensions this brings, many people have no hope for the world. Even if we get through all the other global hurdles, eventually the human race will be snuffed out by an ever increasing sun!

But in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper we keep the world's hope alive – Christ is coming and with him a new heavens and a new earth. And not only is he coming (in the future), he is here with us now. In the supper he has ordained, he gives us an entree of this future. We sample a slice of the future in the here and now. So even in the most central act of Christian worship – the Lord's Supper, we are serving as the world's priesthood by keeping the world's hopes alive and preventing it from sliding into pessimism and despair. None of the news bulletins of the world will ever be able to render such a service to its audience. Only the priesthood of believers in its liturgy can say that one day the earth will be full of the glory of the Lord.

Concluding Thoughts – a "liturgical worldview"

Hopefully this study has been able show that when we gather around word and sacrament we can do so for the sake of the world. The church is called out from the world so that the priesthood of believers can engage in public, representative service on behalf of all people.

- In the Lord, have mercy we bring our begging bowls before God for the world;
- In the Hymn of Praise we proclaim the lordship of Christ over his creation and dethrone all rival gods, and we lead the world in the hymn of all creation;
- In the Offertory we offer ourselves and creation to God on behalf of all people, and we gather their “hopes and dreams” into our prayers and Christ’s;
- In the Prayer of the Church we pray *for* the world and also *on behalf* of a world that does not pray for itself, helping public leaders to fulfil their vocation, and praying for conditions favourable to the spread of the gospel;
- In the Preface, Sanctus and Eucharistic Prayer we give thanks on behalf of all people and give the world hope by the promise of Christ’s return and a new creation.

While a “worldly” orientation may be found in a variety of worship forms, the historic liturgies of the church have especially maintained this outward focus.¹³ The liturgy has the ability to foster what has been called a “liturgical worldview” – a way of viewing the world through the faith expressed in the church’s worship. Two quotations express the idea of a liturgical worldview.

The first is by the late Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann. He writes that the church’s *leitourgia* provides

‘an all embracing vision of life, a power meant to judge, inform and transform the whole of existence, a “philosophy of life” shaping and challenging all our ideas, attitudes and actions’. It is ‘an *icon* of that new life which is to challenge and renew the “old life” in us and around us’.¹⁴

The second is by the American Lutheran pastor and liturgical scholar, Frank Senn. He writes:

‘One can imagine the formative power of the liturgy to plant signs of its eschatological vision in the world. One can imagine that those who have traced on their bodies the sign of the cross will be prepared to bear the cross in daily life by rearing children, dealing with the shortcomings of spouses, tolerating the incompetencies of associates, and going the extra mile to meet the needs of relatives and friends. One can imagine that those who have confessed their sins and heard the word of forgiveness addressed to them will display a forgiving spirit towards others. One can imagine that those who have gotten out of themselves by praising God will be less focussed on themselves in their dealings with others. One can imagine that those who have heard the will of God announced in the Scripture readings and unpacked in sermons will be sensitive to how their own actions comport with God’s will for humanity. One can imagine that those who have confessed the faith once delivered to the saints in the creed will stand up for the faith in the ambiguous ethical decisions that confront them in their family relations, on their jobs, and in the polling places. One can imagine that what has been prayed for in the intercessions will become an agenda for action during the week, such as supporting efforts on behalf of justice and peace, caring for the needs of the poor, visiting the sick, and comforting the bereaved. One can imagine that thanksgiving will give one a sense of mutual dependence and enlarge one’s worldview. One can imagine that receiving the body and blood of Christ (since we are what we eat) will make us, in Luther’s words, “little Christ’s to our neighbours.”’¹⁵

¹³ *The Service – Alternative Form* that we have studied here follows the historic pattern of the liturgy; many of its parts have been used in liturgies for centuries, other parts (*This is the Feast of Victory*) have been quite recently composed; some parts are ecumenical, or catholic; other sections are uniquely Lutheran.

¹⁴ Schmemmann, Alexander, *Liturgy and Tradition*, 52

¹⁵ Senn, 160