

Hymn of the Month

O Jesus Christ, Thy Manger Is (LSB 372)

Background

Paul Gerhardt, one of our most beloved Lutheran hymn-writers (who is responsible for sixteen hymns in our Lutheran Service Book!), is still considered Germany's greatest hymn writer. Gerhardt's life was marked by tragedy: his parents each died when he was a young teenager, his house and possessions were destroyed in a town-wide fire, he was removed from his parish for not caving to Calvinism, four of his five children died in infancy, and his wife died when his sole remaining child was six. He survived the Thirty Years' War and the Plague. And yet, the Lord works amidst pain and suffering, as He certainly did through the pen of Gerhardt, blessing many generations to come.

Lutheran hymnody of the 1600s bore the doctrinal rigor of the Reformation, but in a deeply subjective, devotional tone. Unlike the laity (and even clergy!) just a century earlier, this generation was raised upon a relatively solid catechetical foundation. The 1600s' tumult of war and the Bubonic Plague provided a fresh challenge to the Church: surrounded by grotesque death on every side, how does the Christian *live*? Where does he find consolation and hope? The resulting marriage of sound theology with the depths of human suffering produced some of our most beautiful hymnody, wherein my comfort as a Christian is found in union with Christ.

The Text

This profound little hymn begins with the image of the Christ Child's manger - an image so mundane, it is deceptive. Our overfamiliarity with the Christmas creche may induce us to forget how troubling it is to man's imagination that Almighty God could be contained, period, let alone submit Himself to such humiliation as this... that the forger of galaxies should be so small and weak as to belong in an infant's bed. But this is the Incarnation: Christ has taken on the frailty of human

flesh... *your* human flesh.

Setting forth the Incarnational theme of this hymn, allow me to reiterate that Gerhardt begins the stanza with the image of the *manger*: a feeding trough! This Word made flesh lies upon the place of feasting; the Lord's cradle foreshadows the Sacrament, wherein He is incarnated for His sheep to graze upon. When you kneel at the rail, you recline at the paradise of His manger, that you may feed upon the flesh of God, just as the stanza says.

The second stanza testifies to what theologians call the "two natures" of Christ: that He is both true God and true Man. His majesty and divine authority, as demonstrated in His miraculous taming of the wind and waves, meets us in the depths of our human weakness. "Thou, God's own Son," as we confess Him in the Nicene Creed, "With us art one": the Son has knit Himself forever into the flesh of mankind, that united with Him, we might be one with God. With this great consolation, we hear His echoing reassurance, "Take heart; it is I. Be not afraid" (Mark 6:50).

Stanza three poetically describes the "Great Exchange," that Christ gave us His perfection, while taking our guilt upon Himself. Immanuel, the Old Testament name bestowed on Jesus, means "God with us." This reiterates the previous stanza's emphasis on our union with Christ; and it is His very birth in our place that "doth quell the power of hell and Satan's bold deceiving." Gone is our primal sin, as Eve was deceived by the serpent, and now is the day of Jesus' victory!

Having pondered the significance of the Incarnation, the hymn now turns to the singer, bringing the grace of the Incarnation into the believer's heart. Stanza four address you, the Christian, assuring you that this good cheer is yours! Therefore, "Be not afraid" (Mark 6:50), and "let no sorrow move thee." Jesus draws you into Himself; He joins you, O little Christian, to the eternal Godhead. Truly, "how greatly God must love thee!" (1 John 4:9).

Stanza five magnificently expresses the Theology of the Cross: God reveals Himself to us not by our own reason or strength (i.e., the Theology of Glory), but in Christ crucified. It is in the suffering of the cross that we see who God is, and understand His salvation for us. If we are indeed united to Christ, then we too can expect the suffering of the cross in our own life, just as the hymn tells us: "What glory now the Lord prepared thee for all earthly sadness." But just as Christ's

glory was manifest in His suffering, so too do we find joy in bearing our cross. Not even the resplendent angelic host can make this boast, for this privilege is given to us alone who are united to Christ.

While stanza five fortified us in our present suffering, stanza six points us toward the joy of the world to come. Whatever enticements this life might offer us, whatever wealth and gold, all of it pales in comparison to the treasure of Christ. Therefore, “hold fast until at last a crown be thine and honor in full measure.” Here our theme of the Incarnation has come full circle: at Christmas, Christ came into our flesh; but on that final day, Christ will take our flesh (that is, us) into God. And surely, there is no greater crown and honor than to be united with God forever.