

NOTES ON THE LITURGY: THE VENITE

BY RICH LUSK

“Venite” is Latin for “Come!” The Venite is the church’s traditional call to worship, based squarely on Psalm 95. In the course of church history, several different versions of the Venite have been used: some more hymnic, others chanted, some complete, others shortened. The Venite has been used in the liturgies of virtually every major branch of the Christian church and is part of the ancient Christian liturgy as far back as it can be traced. St. Benedict incorporated it into his morning prayer service. It was included in the Latin and Sarum breviaries (medieval prayer books), and through these historical sources made its way into Protestant liturgies after the Reformation. At some point along the way (most likely very early), a Trinitarian doxology was incorporated into the ending of the Venite. This became standard practice in Christian usage of the Psalter very early on in church history. We do not know much about how Psalm 95 functioned in Old Covenant worship, but doubtless it was used as a call to worship in the temple and synagogue.

Psalm 95 is in the form of what is sometimes called “low praise” because it is sung to the worshipping community rather than directly to God himself. It is more “horizontal” in orientation than “vertical.” As we learn to sing Psalm 95, we need to keep in mind that we are *exhorting one another* to engage the Lord in worship. Sing with vigor, so your fellow worshippers will respond, and make sure you receive their word of encouragement! In the Venite, we are calling one another to “come!” – to gather together to worship God. Indeed, we might say God himself is calling us to draw near, to come to him, through one another’s voices.

Psalm 95 calls on the people of God to come before the Lord with songs of praise and celebration. “To enter the Lord’s presence” is to enter into his sanctuary. In the Old Covenant, of course, the Israelites could not approach God all that closely. The inner rooms of the tabernacle, and later the temple, were blocked off by veils. These curtains had cherubim embroidered into them to remind the people that the sanctuary complex was a new Garden of Eden. Encroachment into this sacred space was punishable by death. The priests could enter into the inner precincts of the Holy Place, but only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place, the very throne room of the Shekinah glory of God, one time a year, on the Day of Atonement.

In the New Covenant, the barriers have been removed. Access to a better Eden – the heavenly Garden-Sanctuary itself -- has been granted. When Jesus’ flesh was torn on the cross, the veils blocking the entry way into God’s presence were torn as well. Now baptism enrolls the people of God into a greater and higher priesthood than any that existed in the Old Covenant (Heb. 10:19ff). We are encouraged to not forsake the weekly Lord’s Day gathering of the saints because then and there we enter God’s

presence in the fullest way. Christ has brought the hopes of Israel, embedded in Psalm 95 and foreshadowed in Levitical worship, to fulfillment.

Psalm 95 also addresses another important matter related to worship. The psalmist speaks of bowing and kneeling before the Lord. These physical postures are not arbitrary. What we do with our bodies in worship matters. Not only do physical motions express the emotions of the heart, from inside out, but they also shape the heart from the outside in. We may not feel particularly humble one Sunday morning, but kneeling with our bodies to confess sin helps adjust our frame of mind. God desires us to worship with our whole persons, not just our minds or hearts. The biblical worldview distinguishes soul and body, but there is no sharp separation between interiority and exteriority. For example, Proverbs teaches us that corporeal punishment shapes the heart of the child. The buttocks and the soul are somehow connected. In the book of Samuel, physical food enlivens one's spirit. Food doesn't just satisfy the stomach; it affects the whole person. When the Israelites rebelled in their hearts, they are called "stiff-necked," indicating that bodily posture (refusal to bow the head) revealed an inner attitude of pride. The (external) music of David soothed Saul's (inner) spirit. And so on.

Finally, the Psalm ends with a warning (verses 8ff). Not all versions of the Venite include these verses, but we should remember that they are there. Thanks to Hebrews 4, these words are well known. We are not to harden our hearts as the Israelites in the wilderness did. God is continually testing us, allowing us to undergo trial and temptation. How will we respond? Will we test God in turn, pushing his patience to the limit? Or will we persevere in faith and obedience, finally entering into the final Sabbath rest that God has promised his loyal people? In particular, this warning needs to be heeded before we hear God speaking to us in the reading and preaching of Scripture. It prepares for what we about to encounter in the rest of the liturgy. Singing Psalm 95 on a regular will force us to ask ourselves: "Are we going to harden our hearts when we hear his voice today? Or will we receive the Word in faith and obedience?"

Here is the text:

O come, let us sing unto the Lord;

Let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.

Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving,

And show ourselves glad in him with psalms.

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.
O come, let us worship and fall down
And kneel before the Lord our Maker
For He is the Lord our God,
And we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.
O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
Let the whole earth stand in awe of Him.
For He cometh, for He cometh to judge the earth,
And with righteousness to judge the world
And the peoples with His truth.
Glory to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
As it was in the beginning is now, and will be forever, Amen.¹*

Here is the chant:

¹ Note that the Venite ends with a Trinitarian doxology. The practice of attaching such lines to the end of Psalms as a way of Christianizing them harkens back to the early church. The Christians picked up and adapted a Jewish tradition of appending doxologies from the end of each book of the Psalter to Psalms sung from that book. So, for example, Psalms 1-41 would end with the doxology found in 41:13; Psalms 42-72 would end with the doxology found in 72:18-19; etc.

1. O come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our
sal - va - tion. 2. Let us come before his presence with thanks - giv - ing,
and show ourselves glad in him with psalms. 3. For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King a - bove all gods. 4. In his hand are all the corners of the earth,
and the strength of the hills is his al - so. 5. The sea is his and he made it,
and his hands prepared the dry land. 6. O come, let us worship and fall down
and kneel before the Lord our Ma - ker. 7. For he is the Lord our God,
and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. 8. O worship
the Lord in the beauty of ho - li - ness; let the whole earth stand in awe of him.

9. For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth, and with righteousness to judge
(Gloria Patri may be added)
the world and the peo - ples with his truth. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to
the Ho - ly Spi - rit: As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ev - er. A - men.

Setting: Plainsong, Tone 2; adapt. The Standing Commission on Church Music, 1979, alt.