



Liturgical Thought

EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY¹

Why do we sing the Kyrie (Lord, have mercy...) immediately following the Introit?

Kyrie Eleison is Greek for “**Lord, have mercy.**” It is the first **ordinary** (The unvarying or unchanging parts of the Divine Service such as the **Kyrie Eleison, Gloria in Excelsis, Creed, Sanctus, the Our Father, and the Agnus Dei.**) of the Communion Liturgy. The **Kyrie** is the only prayer that remained in Greek throughout the history of the Latin Mass. It is the oldest prayer of the faithful, and was originally chanted in a ninefold and then a threefold way. Each addresses the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Having begun our worship with the **Introit, or “entrance,”** as we come in faith into the presence of our Lord, it is most appropriate that the first words we should utter is our cry for the mercy of the Lord.

In singing the **Kyrie**, we join Blind Bartimaeus, the Canaanite woman, the ten lepers, and indeed, the entire Church on earth, in the Church’s plea for mercy from the source and font of all mercy, Jesus Christ. We expectantly look to Christ in faith asking Him to hear us and help us as we seek His mercy in all in our necessities and troubles, for our salvation, the peace of the whole world, the well-being of His Church, our worship, and our everlasting defense.

Our cry for mercy means at least three things. It means first of all that we do not come to church to do something for God or for our neighbor. The blind beggars (St. Matthew 9:27) and the ten lepers (St. Luke 17:10-12) did not offer to do anything for Jesus, nor did the tax collector who would not even raise his eyes to heaven (St. Luke 18:10-14). Neither did the woman from Canaan who was willing to be a dog if it would get her a few crumbs of mercy from Jesus (St. Matthew 15:22). We all stand before God as beggars with nothing to offer.

Second, the Kyrie is an acknowledgement, or confession, that Jesus, the Christ, is present with us even as we implored with our **invocation**. The Lord to whom we cry is here to help and to meet our plea with His mercy.

Third, the Kyrie sets the tone and context for everything that follows in the Divine Service. The **Gloria in Excelsis** makes no sense at all unless it is sung in response to the **Kyrie**. The doctrinal authority of the **Creed**, the

¹ Much of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman’s Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.), and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.

instruction of the readings and the **sermon**, the anticipation of the communicants to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus in His Supper all flow from the **Kyrie**.

What kind of instruction are we seeking? Sound principles for successful living? This is not what the **Kyrie** cries out for. What should the sermon actually be? The **Kyrie sets the foundation of our need**.

During the **Kyrie**, the pastor stands between the altar and the congregation as the central visible element. He now stands ***“in the stead and by the command”*** of our Lord, Jesus Christ. As such, the pastor leads the people in our cry for mercy as a **visible symbol of Christ** who stands before the throne of the Father interceding for us with His own Body and Blood.

✠ ✠ ✠ **Soli Deo Gloria** ✠ ✠ ✠