

Year B. Proper 22 – (2 September 2018)

Some of you probably remember the days when memorizing the weekly Prayer Book collect was part of Sunday School and certainly a prerequisite for Confirmation! I remember studying the collects in Confirmation class but not having to memorize them. However, the collects were familiar to me at an early age because as a chorister at the cathedral we heard them week in and week out, said and sung, that was invaluable and has stayed with me. The collects have become a mainstay of my own spiritual life; not only are they very beautiful, but they are also packed with spiritual meaning.

Each week in the year - for the major festivals, and for saints days and holy days - there is an appointed prayer. It is known as “a collect” because it does exactly what the word says, it “collects”, it brings together the themes of the day found in the readings and in the cycle of the Church year.

Many of the collects in the Anglican tradition have their roots in the liturgy of the ancient Church. So, when Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote the first

English Prayer Book in 1549 he used many of the ancient collects that go back to the early church. He also composed some of his own. This system of prayer is a treasured part of our Anglican heritage.

In the mid-1980's when the *Book of Alternative Services* came to be, many new collects were written; and thankfully some of the old ones were retained. The collect for today is a modified version of one found in the Prayer Book for the 7th Sunday after Trinity. It goes back to the 5th century, to Pope Gelasius 1st.

The old version has been modified slightly. The original first line “Lord of all power and might” has been changed to “Author and giver of all good things”. Rather than addressing God with the title “Lord”, the revisers chose to focus on the meaning of the title. Both ideas come right from the Epistle reading this morning. “*Every generous act of giving with every perfect gift is from above*”, writes James.

And so, the collect as we have today begins with the affirmation that God is the source of all good. This means that God is **not** the source of all that is bad.

This sounds obvious, but sometimes we have a tendency to heap blame upon God for the bad things in life. We have all heard the comment, or perhaps said, “Why did God let this or that happen?”, as if God is somehow in control, the way a puppeteer controls or manipulates his or her puppets. Life brings many challenges and it can certainly be a struggle; but we are wrong in blaming God for the evil in the world and giving in to a spirit of despair. The implication behind the affirmation that the “Lord of power and might is also the author and giver of all good things” is that God is loving towards us and to all creation. God wills our good, even when we do so much to work against it.

It is our free-will - misused – that turns us from God...and there are consequences are all around us. The Good News of the Gospel is that right there into the pain and hardship of the world, God comes to us in Jesus; He opens the door to a new relationship that has self-sacrifice and forgiveness at its very core. That is what the Gospel is all about. In seeking Jesus we seek his ultimate goodness - we can come to know the potential to make every moment of life

a holy moment. So God is the source of all the good in life. God is the wisdom of the ages and the love of all creation. That is what we proclaim in praying that he is the author and giver of all good things.

The readings today pick up this theme. The Old Testament lesson from the Song of Solomon is just a beautiful love song. “My beloved speaks and says arise my fair one and come away”. This metaphor of two lovers in harmony is an image for God in a mutual loving relationship with his people. Only the best and most beautiful is willed for the beloved. This is an ecstatic Easter vision of new life that comes from and returns to the Divine source. God is the giver of all good things because he loves us.

Our response is taken up in the collect with some great verbs. These are very big requests: graft, increase, nourish, keep. As always in these prayers we ask God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Take that thought now and let’s look at the Gospel lesson.

Jesus and some of the twelve are sharing a meal. People gather around them. The doors of the house

are open. Apparently some people outside the doors are interested in this dinner party. It's not the candle light, or the lovely roast lamb, or the fine Bordeaux wine that catches their attention...it is the etiquette! Let me tell you, did I ever get told off at home if I held my knife and fork incorrectly!

Pharisees have come from Jerusalem, no doubt to check out this rival teacher. They are the ones with the true religion. They are the ones who interpret the law and hold on to it for dear life. In their minds, they are the ones who show faithfulness to God and to their fellow Jews. They notice the disciples, eating with defiled hands - that is unwashed hands. Apart from the fact that we know it is good hygiene and certainly so did they, these diners have broken the law. The Pharisees do not ask "why"? They do not consider that maybe there are customs in the north that are different from those in Jerusalem. At any rate, Jesus never answers their question. Their hands might in fact have been purified according to the law. The Pharisees may not have seen it. Their first reaction is to sneer and accuse – they will, after all, find anything to trip Jesus up.

The Lord responds harshly. "You hypocrites...You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition".

The word "hypocrites" has an interesting background. It's not just saying one thing and doing another. It begins by simply meaning one who answers. It goes on to mean one who answers in a prescribed dialogue or conversation, that is to say an actor. And finally it means not just an actor on the stage but one whose life is a piece of acting with no sincerity at all. It is a harsh accusation against the outwardly pious religious leaders who hold up external rituals but lack the spirit of covenant which is at the heart of the law.

Jesus is not condemning the law that requires people to wash their hands before eating. That is proven wisdom and it is not new – there is little to suggest here that they failed to do so. He is lashing out against a legalism that is blind to the higher values of God and the tendency of some to look for that which is wrong long before they affirm that which is right.

The Evangelist tells us that Jesus goes on to say that we need to be very careful about our souls – what is inside – because more often than not evil is generated inside of **us**. There are external forces, but they touch us only insofar as we are willing to let them in. How true that is!

This takes us back to the collect: we pray that God will “graft in our hearts the true love of his name” - that divine love will become part of us just as a vine becomes part of the tree into which it is grafted.

We go on to ask that God will increase in us true religion – a relationship of faithful love. The Epistle deals with this point too. James is trying to encourage the people he loves to have a life transforming attitude. *“Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness”* he says, *“and welcome with meekness the implanted word of God”*. Each of us must ask prayerfully, “how does that speak to me”? James goes on to say, *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for the orphans, and widows, in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world”*. When we truly love God, we must truly love God’s

creation. Love calls us to action. It has been said that the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action. As we begin the fall season this is a very poignant reminder. We come here not just for social time, not just to find our weekly peace, we come to be fed by the living Lord – His character is reproducing itself in us. In a strange way the feeble, broken, cumbersome Church is a vehicle of grace.

In the collect today we ask for these important things: love of God’s name, true religion, and the nourishment of his goodness. We conclude by asking that God of his great mercy will keep us in the same. God’s promise, God’s covenant, is that he is totally faithful in giving us the very things we need. In the new life of baptism, through the strengthening grace of the Eucharist, God makes that pledge to us. Therefore, in our prayers and worship, in our living with each other, in our caring caring for God’s church and God’s world, may we do our part to help the kingdom come to be, on earth as it is in heaven.