

AN ANONYMOUS SAINT

Wonderful discourse on the words of the divine prayer ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’

What power does the prayer have, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’? And what grace surrounds those who practice it? And to what state of dignity does it carry them? It is not possible for us to describe it or reveal it. It is a thing which exceeds us. We will only say where this prayer comes from, and who they were who first pronounced it.

Now this prayer has its origin in Holy Scripture. And these are the three great apostles of Christ, Paul, John, and Peter, who have said these words. It is from them that we have received, as a heritage transmitted by the Fathers. They are divine oracles, revelations of the Holy Spirit, voices of God. We believe in fact that all the words or the writings of the divine apostles which carry the Spirit are the words of Christ, which he spoke through their mouths. For our Lord, in the holy Gospel, promised them that he, the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit would come to make their home in them (cf. John 14 : 29), and not only in them, the apostles, but in every Christian who keeps his commandments.

It is thus that the divine Paul, who was rendered worthy of being elevated to the third heaven, says Lord Jesus: ‘Nobody can say Lord Jesus, unless in the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12 : 3). In affirming that nobody can say this name of the Lord Jesus outside the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul reveals in a totally admirable manner that this name is much more elevated than all other names and that it dominates them; that is why it is impossible to say it otherwise than with the Holy Spirit. As for John the Theologian, who reveals like a bolt of lightning the things of the Spirit and of theology, he has made the last of Paul’s words so as to make the first of his own. He has said: ‘Every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God’ (1 John 4 : 2). By affirming that every spirit which confesses the name of Jesus Christ is of God, this divine apostle shows through these words that the name and the confession of Jesus Christ are of the order of divine and spiritual grace, because this is not a simple and merely lucky thing. So Peter, the prince of the apostles, has taken the end of the words of John – that is to say ‘Christ’ – and has made his beginning. To our Lord who demanded of his disciples: ‘Who do they say that I am?’, Peter responds: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of God’ (Matt. 16 : 15-6), words which God the Father revealed to him from heaven, to which our Lord bears witness in the holy Evangelist (cf. Matt. 16 : 17).

[Diagram, circle with the words around it]

Consider how in their divine words these three holy apostles of Christ hold themselves on to the other so as to form a circle. The one receives from the other the divine words, finding his beginning in the final word of the other, the third party doing the same, and they accomplish in this way the prayer. See how Paul says ‘Lord Jesus’, John ‘Jesus Christ’, and Peter ‘Christ, Son of God’. And so there is a wonderful circle. The ending ‘Son of God’ joins up with ‘Lord’. For it is the same thing to say ‘Lord’ and ‘Son of God’, then the two manifest the divinity of the unique Son of God.

It is thus that the blessed apostles have taught us to say in the Holy Spirit and to confess: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God’. The fact that they are three renders them worthy of faith. For every word is assured and confirmed by three witnesses (cf. Matt. 18 : 16).

The order in which the apostles said these divine words is not without reason, but has an explanation. The first to say them is Paul, then comes John, and finally Peter. The mystical tradition of prayer ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God’ began Paul, who was the last of the disciples of Christ, then through John it passes to Peter, who was the first, and it is accomplished in him. Now it is there, I think, a sign of the order in which we progress so as to unite with God through action, contemplation and love. For Paul signifies action, as he says himself: ‘More than anyone else I have laboured’ (1 Cor. 15 : 10). John signifies contemplation, as the name Theologian demonstrates. And Peter signifies love, as our Lord proves when he says: ‘Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep’ (John 21 : 16). Thus he who gives himself to this prayer progresses in time in active virtue, then rises from action to contemplation, and finally acquires the love of God and unites with him.

But these divine words of the prayer do not signify only what we have said already. They reveal equally the just doctrine of our faith and the overturn all heresy. In this way ‘Lord’ manifests the divine nature of Christ and overturns the heresy of those who affirm that he is only a man and that he is not God. ‘Jesus’ manifests the human nature of Christ and overturns the heresy of those who said that he is only God

and that he is no man, and only man by appearance. 'Christ' manifests the two natures, the divine and the human, the two in a single person, a single hypostasis, and overturns the heresy of those who have said that Christ has two hypostates separated one from the other. Finally, 'Son of God' manifests that, in Christ, the divine nature, after being unified with human nature, is not confounded by it, and that, likewise, the human nature is not confounded with the divine nature. 'Son of God' overturns the heresy of those who say that the divine nature and the human nature in Christ are mixed and confounded one with another. These four words, which are divine words and spiritual swords, overturn then and refute two pairs of heresies which oppose between them in malice and division, but join each other and reach accord in impiety.

[Diagram: four parts crossed]

This is what our Fathers have transmitted to us, those perfect men who had the wisdom of God, who carried the Spirit, who have displayed all their heart and loved so much, as the apostles taught us to be, each of these divine words 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God', and singularly the very sweet name of 'Jesus'. They made of this single name a perfect and total prayer. Continually, during all their life, they forced themselves to be satisfied with the gentleness of Jesus. They always had hunger and thirst for Jesus, especially when they were filled with spiritual and ineffable joy, when they had received the charisms of God and were still outside of the body and of the world, like terrestrial angels or celestial men, so great was the height of virtue where they were raised by the medium of that gentleness of the name of Jesus.

Nevertheless they taught us, novices and imperfect, right to also say: 'Have mercy on me.' That is to say 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.' This is so that we are permitted to know our status and our importance, to know that we have need of the great and rich love of Holy God, and that we are like that blind man of whom the Evangelist speaks who, desiring to see the light with his eyes, called out at the moment when our Saviour was passing: 'Jesus, have mercy on me' (cf. Mark 10 : 47). Likewise, we who are blind in the soul, pray God to reveal his love for us and open the eyes of our soul, so that we might see with the intellect. That is why it is prescribed likewise to say 'have mercy on me'.

Others, wanting also to protect the love of neighbours, say the prayer like this: 'Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us.' So they pray for their brothers. For they know that love is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (cf. Matt. 22 : 40; Rom. 13 : 10), and it is a virtue which contains in it all commandments and all the spiritual works. They join in this way the love of neighbour to the prayer. They pray to God to have mercy on them and their brothers. They thus call on them again the love of God. For they name God when thinking of others. As a result the love of the very good God

comes regularly in us when we see that we keep the faith within the dogmas and the perfection of the commandments through works, two things which are contained in the version of the prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have pity on us.'

If we wanted to examine once again the moments when these words were first spoken, namely 'Lord Jesus Christ', we would find them anew in the order according to which they were first said. See how 'Lord' is said, then 'Jesus', and then 'Christ'. Throughout the Old Testament, before the Law and after the Law, the Son and the Word of God is called 'Lord'. In the age of Lot, it is said: 'The Lord made fire rain down coming from the Lord' (Gen. 19 : 24). And in the Psalms, David affirms: 'The Lord has said to my Lord' (Ps. 110 : 1. LXX). Likewise in the Gospel, at the moment when Gabriel announces to the Mother of God that the Son and the Word of God will become man, it is said to Mary: 'You will call his name Jesus' (Luke 1 : 31). For the Son and the Word of God, being Lord, Master of the universe and God, wished, in his goodness and his extreme mercy, to become man so as to save man. And he was named Jesus, a name which says Saviour and Redeemer of man. Finally 'Christ' manifests the deification of human nature which our Lord took when he incarnated and became man. Before his Passion and his death, he forbade his disciples from calling him Christ, and did not permit it. But after his Passion and his Resurrection, it was with total freedom that the apostle Peter, before the Jewish people, named him Christ when he said: 'That all the house of Israel knows that God has himself made him Lord and Christ' (Acts 2 : 36). For the human nature which the Son and Word of God took on received the unction of his divinity and was equal to God, when Christ was crucified, was revived from the dead, was raised to heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. So it is after the Ascension that the time came when this name of Christ was revealed. The apostles announced then that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God and God.

So it is that we call God 'Lord', then 'Jesus', and finally 'Christ' and 'Son of God', as they appear in the prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me', the prayer that, in the divine wisdom, our Fathers received from the holy apostles as an ancestral inheritance and that they transmitted to us.

We ourselves, as much as we have been able, have said the words of this prayer, as one gathers flowers from a great and beautiful tree. Meanwhile, on the matter of the fruit which these words put forth, others can speak of it, those who with long experience have progressed in this work of prayer, who have tasted the sweetness of the fruit and have arrived at perfection.