

The Lord's Table before the Gates of Hell

The Lord Jesus builds His Church on the confession given to St. Peter: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew 16:16). Against this Church, the "*gates of Hades will not overpower it*" (Matthew 16:18). Our experience in a hostile world can often make us doubt this. Radical Islam is still a real threat to the West, and wars are still being fought. Often you hear the prospect of a future war between the West and China, and how Australia would be dragged into any conflict. Scary stuff. And then, in our country, people are abandoning Christianity in droves, with a new generation arising that doesn't even know the basic Christian message. Churches are closing or teach a watered-down version of God's Word that won't offend anybody.

Our culture has rapidly embraced homosexual marriage, discarding millennia of tradition and rejecting natural law. The concrete, scientific reality of the human body as male or female is discarded for a new age that rejects what every previous age understood, inventing the idea that gender can change - and even be fluid - based upon feelings. It seems as though the gates of hell are indeed prevailing.

When we are prone to despair, whether about our own lives or the state of the culture or the church, it is imperative to remember Jesus' promise: "*On this rock I shall build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it*" (Matthew 16:18). What Jesus promises to Peter in Matthew 16, He reaffirms to the twelve disciples in John 20, where the whole Church is given the keys first announced to Peter upon the good confession of Jesus as the Christ. So we need not fear. Jesus is still with His Church. Strength is not found in numbers or worldly success, but our strength is entirely in the weakness of Jesus crucified. For when we are weak, then the strength and power of Jesus is made manifest.

And to constantly remind us of this, the LORD gives us a table. The table He has now given in Jesus is fully set. There is a rich meal of life-giving, conscience-cleansing food: the body and blood of Jesus. And preached through that meal is the Word, the remembrance of God's creation of our first parents and how He provided for them; how He rescued our spiritual fathers from bondage, bloodying their doors to protect them from death as they ate safely inside; how He gave them safe passage through the waters, turned their bitter waters sweet, and fed them with bread from heaven; how He established His Divine Service whereby they could know peace and joy in His presence, and how He promised them a meal of everlasting life when death was swallowed up forever.

The Lord Jesus now brings us to this beautiful table. To the world, it appears to be nothing, and sadly, to some Christians, too, who do not believe that Jesus can or does mean what He says, "*This is My body; this is My blood:*" Yet, surrounded by enemies - arguments in the church, hatred from the world, cancer and disease creeping in our bodies, experiences of sadness breaking our hearts - the Lord sets a table where our cup runs over with goodness, Jesus is saying to us, "*I Myself am with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. I know you feel guilty, but I have taken your guilt upon Myself. Your conscience is clean. I know you feel weak. But My body is true food. By it, you will live. I will raise up your body. Inside you is anger and sadness, betrayal and pride, frustration and feelings of worthlessness. Come to Me, come to My Table; here you will find rest. Here you will find that I have done everything for you already.*"

This is far better protection than any wall, moat, or army team could provide. The Lord God who commands angelic armies, who creates and brings to nothing by His Word, has invited us to His Table. What other comfort do we need? Truly the gates of hell shall not prevail where the Lord sets His Table.