

500th Anniversary of Luther's Invocavit Sermons

March 9-16, 1522

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. For some 10 months since the Diet of Worms, Luther had been at Wartburg Castle
2. Conditions in Wittenberg had been progressively destabilizing during those months:
 - a. Sept., 1521: cup received in L.S. October: Luther's monastery no longer doing private Masses.
 - b. Christmas, 1521: Karlstadt gave cup in L.S., spoke liturgy in German, wore street clothes.
 - c. "Zwickau prophets" arrived, claiming direct revelations from God.
 - d. Melancthon drew back. Karlstadt rushed forward. In mid-January, he got married.
 - e. Violence at churches; art works destroyed. By mid-Feb., 1522, city fathers wanted Luther back.
 - f. Schools were closed; working conditions disrupted; university near collapse.

The Invocavit sermons are in volume 51 of the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, pp. 70-100.

THE EIGHT SERMONS

1. First one set the tone: "The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Therefore everyone must...know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian."
 - "We are the children of wrath and all our works, intentions, and thoughts are nothing at all"
 - "To all who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12).
 - "We also must have love and through love we must do to one another as God has done to us thru faith." Here, "have you not grievously failed? I see no signs of love among you."
 - Patience was needed, not undue haste. There are "brothers and sisters on the other side who belong to us and must still be won."
2. Two important distinctions in the sermons:
 - a. Faith and love
 - From first sermon: faith "must always remain pure and immovable in our hearts, never wavering; but love bends and turns so that our neighbor may grasp and follow it."
 - From second sermon: "Faith is directed toward God, love toward man and one's neighbor."
 - From seventh sermon: love is the fruit of the sacrament. Yet "You are willing to take all of God's goods in the sacrament, but you are not willing to pour them out again in love. . . . God will not have His Word revealed and preached in vain."
 - b. "Must" and "free"
 - The faith that we believe is a "must." We have to be unyielding about it. Luther said that if the mass were not so evil, he would go back and reintroduce it. Since it *was* evil, though, he was not going to reintroduce it. A "must" was involved.

- But there are also “free” things, in which one may do or omit something, to serve one’s neighbor. Don’t make a “must” out of what is free. That would be a “loveless exercise of liberty.” If you entice someone to eat meat on Friday, and he ends up troubled at the point of death, God will call you to account. You can’t die for someone else. Don’t deceive others.
- c. Underlying: do not use compulsion in matters of faith. From end of second sermon: “I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip [Philip Melanchthon] and Amsdorf [Nicholas von Amsdorf], the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.”

3. Some “musts”

- a. Abolition of the mass
- b. Communion in both kinds – but should not be forced right now. There’s teaching to be done.
- c. In any case, those who thought they were better Christians for taking the elements in their hands or receiving the cup were not only giving offense to others but also work-righteous.

4. Some “free” things

- a. Should a person marry? Often related: Should monks and nuns leave their cloisters?
- b. Images – Remember, God did command some images: cherubim on mercy seat; bronze serpent on spit. No one should worship images, of course, but the big problem was the work-righteousness of those who placed images in church. *That* is NOT free.
- c. Abstaining from meats
- d. Communicants handling elements in Sacrament of the Altar – Luther objected to *others* making this practice a must. In this case he strongly advised: *Don’t fix* long-standing custom.
- e. Private confession and absolution. However, Luther treasured this practice.
 - “I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world.”
 - “. . . you do not yet know what labor it costs to fight with the devil and overcome him. But I know it well. . . . I know him well, and he knows me well, too. If you had known him, you would not have rejected confession. . . .”

5. A few lessons for today (drawn from the *Invocavit* sermons by Klemet Preus, *The Fire and the Staff*)

- a. Change required by the Gospel is a “must”
- b. The Word, not force, should effect change
- c. If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it
- d. Don’t let yourself get pushed around
- e. Always yield to the weak -- slow initiation of necessary change, not quick initiation of unnecessary change