

Lord, Have Mercy

Our prayers of confession often sound as if we are pleading with God to forgive us, as if God might forgive us if we repent hard enough or sincerely enough, and/or that God might not be trusted to forgive us. Yet God's grace is not effective because of anything we do (including confession); nor is God's grace a reward or divine response but a free gift of God. The good news is that while we were still sinners, God sent Christ to die for us and for Jesus' sake forgives our sins. (Romans 5:8) Repentance follows grace and is called forth by it.

The light of God's glory reveals not only who God is, but also who we are. The response of faith is awe and repentance which puts us on our knees as we confess both the magnitude of God's saving love and the depth of our need for mercy. This response is reflected in the rhythm of our prayers during the Christian year with a stronger sense of praise during festival seasons like Christmas and Easter and a greater emphasis on repentance in the seasons of preparation (Advent and Lent). The two emphases are inextricably related however. It is often when we are most aware of the majesty and greatness of God that we also have the greatest sense of our own sinfulness and inadequacy. Likewise it is often when we are most overwhelmed by the sinfulness of our lives that we are moved to offer the highest praise to God. Singing the Kyrie Elieson as we do during Lent carries this double emphasis of praise and repentance. The Greek words can be translated either as "Lord, have mercy," a prayer acknowledging our need of mercy or "Lord, you have given mercy!" a triumphant acclamation of God's mercy towards us.

Because God's coming to us in mercy precedes our repentance and confession, we dare to approach the throne of grace with confidence rather than fear. As you offer your prayers of confession during this Lenten season, offer them in the certain knowledge that God will not refuse or cast aside those who come trusting in the work and grace of Jesus. (John 6:7) Hear the good news! Christ came into the world to save sinners (John 3:16; 1 Tim. 1:15); and even as our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. (1 John 3.20).

A Story from the Desert Fathers

A soldier asked Abba Macarius if God accepted repentance.
After the old man had taught him many things he said,
"Tell me my dear [friend], if your cloak is torn, do you throw it away?"

He replied,
"No, I mend it and use it again."

The old man said to him,
"If you are so careful about your cloak,
will not God be equally careful of his creatures?"

Peace and joy,
Vicki