

“The Fourteen Words”

Stanza 1 is based on the first seven words, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13), and stanza 2 on the second seven, “Take heart, child, your sins are forgiven” (Matt. 9:2).

In stanza 1 “O God, be merciful to me” is prayed three times. I had multiple things in mind. The Greek of Luke 18 would indicate that the tax collector prayed his prayer several times. Then, there is something earnest about praying three times (see Matt. 26:44 and 2 Cor. 12:8). I also had the Trinity in mind. But above all, I wanted to *do* what the second line says. There is for the sinner nothing else to pray.

Stanza 1 ends with the word “me.” Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector never uses the word “I.” “I” and “me” are very different. “I” is the subject, the doer. “Me” is the object, the one “done to.” The difference is grammatical, but also theological. That is why stanza 2 begins with “I” – “I am your God.” God is the “I.” I am the “me,” the object of His mercy.

God hears the sinner’s prayer and reveals that He is Our Father. This revelation and His word to us all takes place through His own dear Son, the crucified-risen Jesus Christ. The Father’s voice is heard through the Son: “Dear child....” And the Breath with which the word is spoken is the Holy Spirit.

The forgiveness is personal: “I say to *you*...*your* sins.”

And whatever He calls a thing, that it must be! He calls death “sleep” (Matt. 9:24). He calls the bread “My body” (Matt. 26:26). He calls my sins “forgiven.” No matter appearances, I am only to believe.

“Take heart” is from Matthew 9 and is full of faith and courage. “Look up” remembers that the tax collector in Luke 18 “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven.” But now he should and is ordered to! For you will see a heaven and life with God that is opened wide by Christ (Matt. 3:16). Things are “looking up”!

“Heaven” rhymes with “forgiven” in more than one way. They rhyme spiritually!

The hymn is first a confession of sin, and then a confession of faith. This is the core of the true spiritual life!