

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We prayed today that “the Giver of all ... good,” would “grant that we may think those things that are right, and by [His] merciful guiding accomplish them.” The Collect of the Day is meant to “collect” the Biblical themes for the day and set them before us as we prepare to hear the word of the Lord. “Thinking and doing the things that are right” is surely on our minds today.

How difficult that has become today, you might be thinking in this fast-paced world of social change. I certainly have found it difficult to keep up, to know, for example, what to think about our culture's rejection of sexual identity of male and female for a continuum of self-chosen gender identities. Our soon-to-be-approved Statement of Belief will help to clarify some of these issues. Nevertheless, it's not that kind of thinking that's before us today. Rather, it's right thinking about God.

Atheists and agnostics notwithstanding, admitting that there is a god — lowercase “g” — is not really so hard. In fact, it's natural. Nature bears witness to it. David sings, “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork*” (Ps. 19:1). St. Paul teaches us, “*what can be known about God is plain ..., because God has shown it .... For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made*” (Rom. 1:19-20).

It's why cultures all over the earth, without knowing anything about the Bible, have their gods. St. Paul teaches, they even “*exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*” (Rom. 1:23). They worshipped idols, like those that provoked Paul's spirit in Athens. They fashioned images of these false gods, images made out of “*gold or silver or stone,*” worthless images “*formed by the art and imagination of man.*” Not right thinking.

Well, the Greek gods may have fallen out of favor today, but there are still plenty of gods around. There is still plenty of that kind of wrong thinking today, whether it includes the same kinds of images, or different ones. There are those who make the self their god, and the goal is their shapely bodies or their emotional self-actualization or a self-determined happiness. Or perhaps their gods are the gods of the West: money, status, and power, their temples being the great skyscrapers in our great cities, their idol a bronze statue of a snorting and pawing bull, ready to charge. Or perhaps their god is an unfettered feminism, or an unbridled sexuality where anything goes. Or perhaps their god is science and technology with its unifying dogma of evolution and with its priests prostrating themselves before this unproven and improvable hypothesis, assured by their faith that science will eventually provide the answers.

Or perhaps, it's something men have not yet imagined, something still unknown and unknowable, like the Athenians' altar erected "to the unknown god." But their hearts still accuse them, for God's "*law is written on their hearts*" (Rom. 2:15)—God's natural law.

Of course, many of these wrong thinkers would not call themselves theists, even though they trust in themselves or their money or science and expect all good to come from it, that it leads them to happiness. That's what makes a god, Luther says in the Large Catechism. "A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol" (Luther, Large Catechism, Part I, 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment, 2). Thus far, Luther.

So they are theists, you see, whether they want to admit it or not. Their problem is that they are missing an important piece of information necessary for right thinking. They're depending only on natural revelation. And, to be sure, that word, "*firmly fixed in the heavens,*" is still the Lord's word. But it's not His only word, not even the most important word. They are missing God's special revelation. They are missing God's illuminating word—"*a lamp to [our] feet and a light to [our] path*" (Ps. 119:105). This is the source of right thinking and believing.

It's here that God takes us, who would otherwise perish in our affliction, and gives us life in the Word in whom is life and who "*gives to all mankind life and breath and everything,*" as we believe in this Word who is the Life, the only way to the Father who will come again in glory to lead believers to the Father, as we trust in this Word whom death could not hold, but who rose from death to resurrected life and who by Holy Baptism unites us to Himself, to that same death and resurrection, and assures us of our salvation, that "*we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*" (Rom. 6:5), as we hope in this Word as out of the depths we cry out to Him, our souls waiting for the Lord (Ps. 130:1, 5), longing for our salvation (Ps. 119:81), and crying out to Him, "*O Lord, ... how long?*" (Rev. 6:10).

This Word, Jesus, would not leave us as orphans. Although we sinners reject and abandon Him — repent! — He never leaves us or forsakes us, but promises to be with us always. And He sends the Helper to us, that by word and sacrament, He might be with us forever. This Helper is the Spirit of truth, and He helps in our right thinking. He helps us discern the truth of the things of God, for the wisdom of God is hidden to man and disclosed through the mysteries. The person who has only the natural knowledge of God can't understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). But the Holy Spirit, working through the word and sacraments, calls us, gathers us, enlightens us, and sanctifies us. He brings us to faith in Christ Jesus.

By His grace, the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who spoke by the prophets, takes the dead and makes them alive; He takes enemies and makes them friends; He takes the blind and gives them sight; He takes fools and makes them wise unto salvation; He takes unbelievers and makes them believers; He takes the weak and makes them strong in the Lord—strong in faith in Christ alone—in right thinking. And He enables us to accomplish these things that are right.

Thanks be to God; take no credit, for that is right thinking, too. And God grant that our lives may reflect this Spirit-given faith, keeping God's commandments, doing good works, that others may see and hear and believe and give glory to our God—and maybe even ask you to tell them about "*the hope that is in you.*" God grant us right thinking, and readiness in doing the right thing.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.