

## ORDINATION SERMON

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### GIFTS FROM HEAVEN

*But each of us has been given the gift measured out by Christ Who gave it. So it says: “He went up on high, took prisoners, and gave gifts to people”. Now what can “He went up” mean but that He had gone down to the lower parts of the earth? He Who went down also “went up” above all the heavens to fill everything. And He gave us some men to be apostles, some to speak the Word [prophets], some to tell the good news [evangelists], some to be pastors and teachers, in order to get His holy people ready to serve as workers and build the body of Christ until all of us get to be one as we believe and know God's Son, reach a mature manhood, and grow to the full height of Christ. We shouldn't be babies any longer, tossed and driven by every windy thing that is taught, by the trickery of men and their clever scheming in error. Let us tell the truth with love and in every way grow up into Him Who is the Head – Christ.*

Ephesian 4:7-15 (AAT)

Holy Father: sanctify us in truth; Your Word is truth.

Dear Christians,

God's prophet (Micaiah) answered, “*I saw all Israel scattered on the hills: like sheep... .*” (2 Chron 18:16)

*Help! O Jesus, when a great deception  
Starts to conquer the land with force.  
Satan now lures so cruelly  
Ready to capture souls.  
The Prince of the World is planning a trap  
How to lead the nation into destruction  
How to lead the nation into destruction.  
[Finnish hymn 385]*

Many believers are baffled, lost, wandering as if in a fog. The winds blow from here, from there – which of them might be the breath of the Holy Spirit and which mere deception?

Just as the Apostles and Jesus Himself warned, many are the deceivers, the antichrists, the preachers who proclaim their own thoughts, and the prophets prophesying in the spirit of the age. Some of them mean well, but do not know the Word of God; others seek human glory and careers; yet others are craftily calculating in order to ensnare people and get their hands on their purses. Sometimes these are listened to by a bewildered, small group in a large church; sometimes they are followed by great crowds filling both sports stadiums and offering buckets to overflowing.

What about my own heart? It is deceptive above all. Out of it comes deceptions and transgressions, even if they came from nowhere else.

Have you noticed all this? Have you prayed, sometimes ardently, sometimes hastily, asking for help: “Help! O Jesus, when a great deception...”?

Thanks be to God, Jesus does help!

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”* (Matt 9:36-38, NIV)

From generation to generation, the need has been great; from generation to generation, people have called out to God and asked the Lord of the Harvest to send laborers into the ripening fields.

From generation to generation, the Lord of the Harvest has answered. Today we are witnesses to such help and to this answer to prayer. These four brothers are the gift of the Risen Savior to His people.

On this Ascension Day, the cause for celebration is the Victorious Savior, Who has risen to the right hand of the throne of God, the Father. He fills everything – there is no place where Jesus' power does not reach. His power reaches to congregations. When the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed and when the Sacraments are distributed according to the Word, the greatest of miracles occurs; those spiritually dead receive life and sinners are forgiven their sins, and begin to give thanks to the Lamb of God.

Christ carried to God's throne room on high the spoils He had taken, i.e. the captives released from the bondage of sin and death. From these prisoners He gave and still gives gifts to the congregations. We often speak of the Gifts of Grace, *charismata*, skills and talents that God bestows for the upholding of the congregation. But at this point God's Word does not speak of *charismata*, but of individual gifts, almost as concrete presents, which Jesus gives to His own. These gifts are people: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.

I do know that none of you ordinands today would dare to stand before the congregation and say: “I congratulate you on receiving God's wonderful gift – me!” What true pastor does not realize his own wretchedness and inadequacy? God does not send angels but people as His messengers. In this sense, they are indeed angels, as angel, *angelos*, truly means “a messenger”: “*to the angel of the church in Ephesus, write... .*” (Rev 2:1)

In fact you are given a simple task: to be God's mouthpieces. What is important is that God's Word will be proclaimed. Your own opinions may be interesting; they may be discussed in the evening sessions of pastoral training days; but they do not gather or feed the flock, nor do they awaken true faith in anyone's heart.

Prof Jukka Thurén wrote in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St John*:

“It is part and parcel of respecting and loving someone that his opinion is valued, that recognition received from him means more than that given by any other. If human acceptance and respect mean to the Bible scholar (or pastor) as much or more than the value given by God, then this theologian has other gods besides or instead of the One True God. It is natural that people accept such a Bible expositor (or pastor) who acknowledges his dependence on human acceptance, since this is how he places people above God.”

It is only the Word of God that gathers the people of God and feeds the lambs and the sheep. Sometimes the Word does not taste pleasant to people, but that is not your problem, except in that you pray for the flock. The truth rarely gathers great numbers of people and large funds. God Himself takes care of the headcount and resources.

Dear congregation, receive the gifts of God. In the Lesson, Paul speaks here of several different types of people called. And the shepherd of a congregation includes a bit of each of these categories. Although the Apostles were unique, the true pastor stays in their teaching, upon which Jesus founded His church. Pray that the pastor would also have the insight of a prophet, the clarity of an evangelist in his words, the heart of a shepherd, and the skills of a teacher.

Christ ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God, the Father. From there the Father and the Son sent forth the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's best gift to us here on the earth, given through the Means of Grace, cared for by these, the "second best gifts" of God, i.e. the pastors who themselves live by the Means of Grace.

The flock, the congregation, contains mature sheep who have over the years learned to differentiate between good and evil. They are a great assistance to the shepherd. But, in addition, the congregation includes and hopefully always gains new sheep. How will they remain healthy and mature? They will not by themselves be knowledgeable about correct and false teaching. The task of the shepherd is to share with them, and with the whole congregation, reliable, good, healthy, eternally nutritious food.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, there is a well-known conceptual pair: *akribeia* and *oikonomia*. *Akribeia* means that the Word of God, the correct teaching which has been tried and tested, is known well. *Akribeia* is under the shepherd's responsibility. He is to know the Word of God and the correct, healthy doctrine. The Finnish Reformer Mikael Agricola stressed that it was the pastor's task to study. This cannot always be expected of sheep, especially the new ones.

Secondly, *oikonomia* means the pastor can share, divide, the Word as it is needed, not according to his own opinion, but in accordance with the Word of God, skillfully. One sheep perhaps needs to hear the strict law, another only the Gospel. The goal of all this is the awakening of strong confidence in the Savior of sinners and in the salvation of souls. "*For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty... .*" (Mal 2:7)

[portion of sermon in Swedish from here]

*God has ascended amid shouts of joy,  
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.  
Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
sing praises to our King, sing praises.  
For God is the King of all the earth;  
sing to him a psalm of praise.  
God reigns over the nations;  
God is seated on his holy throne.  
(Ps 47:5-8)*

The Psalm for today declares that God has ascended to His holy throne, and that He is King of the entire world. When you servants of the Word of God go about your work, it may seem that the king of the world is someone else entirely. The forces of the world, the problems among parishioners, the

slowness to believe God's Word, and in particular your own wretchedness seem to be in league with the Prince of this World. It is perhaps therefore that many Christians think that the Psalm refers far away to eternity, to the new earth and the new heaven. No doubt the only one ruling will be God. There finally he will sit on His throne and set everything in its proper place. But Jesus does assure us that God's sovereign rule is in force even now: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* This assurance is the basis for the command to baptize and for the Great Commission: *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* (Matt 28:18-20)

Your work is backed by all of God's power. We all do wish it might clear away every unpleasantness from before us, from our lives. And yes God often opens up doors in places we would never imagine and even lets mountains be moved if He sees fit. But He employs an even greater power: Jesus ascended to the Father, sat down at His right hand, and speaks words with an incredibly immense power and force. The Apostle John refers to it: *“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”* (1 Jn 2:1-2) And the Letter to the Hebrews states: *“We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being...”* and Who says: *“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”* (Heb 8:1-2, 12) This infinitely great power is the power to forgive sins.

This power was given to the congregation by the Lord, and it is your calling to use this power for the salvation of man!

[the Swedish portion ends here]

What a God we have! *“And He gave us some men to be apostles, some to speak the Word [prophets], some to tell the good news [evangelists], some to be pastors and teachers.”*

- Hear what the Apostolic teaching states: Christ died for your sins and was raised from the dead for your justification.
- Hear what the prophet proclaims: *“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”* (Is 1:18)
- Hear what the Evangelist declares to you: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* (Jn 3:16)
- Hear what the Shepherd says: *“I am... the shepherd of the sheep... The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”* (Jn 10:2, 11)
- And finally, hear what the teacher assures us: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* (Matt 11:28-30)

Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!

[translation by Riitta and Tom Toepfer]