

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

“O Christ, Our True and Only Light” (*Lutheran Service Book* 839)

How various in style and content are the great hymns of the Church! Some build an unyielding bulwark around doctrinal nuggets. Some soar with elegant expressions, showcasing scriptural beauty that we would be unlikely to appreciate on our own. Others progress through stories of faith, moving from one point in Christ’s life—or in the faith lives of us sinners—to another. Still others share praise or catechetical thought or confession of our sinful state.

“O Christ, Our True and Only Light” does not seek to stun with poetic insight or impress with heavy academic thought. Rather, this seventeenth-century hymn takes a single, simple idea and walks us through its execution. While the stanzas vary little in theme and content from each other, they work together beautifully to express a plea to Christ to do exactly what He does already.

In this case that plea is for Christ to “enlighten those who sit in night” and bring them into the Church as our fellow recipients of faith. His mission encompasses bringing into His family both lifelong unbelievers and those who once believed and have fallen away. Additionally, He seeks to strengthen the weak. Whatever the circumstances or reasons for their distance from God, all suffering sinners are valued and sought after.

No matter what “dark delusions” trouble them, He enlightens sinners so they may rejoice at their salvation and find peace and rest. This is, indeed, what He has done for all of us already blessed to be in His faith family. We were not wise, joyful, and strong on our own. Even now, as we cling to His grace, our sin makes fools of us, our joy shows less than our sorrow, and our strength is sapped away by hardships. Apart from what we long for regarding unbelievers, this is why Christ’s light still matters to us. We still need that light of faith, of encouragement, and of focus on the one and only source of mercy and grace.

This hymn is straightforward in its purpose and unassuming in its approach. But don’t think that lessens its worth, for this hymn is a prayer doing exactly what a prayer should. Rather than pushing a wealth of concepts at us, each stanza gently reiterates our desire for Christ to save the lost. We repeat this desire because it’s necessary: because the lost still need saving and because we need this repetition in our lifelong struggle to conform our will to God’s. Of course, Christ will save the lost. That is why He came as a man to live, suffer, die, and rise again. Of course He will continue to enlighten them through the Holy Spirit and His Word. But through this hymn, we are being trained to pray without selfish imposition, to desire what God wants because that is simply what is best.

In the end—as well as at the beginning and along the way—we praise God with an ever-increasing crowd of people loved by Him who love Him in return. Neither praise nor prayer are diminished by repetition, but rather, like the words “I love you,” become

deeper and sweeter the more their sound is heard. So we pray to and praise God again and again and again, for He will do what He has promised.

So too we pray for Christ to lead us ever forward through a world of darkness to a kingdom where we will forever bathe in His glory. He is our true and only light here and now and for all eternity.

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O Christ, our true and only light.
Enlighten those who sit in night;
Let those afar now hear Your voice
And in Your fold with us rejoice.

Fill with the radiance of Your grace
The souls now lost in error's maze;
Enlighten those whose inmost minds
Some dark delusion haunts and finds.

O gently call those gone astray
That they may find the saving way!
Let ev'ry conscience sore oppressed
In You find peace and heav'nly rest.

Shine on the darkened and the cold;
Recall the wand'ers to Your fold.
Unite all those who walk apart;
Confirm the weak and doubting heart.

That they with us may evermore
Such grace with wond'ring thanks adore
And endless praise to You be giv'n
By all Your Church in earth and heav'n.

Text: Johann Heermann, 1585–1647, tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1827–78, alt.
Tune: *Andächtige Haus-Kirche*, Nürnberg, 1676

(Both text and tune are in the public domain.)

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and copied for local use.]