

COLLECTS

Commentary

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

GRANT, we beseech thee, O Lord, that we, who for thy sake have been punished, may mercifully be pardoned by thy Saviour Jesus Christ.

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

THE COLLECT.

O LORD, who never failest to help and grace them whom thou dost bring up in us; and love: Keep us, we beseech thee, from all occasions of thy good providence, and perpetual fear and love of thy Saviour Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE COLLECT.

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

O LORD, who didst fast for us, and give us grace to be being subdued by thy godly motion to thy honour with the Father and the Holy Spirit without end.

SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE COLLECT.

RAISE up, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and assist us; who with the Father and the Holy Spirit reignest, one God, world without end.

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

THE COLLECT.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Holy Trinity Anglican Church

Welcoming ♦ Relevant ♦ Traditional ♦ Evangelical

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Ist SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day when He shall come again in his glorious majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, now and forever. Amen.

The collect's contrast between the *works of darkness* and the *armour of light* comes from Romans 13:8-14; and in Matthew 21:1-13 we read about Christ's entry into Jerusalem "Meek, and sitting upon an ass", i.e., *in great humility*. But the Hosannas which greeted Jesus on the first Palm Sunday assure us that such an entry was indeed, as the prophet foretold, the entry of a King, who will one day come again to consummate his kingdom. This consummation is the final "salvation" of which Romans 13:8-14 speaks, which is "nearer to us now than when we first believed."

Our lives are set between these two comings (or Advents) of Christ. As we live now on this earth, so Christ himself once lived. It was in terms of *this mortal life* of ours that he *first came to visit us*, sharing our temptations and our sorrows, bearing pain and ridicule and death. But he is to come again, no longer in lowliness and suffering, but as Lord and Judge of all mankind. Then "every eye shall see him" (Revelation 1:7). The commencement of another Christian Year challenges us with the thought that this may be the last; before next Advent Sunday he may come. Shall we be prepared to meet him?

The *armour of light* is available for us. St Paul describes it in Ephesians 6:13-17. A comparison of Ephesians 6:11, with Romans 13:14 reveals to us the fact that the "whole armour" of the Christian is nothing less than Christ himself who comes to clothe us in his purity and strength (cf. Galatians 3:27). In him we may not only conquer now the works of darkness, but *rise triumphantly to the life immortal* in the day of his coming.

Our response to God's offer now will determine our destiny *then*. (See John 6:40).

2nd SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In his preface to the first English Prayer Book (page 715 in the Canadian BCP), Archbishop Thomas Cranmer refers to the ancient practice of reading through the whole Bible in public worship year by year. During the Middle Ages this custom had

become “altered, broken, and neglected” so that commonly “when any book of the Bible was begun, after three or four chapters were read out, all the rest were unread”.

Cranmer was determined that the faith of English-speaking people should be broad-based on the *whole* of God’s self-revelation in the Bible, for God has caused *ALL Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning*. Every part bears witness in some way to the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 24:27,44).

The collect is based on Romans 15:4f. Its petition that we may *hear* the scriptures recalls days when few people were able to read. We still *hear* God’s Word in the public services of the Church, but to this must be added our own private reading and study, if the lessons in Church are to become meaningful for us. The discipline of daily Bible reading working through the whole Bible is a good one to adopt and Scripture Union’s Encounter with God notes and The Story emails can assist with this.

We must *mark*, i.e., give attention to what we read, *learn*, i.e., store up in our memories; and *inwardly digest* it, i.e., make it a part of ourselves. Thus “we through our endurance, and through the exhortation that comes from Scripture”, shall have hope.

Hope is a characteristically Advent word. It is a *blessed hope* because God who has so wonderfully fulfilled his word by sending his son into the world to be our Redeemer will also bring about his final triumph over all the forces of evil.

3rd SUNDAY IN ADVENT

O Lord Jesu Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee: Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

This collect is an appropriate and beautiful prayer for all of us called to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Like that of John the Baptist, our ministry is one of preparation, his for Christ’s first coming, ours for his second. The basic scriptures underlying the collect come from the prophecy of Malachi (3:1, 4:5, 6).

The ordination service describes presbyters (priests) as “messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord”; each word is full of meaning. In 2nd Corinthians 8:23 the word “messengers” is the same as the word “apostles.” “Apostles” means those who are sent: like the apostles, the Church’s ministers are those sent by God to proclaim the message which he has entrusted to them. That may prove costly, as the example of John the Baptist shows. It is no easy task to *turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just*.

“Ministers” in 1st Corinthians 4:1 means literally “under-rowers”. Like gallery-slaves in a Roman trireme they must be willing to stroke their oars in harmony with fellow-

oarsmen and instantly obey the captain's bidding. What a degree of cooperation and concentration this implies!

"Steward" is derived from the old English word "sty-warden", or keeper of small cattle on a feudal baron's estate. The prodigal son in the Gospel parable was a sty-warden. But the title also belongs to that same royal dynasty which had been restored to power at the time when this collect was composed, i.e., the Stuarts. So whether our task be the lowest or the highest in the land, we are all required to be faithful.

4th SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Raise up, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; who with the Father and the Holy Spirit livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

The subject of this collect is "The Advent of the Holy Spirit". Because we live between the two comings of our Lord, that is not to say that there is not a sense in which he can come to us here and now. Of course he can, and he does, through the Holy Spirit.

In this collect we ask God to *come among us* and by his *bountiful grace and mercy* to *help and deliver us*. The spirit or Paraclete is the "one called alongside to help" and it is he who mediates to us now the grace and power of Christ.

Succour means to run to the assistance of, and this gives point to the adverb *speedily* placed before the words *help and deliver us*. *Let* is a word which has a meaning today the precise opposite to what it had in the sixteenth century. To be *sore let* is to be "painfully obstructed". For other examples of this use of *let*, see Isaiah 43:13, Romans 1:13 (AV).

CHRISTMAS DAY

Almighty God, who hast given us thy only begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin: Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Like all collects composed or made new at the Reformation, this collect is strongly biblical. It is also deeply theological. It reminds us of the power (*Almighty*) and love (*who hast given us*) of God the Father; the unique status (*thy only-begotten Son*) and full humanity (*our nature upon him*) of the Son, *born of a pure Virgin*; and the regenerating and invigorating power of God the Holy Spirit.

The collect puts us in remembrance of our Baptism where we were “*made thy children by adoption and grace,*” and of our Confirmation where we sought the special gifts of the Holy Spirit, and their continual renewal in the Holy Communion.

The amazing thing is that he who was born in Bethlehem can be born in our hearts. Of this indwelling, Baptism is the pledge and symbol, but we ourselves must hold out hands of faith to receive all that God has so graciously bestowed upon us in that greatest of all Christmas presents, the gift of his Son to be our Saviour and Lord.

O holy child of Bethlehem.
Descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels,
The great, glad tidings tell,
O come to us, abide in us,
Our Lord Emmanuel.

THE INNOCENTS

O Almighty God, who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast ordained strength, and madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths: Mortify and kill all vices in us, and so strengthen us by thy grace, that by the innocency of our lives, and constancy of our faith, even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This feast, which properly belongs to the Epiphany cycle, has been observed from at least the fifth century, and the collect is based on that which was used in the Sacramentary of Gelasius. It was recast for the 1662 revision and given a new preamble based on the old Sarum introit for the day, viz. Psalm 8:2. The addition of the words *and constancy of our faith* was due to Bishop Cosin (see collect of St Stephen’s Day).

Since Psalm 8 looks forward to the incarnation, Dean Goulburn thought that “babes and sucklings” must refer to the Christ-child, whose birth at Bethlehem “laid a foundation of untold strength” which was going to be seen particularly in the shedding of his blood for our redemption. To this the blood of the innocents pointed the way. But the same phrase is quoted in Matthew 21:16 and applied to the children who cried Hosanna in the Temple courts at a time when the religious leaders of the nation were hardening their hearts against the Saviour. (There the quotation is from the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as Septuagint, and has “perfect praise” instead of “ordained strength”.) May we not then take it here as referring to the innocents themselves who, at a time when the powers that be were already ranging themselves against the Lord’s Anointed, were given the privilege, albeit unconsciously, of yielding up their lives for

Christ? So we go on to pray that, as they glorified God by their deaths, we too may glorify his holy name by lives which are as pure and innocent as theirs.

The slaughter of the innocents, recorded in Matthew 2:16-18, assures us that even the most tragic and uncalled-for events in our daily lives can be overruled by God and used for his glory. It is also a pledge that infants who die young have a place in God's Kingdom.

EPIPHANY

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, who know thee now by faith, may be led onward through this earthly life, until we see the vision of thy heavenly glory; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, one God, world without end. Amen.

The star which led the Wise Men from Eastern lands to the humble lodging of the Infant Saviour, there to lay before him their gifts of homage and adoration, is here likened to God's gracious gift of faith, which leads us step by step along the road by which one day we shall be ushered in to his unveiled presence.

By the appearance of the star, these representatives of the great Gentile nations were assured of the coming of one born to be King of all the world. By faith we too believe that Jesus is the universal King. No more that the Wise Men do we see now "all things put under him" (Hebrews 2:8), but we believe that one day he will come into his kingdom. Faith, resting on the promises of God, looks forward with eager longing to that day when faith itself shall yield to sight.

The comparison between the Wise Men's journey through barren deserts and along dangerous trails and our own pilgrimage of faith is clearly shown: "that we...may be led onward through this earthly life, until we see the vision of thy heavenly glory". Faith is the star which leads us on to him and like a star it shines brightest when the world around is dark.

At the same time we notice a contrast between faith and sight. The Wise Men saw Jesus, but in utmost lowliness, a tiny helpless Infant nestling in his mother's arms. When we see him, it will be in "power and great glory". (see Epiphany VI collect). As Mrs Alexander says in her Christmas hymn:

Not in that poor, lowly stable
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see him, but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high.

What an Epiphany that will be! But its enjoyment will only be possible in so far as we have already come to know him now by faith and have yielded to him the homage and devotion of our lives.

Ist SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the Gregorian prayer underlying this collect, the word translated “prayers” is *vota* – which means “votive offerings”. This links up with the Wise Men and their gifts, and also with Romans 12:1 – “I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.”

Here is a reminder that prayer is meant to be an expression of total commitment to God. Instead of a continuous *asking*, it is meant to be a *continuous surrender of ourselves* to God, so that his purposes of love can be worked out in and through us. “Not my will, but thine be done” (Jesus’ words in Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36, Luke 22:42).

This is only possible on the basis of “God’s mercy” revealed to us in the Cross of Christ. So we ask him to receive our prayers *mercifully*, or as the Latin original has it, “with heavenly compassion” (*caelesti pietate*), *with the* tender, understanding love that a father shows towards his wayward, often wilful, children.

Notice that we ask God, not to *answer* our prayers, but to *receive* them. It is for him to answer them as he knows best, and that means that for us the answer will be sometimes *No*. In God’s gracious sifting of our petitions we are enabled to discern the outline of his will. It is when we see what God does with our prayers that we begin to perceive, and do, the things that he requires of us. We need to have our minds open to the guidance of God the Holy Spirit.

As we humbly wait upon him, he will not only show us what we ought to do, but will provide us with the grace and power to do it faithfully. This great discovery of adequate resources thrills through St Paul’s letter to the Philippians (see 1:6, 2:13, 4:14, 19). “Ye shall receive power,” was Christ’s promise to the first disciples (Acts 1:8). Christianity is more than an ethical code, a way of life, a wonderful ideal. It spells *power*. In an age in which men have learnt to control almost everything except their own unregenerate natures, here is a message of tremendous importance for our time.

2nd SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Something of what we mean when we say that God is *almighty and everlasting* is brought out in the relative clause which follows. His power and eternity are manifested in the ability with which he is able to *govern all things in heaven and earth*.

God has given us the power to disobey or ignore him, yet he remains still in control. Even the wrath of man can be turned to his praise (Psalm 76:10). No one even in this space age, will ever be able to usurp his position as the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe. We are here on his terms, not our own.

So he “governs all things”, i.e., moderates them, makes them subservient to his own plan and purpose. That is what he did with the proud King of Assyria, Sennacherib. When, through his representative the Rabshakeh, Sennacherib boasted of all his victories and achievements, the astonishing reply came through the lips of the prophet Isaiah: “Have you not heard that *I* determined it long ago?” (2nd Kings 19:25). All that the King of Assyria had done was but a part of a larger programme in which the chief actor was God. When God had finished with Sennacherib he would put his hook in his nose, and turn him back like a witless animal along the way by which he had come (see verse 28).

In this confidence we can well ask God to grant us his peace. In its original Gregorian form the petition was, for outward peace, “peace in our time”, as in the suffrage we use at Morning Prayer: “Give peace in our time, O Lord.” In this we hear an echo of the stormy times in which the collect was composed. Our reformers have spiritualised the prayer. Thy *peace* is the *inward* peace of reconciliation with God, and the indwelling of his Spirit, and it is a peace which we can enjoy *all the days of our life*, whatever our outward circumstances may be. Truly we can say:

Though all the world is filled with fear,
And hearts of men be sore distressed;
I go my way with tranquil joy,
For I know Christ, the man of rest.

But the possession of such peace is not for our own selfish enjoyment. It becomes most securely ours when we plunge into the turmoil of the world as agents of Christ’s healing, reconciling love.

3rd SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This collect is very similar to the one appointed for the 3rd Sunday in Lent; in the Latin original they both made reference to the “right hand of thy majesty”. There, “at the right hand of the Majesty on high”, Christ sits enthroned; there, having completed his work of purging our sins, “he ever liveth to make intercession for us” (Hebrews 1:3, 7:25). God’s right hand is thus, in a special way, the place of help, and today’s collect is a prayer to God for strength to enable us to overcome our own infirmities. Christ’s presence at the right hand of God’s majesty is the pledge and promise of our victory. He himself *is* God’s right hand!

The reformers omitted “of thy majesty” from this collect and added the phrase *in all our dangers and necessities* and also the word *help*. Perhaps they wished to link it up more closely with the story about our Lord’s cleansing of a leper (Matthew 8:1-4) where we are told that Jesus “*put for his hand* and touched him – saying ‘I will, be thou clean.’”

His touch has still its ancient power! It can bring healing to our bodies as well as to our souls. It can *help and defend us* in time of temptation or special difficulty. In *ALL our dangers and necessities* it can hold us up and keep us true and furnish us with all the grace and strength we need.

But we must recognise *our infirmities*, our inability to overcome our many limitations. When the leper said to Jesus, “if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean”, it was a frank admission that he was unable to cleanse himself. So many people do not experience the fullness of God’s saving and keeping power because they do not fully commit themselves to him. They will not “let go” and “let God”. They still try to muddle through on their own, invoking the help of God only in extreme emergencies. But God means for us to look to him moment by moment. We must put our hand in his, if we are to win through.

4th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: Grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The *many and great dangers* remind us that we have here another collect dating back to the stormy days of Pope Gregory. The second half of the prayer was, however, altered by the 1662 revisers. The original, reproduced by Cranmer in the 1549 Prayer Book, ran

as follows: “Grant to us the health of body and soul (the Latin had “health of mind and body”), that all those things which we suffer for sin, by thy help we may well pass and overcome.”

The implication here is that the *frailty of our nature* is increased every time we give way to temptation. Sin brings its own punishment in the shape of a weakened resistance and an impaired will. But God in his mercy and grace can offset the downward pull of own defeats and restore us to full ‘health of body and soul’.

Through its alteration in the seventeenth century, the collect has been made more general in its application. Not only from the results of our own folly and wrongdoing do we pray to be delivered; we are led to seek God’s protection in *ALL dangers* and to claim his support *through ALL temptations*.

The prepositions *in* and *through* are significant. The Christian is not promised temporal security or complete freedom from trial. But he is promised *such strength and protection* as will enable him to carry on unafraid and to surmount each temptation as it comes. This is the meaning of that part of the Lord’s Prayer which says, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” That is, do not lead us into trial without also bringing us victoriously through it. Thereby we lay hold of the gracious promise given to us in 1st Corinthians 10:13.

The *many and great dangers* find and illustration in the story of the Storm at Sea (Matthew 8:23-27). That was a visible peril. Others, like submerged mines, bestride our pathway unawares. The opening words of the collect are most apt: *O God, who knowest...* He sees the dangers, even when we do not. By his spiritual radar he can detect the obstacles, and lead us safely through.

5th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

O Lord we beseech thee to keep thy Church and household continually in thy true religion; that they who do lean only upon the hope of thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by thy mighty power; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The collects for the fifth and sixth Sundays after Epiphany have sometimes been called the “wandering collects”. Because, in a year in which there are only three or four Sundays in the Epiphany season one or both of these collects may turn up later in the year in order to fill out the correspondingly lengthened Trinity season.

The opening phrase of this collect is precisely the same in Latin as the opening phrase of the collect of Trinity XXII. In both, the word *Church* has been inserted alongside the word *household* to make the meaning more explicit; and the expression *continually in thy true religion* and “in continual godliness” both represent the Latin *continua pietate*. This really means “by continual fatherly concern”, for the word *pietas* is here used “of God’s

sentiment towards us, not of ours towards him". It is the care which a *pater familias*, a father of a family, shows for his *familia* or household, which includes not only his own children and dependants, but all who work for him or serve him in any way. This word meets us in Luke 12:42, and in Galatians 6:10 the Church is described as "the household of faith".

God's tender, fatherly care extends to all, and it is this which, down the centuries, has kept the Church continually in his true religion. In the purification of the Church of their own day, and the setting up once more of scriptural standards of worship and doctrine, the reformers saw an outworking of God's unceasing love for his people.

The latter half of the collect contains a beautiful description of what constitutes *true religion*. On man's side it consists of leaning only upon *the hope* of God's *heavenly grace*. On God's side it involves the unfailing supply of *his mighty power*. When these two things come together, trust in God alone, and the promised power of the Holy Spirit, then true, spiritual religion can flourish once again.

Many policies are being put forward to ensure the Church's revival in our own day. Ecumenism, a fuller use of modern media of evangelism, such as radio, television and the Internet, cells in industry, and so on. All these have their value, but the basic need is for that spirit of heartfelt, expectant, humble prayer which leans only upon the hope of God's heavenly grace. As we look to him, so the blessing we seek will come.

6th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

O God, whose blessed Son was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil, and make us the sons of God, and heirs of eternal life: Grant us, we beseech thee, that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves, even as he is pure; that, when he shall appear again with power and great glory, we may be made like unto him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where with thee, O Father, and thee, O Holy Ghost, he liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The collect is based on 1st John 3:1-8, and Matthew 24:23-31, both of which refer to Jesus' second coming.

The collect begins by reminding us of the two-fold purpose for which Christ came. It was, as St John tells, that he might destroy the works of the devil. This he did supremely on the Cross when he broke the power of sin and death. Again, it was that he might make us the sons of God and heirs of eternal life. This too, we learn from the 1st John passage. Having freed us from bondage to sin, Jesus brought us into a new relationship with God and gave us the status of sons. St Paul writes glowingly of all this in Galatians 4:4-7.

The implications of our new status have to be worked out in experience. Although we have received the new nature, we still have to purify ourselves, i.e., consciously make

way for the new nature to express itself in terms of our daily walk and behaviour. We do this, not by morbid introspection, but by continually “looking unto Jesus”. As we gaze at him, so we become transformed, changed into his likeness (cf 2nd Corinthians 3:18). The ultimate transformation awaits the Last Great Day, when with unveiled faces we shall “see him as he is”. That final manifestation, with power and the great glory is foretold in Matthew 24:30 and is the great far-off divine event towards which the whole creation moves.

The collect fittingly concludes with ascription of praise to each of the three persons of the sacred Trinity, in anticipation of that glorious song of praise which will ascend to the Triune God when Christ has come fully into his kingdom (see Revelation 5:11-14).

SEPTUAGESIMA

O Lord, we beseech thee favourably to hear the prayers of thy people; that we, who are justly punished for our offences, may be mercifully delivered by thy goodness, for the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Justly punished for our offenses! A far cry from the usual, “What have I done to deserve this?” When trouble and calamity overtake a man, the usual reaction is one of pained surprise and indignant expostulation. He thus hardens himself and becomes incapable of deriving any positive advantage from his affliction, in the end, he can only give way to despair.

Both this collect and the next one come down to us from the Gregorian Sacramentary. Italy was then being invaded by the fierce Lombards, and, if there had been any newspapers in those days, their headlines would have told a tale of murder and rape, of ruined homes and starving refugees, of fear and hopelessness. Yet the author of this collect is bold to say *we are justly punished for our offences*. Could that be true in every case? Were there not, then as now, many helpless and innocent people, whose sufferings were entirely undeserved?

In answer to this question it is well to observe that the word punished would be better translated “afflicted”. Affliction comes to all of us, because we belong to a race which as a whole has turned away from God and gone its own way. Affliction is God’s means of showing us the consequences of our wrong choices and of recalling us to repentance and a humble seeking of his Face. Individual guilt may vary, but none of us can contract out of a corporate sense of responsibility.

It is when we realise that we have “all sinned” and have “all come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) that we open a door whereby God is able to come in and change the situation. His goodness has been manifested to us *through Jesus Christ our Saviour* – here the thought of Christmas and Epiphany recurs – and that same Saviour who, on

the Cross, suffered all that the hate and the sin of man could inflict upon him, now *liveth and reigneth* and intercedes for us at God's right hand in heaven. So we look ahead to Calvary, Easter and Ascension. Because of these verities, we *may be mercifully delivered*, if not from the afflictions themselves, then from the hardening, deadening effect they may have upon our souls. Hope lies with those who *pray*.

SEXAGESIMA

O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do: Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last Sunday's collect expressed penitence for our share in the world's ills. Today's collect disposes of the idea that we can remedy the situation by our own unaided efforts. Not by *anything that we do* can peace and security be brought to a troubled world, or to a troubled heart. An important lesson this, in the days in which we live, when there is so much emphasis on man's power to help himself. It is re-echoed in the collect of the Second Sunday in Lent.

In place of the phrase *by thy power* there originally stood the words "by protection of the doctor of the Gentiles", i.e., St Paul. As a request for the great apostle's intercession, such as is often found in the mediaeval collects of the Saints' Days, Thomas Cranmer therefore rightly rejected and replaced it. But it is possible that originally there stood here a phrase which meant "by the protection belonging to the doctor of the Gentiles" or "protection which he, above all others, enjoyed at the hand of God".

QUINQUAGESIMA

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

The old Latin collect of this Sunday was a prayer that "we, being absolved from the chains of our sins, may be defended from all adversity". It thus reflected the mediaeval practice whereby the faithful made a special confession of their sins before the beginning of Lent in order to make a full and proper use of it. "Shrove" Tuesday, when people were "shriven" or absolved by the priest, is another reminder of this custom.

Thomas Cranmer and the other reformers knew how far short these outward observances can fall of true, heart-religion. So they substituted a new collect, based on St Paul's great hymn of love in 1st Corinthians 13.

How necessary it is, just before Lent begins to be told that *all our doings without charity are nothing worth*. If more frequent attendance at Bible class or Holy Communion, or

special acts of self-denial and self-discipline, only make us proud and spiritually “superior”, then we shall have “kept Lent” in vain. The end of Lent should find us with a greater love in our hearts for God and for our fellow-men. That is the positive side of our observance without which all else is valueless.

This is not something which we can achieve ourselves. God *must pour into our hearts that most excellent gift* (it is his gift) *of charity*. This he does by giving to us his Holy Spirit (see Romans 5:5). The “love of God” to which St. Paul there refers is probably God’s love for us rather than our love for him but the love of God is such that when it is received, it must call forth an answering love to him, a love which shows itself in humble and devoted service to other men, to “the brother for whom Christ died” (1st Corinthians 8:11; cf. 1st John 4:19-21). Without the bond or ligature of love, there can be no real peace, and virtues only turn to vices (Ephesians 4:1-3, Colossians 3:14, 1st John 3:14).

The words “charity” and “love” have debased meanings nowadays. If we would know what love really is, we have but to look at what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray this prayer.

1st DAY OF LENT

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the Book of Wisdom 11:23f. (in the Apocrypha) we read: “But thou hast mercy upon all men...and thou overlookest the sins of men to the end that they may repent. For thou lovest all things that are and abhorrest none of the things which thou didst make.” The petition *create and make in us new and contrite hearts* is based on Psalm 51:10.

God is not indifferent to the world which he has made. Even though men have misused his gift of freewill and turned themselves against him, yet he still loves them. He loves the sinner, while hating his sin, and is ever ready to forgive the penitent. So we pray that he may give us *new and contrite hearts*.

One is reminded of the figure of God as a potter in Jeremiah 18. Because of its imperfection, the vessel which the potter made had to be remade. It had to be broken up (that is the meaning of the word *contrite*) and fashioned all over again on the wheels. So God, by his invincible love, can shatter our hard, rebellious hearts, and recreate them as he would have them to be. But he will not do this without our full consent.

We lament our sins *worthily* when we forsake them for what they are in themselves, an affront against God’s holiness and love, and not merely for the trouble they may give us afterwards. *Wretchedness* means the unhappiness which is the result of sin. *Remission* is of debt; *forgiveness* of offences.

The rubric directs this prayer to be used throughout Lent after the collect appointed for the day.

1st SUNDAY IN LENT

O Lord, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights: Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

Like the collects of Advent III and St Stephen's Day, this one is addressed directly to our Lord. The reason is not far to seek. He had shared our temptations (cf. Hebrews 4:15). It was composed for the 1549 Prayer Book and replaced an older collect which spoke of fasting and other good works as a means of acquiring merit before God, an idea directly controverted in the New Testament.

The Lenten fast is based on the forty days and forty nights which our Lord spent in the wilderness on the eve of his public ministry (cf. Matthew 4:1-11). Through rigorous self-discipline, our Lord was able to withstand the subtle temptations of temper when he came to him. This he did *for our sake*, that we too might be victorious. For by resisting the devil he deliberately chose the way of the Cross and so wrought our salvation.

We too must *use such abstinence*. Not for the acquisition of merit, but that *we may ever obey*. Abstinence is the negative side of positive obedience to God's way and will, *his godly motions* (i.e., directions) as the collect calls them. We leave off doing certain things, that we may be better able to do other things – our flesh must be subdued to the spirit.

Until 1662 this word *spirit* was spelt with the little "s". Since then it has had the capital. The spirit, or higher side of our nature, cannot triumph over the lower until it is cleansed and empowered by the indwelling Spirit of God. Here, as in everything else, "the Spirit helpeth our infirmities" (Romans 8:26). Christ has given us not only an example, but his own presence to cheer and sanctify us.

Our church prescribes no precise rules for fasting. Every man must examine his own heart and determine to set aside everything that would prevent him from living a life which will bring honour and glory to God.

2nd SUNDAY IN LENT

Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In this and the remaining Sunday collects during Lent we sense the troublous times in which they were first composed. The sixth century witnessed the collapse of Roman rule and the break-up of a thousand years of Roman law and order. Men were made forcibly aware of their weakness and insecurity in the face of rapidly changing circumstances and the perils of an uncharted future.

Today's collect begins with a frank recognition of our powerlessness. In spite of all the advances of modern science, and the provision of material aids such as our fathers hardly even dreamed of, our age is rapidly becoming spiritually bankrupt. Thoughtful people are coming to realise this. The best cure for a sick body and a frightened and disordered mind is not so much medical and psychiatric treatment as renewed faith in God and contact with him through prayer and sacrament.

"Almighty God, who seest..." Once we realise that God's eye is upon us, and that he looks on us in mercy and compassion, then we betake ourselves to him with prayer that he may keep us, both in body and soul.

Our reformers added the phrase "which may assault and hurt the soul". In the Latin original the second half of the aspiration is a prayer that we may be "cleansed in our minds from evil thoughts". We cannot prevent evil thoughts entering our minds. They come at us from every quarter. But we must not harbour them. To do so is to contract defilement, and we shall need the cleansing of the divine forgiveness. In our version of the collect we pray that evil thoughts may not even find a lodgement in our souls.

When we think of all the physical and spiritual dangers to which we are exposed, we do well to re-echo the prayer of the Syro-phoenician woman: "Lord, help me" (Matthew 15:25). Our collect is an expansion of that prayer.

3rd SUNDAY IN LENT

We beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This collect is like the one appointed for the third Sunday after the Epiphany. But instead of asking God to look upon "infirmities", we ask him to look upon the *hearty desires* of us, his humble servants.

The word translated *hearty desires* is the Latin word *vota*, which is rendered "prayers" in the collect of Epiphany I and "good desires" in the collect of Easter Day. It means literally, "votive offerings", and refers, in today's collect, to the vows and decisions of the catechumens who this week gave in their names to announce that they were ready to undertake the professions and responsibilities of Christian life and witness.

Some of these vows, or hearty desires, are suggested in Ephesians 5:1-9. Those who, having begun their course of instruction, were now fully determined to go forward to Baptism, were setting themselves to walk in love, to avoid uncleanness and to walk as children of light. By so doing they were making themselves into a very special target for the evil one. Satan always pays particular attention to young Christians! Hence this prayer that God will stretch forth the right hand of his Majesty *to be our defence*. The reformers added, for good measure, *against all our enemies*.

Luke 11:14-26 describes a man's soul as a house "swept and garnished". That is like the renunciation called for in Baptism. But it is not enough to sweep away the evil. There must be the installation of the good. Christ himself must enter in and take possession of man's soul. When he is given access and control, then the devil is powerless to hurt us.

*Temptations lose their power,
When thou art nigh.*

4th SUNDAY IN LENT

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

This collect, should be compared with that of Septuagesima. There we pray to be "delivered"; here, to be *relieved*. The Latin word translated *relieved* is *respiramus*, which means "that we may breathe again", or, as someone has suggested, "that we may get our second wind".

Lent is now halfway through, and perhaps we have grown weary in our devotions. The thought of our sins as the cause of Christ's passion has become almost intolerable. Still we acknowledge that for our *evil deeds* we do *worthily deserve* (the phrase is Bishop Cosins's, and was added in 1662) *to be punished*, but we seek the comfort of God's grace that we may be refreshed even now by the assurance of his pardon.

The self-examination to which Lent calls us may lead us into something of a wilderness. We feel our own barrenness and lack of resources. Our souls are parched and dry. But God can "prepare a table in the wilderness" (Psalm 78:19). John 6:1-14 describes how, in a desert place, the Lord Jesus fed a multitude of people. His refreshment of their bodies with the multiple loaves and fishes is a parable of the spiritual food which can sustain men's souls.

So this Sunday in the middle of Lent has always been known as Refreshment Sunday. In the Middle Ages the discipline of fasting was relaxed and the day was one of subdued rejoicing. For us it may signify that sorrow for sin and joy in God can co-exist side by side. We can be sad and glad simultaneously. Sad for our share in the Cross of

Christ, and glad because through that Cross we have been “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven”. For ours is not the sorrow of the world which worketh death, but a godly sorrow which worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which “bringeth no regret” (see 2nd Corinthians 7:10).

5th SUNDAY IN LENT

We beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people; that by thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The prime occasion when Almighty God mercifully looked upon his people was when he offered up his own Son upon the Cross for our salvation. There his *great goodness* was supremely manifested, on the basis of which we can indeed pray with confidence to be *governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul*. We are reminded of the Words of Administration in the Holy Communion: “the Body (or Blood) of our Lord Jesus Christ...preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life”. Every part of us is to be included in the scope of Christ’s redeeming work. See Colossians 1:19-22, Romans 8:23.

People is *familia*, the word rendered “household” in the collects of Epiphany V and Trinity XXII. *Governed* and *preserved* are thus appropriate terms to be used of the Master of the Household, the *pater familias*, whose work it is to rule and provide for those entrusted to his care.

PALM SUNDAY

Almighty and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The beautiful Palm Sunday collect is a fitting introduction to Holy Week: we focus our attention on the suffering and the death which was the purpose of Christ’s coming, as also the culmination of his last journey to Jerusalem.

Our reformers must have had John 3:16 in mind when they added the phrase *of thy tender love towards mankind* to the beginning of this prayer. It was because God “so loved” that he “gave” the greatest gift that he could ever give, the gift of his only begotten Son. The next few words are based on St Paul’s description of Christ’s condescension in Philippians 2:5-11. Herein are contained the great truths of the incarnation and the atonement, Christ’s identification with us even to the point of sacrifice. How low he stooped “for us men and for our salvation”! When he became so humble, can we remain so proud?

*When I survey the wondrous Cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died;
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

Not only must we follow the example of his great humility; we must also follow the example of his *patience*. The word here carries its original meaning of “suffering”. We too must suffer with him, we must die to sin and rise again unto righteousness as St Paul asserts in Romans 6:1-11. The Cross must become an event in our own lives, so that we can say, again with St Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live no longer I, but Christ liveth in me” (Galatians 2:20).

GOOD FRIDAY

Christ died for the sins of the whole world, and it is appropriate that we should have the whole world in view in our intercessions. In these collects, under the very shadow of the Cross we pray for: “this thy family” – with particular reference to the local congregation; the whole body of the Church – i.e., all who profess and call themselves Christians, the holy Catholic Church throughout the world.

Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold this thy family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was contented to be betrayed, and given up into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer death upon the cross, who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In the Sarum liturgy this was a post-Communion collect for use on Wednesday in Holy Week. Hence the specific reference to our Lord’s betrayal (see Mark 14:10f.). The phrase “*was contented*” represents the Latin *non dubitavit* which means “did not hesitate”. We are reminded of how Christ “stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51) for the accomplishment of his passion. In the conclusion of the collect there is a contrast between the shame of Calvary and Christ’s present glory which is reminiscent of Philippians 2:5-11.

*The head that once was crowned with thorns
Is crowned with glory now*

Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified: Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before thee for all estates of men in thy holy Church that every member of the same, in his vocation and ministry, may truly and godly serve thee; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

This was one of a series of solemn prayers in the Roman rite for Good Friday which has been expanded to include “*every member*” of the Church. Not only the clergy but the lay people too have a definite ministry to perform. This is not confined to what is known as

“church work” but includes a true and faithful witness to Christ as a one’s place of business or recreation, in the home, on a journey, or whatever we may be. We do wrong to limit the idea of vocation to the ordained ministry or missionary work. Every Christian must be a missionary. To help him in this task is part of the work of the Holy Spirit (see John 15:26f).

EASTER EVE

Grant, O Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that, through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to out joyful resurrection; for his merits, who died and was buried, and rose again for us, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The old Sarum collect of Easter Eve had reference to the special ceremonies which began at twilight and went on all through the night in preparation for Easter celebrations. Candles and torches were lit everywhere, and in the early centuries of our era those who during Lent had been prepared for Baptism underwent their last testings. On renouncing Satan and all his works, they were exorcised and then baptised and confirmed so they might be able to take their places amongst the Easter communicants early on Sunday morning.

The reformers eliminated the old Vigil service and ordered the collect of Palm Sunday to be used in place of the Sarum one. Our present collect was provided in 1662. The work of Bishop Cosin, it is based on a collect which appeared for the first time in the Scottish Prayer Book of 1637 and may have been composed by Archbishop Laud. This incidentally was the Prayer Book which Laud tried to force upon the Scottish Church and led to the Solemn League and Covenant and the repudiation of episcopacy in 1638.

The collect not only preserves the ancient connection of Easter Eve with Baptism but is squarely based on St Paul’s great baptismal passage in Romans 6:3-11. Verse 4 says: “We were buried with him through Baptism into death; that, like as Christ was raised from the dead through the Glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.” The outward ceremony, whenever it takes place, must call for the inward response of the heart. We must *continually mortify*, i.e., reckon as dead, our corrupt affections, and share, even now, in that rich, joyful resurrection life which is ours through Christ’s victory.

EASTER DAY

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee, that as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The first part of our Easter collect goes back to the sacramentary of Gelasius. The original petition was: "Grant, we beseech thee, that we who celebrate the solemnities of the Lord's resurrection, may through the renewal of the Spirit arise from the death of the soul." This was altered to the present wording in the Gregorian Sacramentary, in order to offset the false teaching of Pelagius who said that it was possible for a man to turn to God and do his will without the help of divine grace. This heresy is by no means extinct today.

The collect, thus revised, reminds us that, as St Paul said, "it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). We *all* need his *special* grace, "special" because it is available for each one of us individually: we *all* need his *continual help*, if we are to make anything of our Christian lives.

Like the good shepherd who goes before his sheep, so the Lord Jesus has *prevented* or "gone before" us, that by his grace he might open up in a way to follow him along the path of victory. Because he has *overcome death*, because he had opened the *gate of everlasting life*, we can be more than conquerors through him that loved us. We can know in our lives "the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10).

Ist SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

Almighty Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification: Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The invocation is unique among the collects, but reminds us of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God, the *Father Almighty*." The God whom we worship is both absolute power, and absolute love. What a combination! Its outworking is seen in the clause which follows, based on Romans 4:25. Such is God's power and love that he has given his only Son to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification. See further Ephesians 1:19f., 2:4-6 and John 3:16.

The petition takes us back in thought to the Jewish Passover, in preparation for which all yeast or leaven (a symbol of evil) had to be swept out of the house (see Exodus 12:15) and kept out as long as the feast lasted. It is not enough to come to Communion on Easter Day, to join in the glad singing of the Easter hymns, to relate all this to our daily lives. We must forsake sin and determine to follow Christ fully day by day.

Because "Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us" we too, says St Paul in 1st Corinthians 5:8, must "keep the feast". The collect paraphrases this by saying that we must *always serve thee in pureness of living and truth*. That is what St Paul meant by keeping the feast. Life for us can be a continual Easter if we allow Christ to have his way with us.

This Sunday is commonly known as Low Sunday. The flop after the festival! But it is probable that “low” comes from *laudes*, the Latin word for praises. Our praises are to be continued on the first Sunday after Easter, and indeed on every Sunday of the year and on every day of our lives.

2nd SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

Almighty God, who hast given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In our collect we are reminded that Jesus Christ is *both a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life*. By itself, the idea of Christ as our great exemplar will not carry us very far. It will only lead us to despair, for his standards and achievements are far beyond our reach. We have only to substitute his name, and then our own, for the word “charity” in 1st Corinthians 13 to be made sure of that.

But Christ has died for us, and risen again. That is to say, he has washed away the evils of our past mistakes and failures, he has cleansed us from our sins, and he has brought a new power into our lives, a power which makes for righteousness. Thus he is to us God’s unspeakable, indescribable gift. His work for us and in us is his *inestimable benefit*. We can never fully reckon up our indebtedness to him.

By *thankfully receiving* all that he has done for us, we find ourselves in a new situation. All his patient life of service while he was here on earth is no longer there to mock us, but becomes a dynamic pattern to which, by grace, our own lives may conform. As we *receive*, so we are *enabled* to follow those blessed steps. This is the right order. We cannot live out what has not been implanted within.

Effort is still called for. We must *daily endeavour ourselves*; but the effort is not that of mustering up our own puny resources but of “looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2).

3rd SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

Almighty God, who showest to them that be in error the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return into the way of righteousness: Grant unto all them that are admitted into the fellowship of Christ’s religion, that they may forsake those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the early centuries of Christianity, Easter was the great season for Baptisms. This collect, which comes from the Sacramentary of Leo I, and is one of the oldest in our

Prayer Book, has the newly baptised especially in view, those who have so recently been *admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion*.

The invocation may appear to refer to returning backsliders rather than to new converts. This is not necessarily so. The whole human race has turned away from God and needs to be recalled to him. Into the darkness of human failure and sin comes *the light of God's truth*, showing men what they really are and revealing to them God's way of salvation in Christ, who is the Light of the World. He who "comes to the light" (John 3:21) is enabled to *return into the way of righteousness*, to fulfil the purpose for which he was originally made.

So he submits to Baptism, the outward sign and seal of God's reconciling love, and finds himself a member of a fellowship with clear and definite aims. His baptismal vows remind him that, in addition to faith in Christ, he is committed to two things, *renunciation* and *obedience*. He must *forsake* the things which are contrary to his profession and he must follow the things agreeable to the same (1st Peter 2:11-17).

The negative side must be matched by the positive. We must *follow ALL such things as are agreeable to the same*. The reformers added *all*, thereby showing that there must be nothing half-hearted in our allegiance. We must be "whole-hoggers" in our loyalty to Christ.

4th SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The years immediately preceding the revision of the Prayer Book in 1662 were years of civil strife and bloodshed, followed by the repressions and disorders of the Commonwealth, so that even Cromwell said that he would rather have lived under his own woodside and have kept a flock of sheep than undertaken the government of such an unruly nation.

This may account for the change in the opening clause which originally ran: "O God, who makest the minds of the faithful to be of one will." In its earlier form, the collect was a prayer for church unity, and showed that the way to unity is by loving what God commands and desiring what he promises. That is still the basis of Christian unity today: a common allegiance to God's commandments as revealed in holy scriptures and an earnest seeking after his blessing.

The 1662 revisers, in altering the invocation, have simplified the collect and made it even more applicable to a time of change and perplexity such as that in which we

ourselves are living. As in the perilous days of the fifth century when the Roman Empire was crashing to its ruin, so now, men are passionately seeking for security and for an alleviation of their fears. Their search is doomed to failure because of the *unruly wills and affections of sinful men*, themselves included. Until the unruly will is replaced by love of God's commands, and the unruly affection by the desire of what he promises, there can be no real hope of peace.

Security is offered to those whose hearts are fixed in the right place. Where is that? Our collect leaves us guessing. The answer comes in the collect of Ascension Day. To dwell continually with Christ is to know the secret of true peace and victory. (see John 16:33, 15:5).

5th SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

O Lord, from whom all good things do come: Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This Sunday is Rogation Sunday, and *rogation* means *asking*. At this season of the year we specifically ask for the supply of our material needs and for God's blessing on the crops and on all the labours of our hands in farm and field and factory. We are encouraged so to pray by the clause in the Lord's Prayer which says, "Give us this day our daily bread." This does not imply that we do not have to work for it. We do, but we are always to remember that all good things come from God and are his gracious gift to us. Such a recognition will lead us to be careful in the use we make of earth's resources and mindful of the needs of others.

What is true in the material realm is true also in the spiritual. St Paul says, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness" (2nd Corinthians 9:10). Good thoughts, like good seed, can be implanted in our minds and brought to fruition in loving deed and noble act by the rain and sunshine of God's grace.

There is a change of metaphor in the words *by thy merciful guidance*. The original Latin had "with thee as pilot" (the Reformers added *merciful*), a thought which comes again in the collect of Trinity II (where "govern" means to "pilot"). We may know what good things we ought to be aiming at. Only God can enable us to "arrive". He not only supplies us with a chart, but offers himself to be our pilot.

ASCENSION DAY

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend,

and with him continually dwell; who liveth and reignth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

St Luke tells us that forty days elapsed between our Lord's Resurrection and Ascension. Ascension Day therefore always falls upon a Thursday, and this tends to obscure the fact that it is one of the major feasts of the Christian Year. As such it is provided with a Proper Preface in the service of Holy Communion.

The Preface refers to the apostles and says that it was "in their *sight*" that Christ ascended up into heaven. This is often contrasted with the words *we do* BELIEVE here. But "their sight" was not without faith. Nor is our not having seen any bar to our enjoying the full benefits of Christ's Ascension.

No longer confined by his incarnation to one place, Christ is everywhere. Whenever and wherever we turn to him in faith and prayer we realise his presence. The Holy Spirit makes real to us the things of the Lord Jesus (see John 16:7,14).

As Christ by his spiritual presence is still with us here on earth, so it is equally true that by that same spiritual contact we already dwell with him in the heavenlies. That is the thought which come in the petition. It is based on such scriptures as Ephesians 2:6, where we are told that God has "raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ", and Colossians 3:1f. – "If ye be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above..."

In so doing we gain a new perspective, and the difficulties of life come to be seen in their right proportion. Heaven becomes our true home, and one day will be so altogether. When Christ comes to earth, he comes by himself alone. When he returns, he takes his people with him.

*He has raised our human nature
On the clouds to God's right hand;
There we sit in heavenly places,
There with him in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;
Man with God is on the throne.
Mighty Lord, in thine Ascension
We by faith behold our own.*

C Wordsworth

SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION DAY

O God the King of Glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven: We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless; but send to us thine Holy

Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen

This collect was a favourite with the Venerable Bede, and was often sung by him during his last illness as he was completing his translation into Anglo-Saxon of the Gospel of St John. He died at Jarrow on Ascension Eve, 735, still singing.

The collect looks back to Psalm 24:7-10, John 14:18, Acts 1:4. In the collect, the title *King of Glory*, is applied to God the Father, and the Holy Ghost is represented as not only sent to *comfort* us down here, but also to *exalt* us up there, where Christ himself has gone before us. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to dwell continually with our Lord and through him that we are raised to the heavenly places.

Comfortless in the collect and in John 14:18 (AV) means “orphans”. The prospect of the Lord’s departure from them filled the disciples with anguish and apprehension. “Because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your hearts” (John 16:6). There were no grounds, however, for their fear. Through the Spirit, that other comforter (see John 14:16), he would still be with them, in a much more intimate way. That new experience of theirs is available to us “by the same Spirit”, whose promised coming is the theme of Whit Sunday.

WHITSUNDAY

God, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

Another name for Whitsunday is *Pentecost*, which means “the fiftieth day”, i.e., after Passover or Easter. The old Jewish feast of Pentecost was both a thanksgiving for the wheat harvest and a commemoration of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. The Christian Pentecost celebrates the giving of the new Law, the law written by the Spirit on the *heart*, and marks the beginning of the harvest of all nations. At Sinai, Israel was constituted as the people of God; in the upper room at Jerusalem the Christian Church was born.

The name Whitsunday or “White Sunday” became popular many centuries ago because, like Easter, this was a season of Baptisms, and the newly baptised in their white baptismal robes were conspicuous in the services of the day. The weather was warmer than at Eastertide in northern climes and more Baptisms took place therefore at this later season of the year.

The collect focuses our attention on the Holy Spirit's *teaching ministry*. "He shall teach you all things" was the Saviour's promise in John 14:26. Those whom he teaches are God's *faithful people*, i.e. those who have complete faith in him and in the Christ he hath sent.

Instructed by the spirit, *we have a right judgement in all things*. The original Latin *recte sapere* can mean "relish what is right". By the help of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to "prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Roman 12:2), and to love it. We can say with the Psalmist, "I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea, thy law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). So shall we *rejoice in his holy comfort*, for not only shall we earnestly desire the best and highest things, but we shall find that he strengthens us to do them. This is the real meaning of *comfort*. Not "consolation" but "fortification". A making *fort* or strong.

TRINITY SUNDAY

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity: We beseech thee, that this holy faith may evermore be our defence against all adversities; who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

Charlemagne (Karl the Great), the first Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had as his religious and educational adviser an Englishman named Alcuin (c. 735 – 804) who was born in York and educated at the Choir School there. Among many other things he did, Alcuin drew up a sacramentary of votive offices for the private use of priests. It included an office of the Holy Trinity and it is from this service of devotion that our Trinity collect is derived.

Steadfastness of faith is the means by which our defence is assured. It is when we look to God in expectant and believing faith that evil ceases to have power over us. Steadfast faith is something which God himself keeps us in. It is by his *grace* that we can confess a *true faith* in his name.

Such confession leads us to the acknowledgement, not of God's *existence* so much as of his *glory*. The heart is drawn out in adoring worship. The glory we acknowledge is the glory of a God who has revealed himself in Three Persons; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As Father, he is the Sustainer of the universe and of ourselves within it; as Son he is our Redeemer from sin; as Holy Spirit he dwells in our hearts and leads us in the paths of righteousness.

As we contemplate this mystery of the divine being, revealed to us in Christ and in the scriptures, we find our needs are met. Life becomes meaningful for us and ideals no longer mock us. The call to high and holy living is matched by adequate resources. With St Patrick we rejoice to say:

*I bind unto myself the Name
The strong Name of the Trinity
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One, and One in Three,
Of whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.*

The *Trinity* implies the *Unity*. The *Divine Majesty* in the power of which we are enabled to worship God in Three Persons proceeds from one ineffable being, whose name and nature is Love.

Ist SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in thee: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping of thy commandments we may please thee both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In a prayer which dwells on the thought of human weakness and frailty, it is appropriate that we should begin with an acknowledgement of God's strength. For his strength is made perfect in weakness (2nd Corinthians 12:9). It is when men have reached the end of their resources that they are ready to *put their trust* (the Latin original has "hope") *in thee*.

This collect really has two petitions. The first, *mercifully accept our prayers*, follows the acknowledgement that God is the strength of all who put their trust in him. The second, *Grant us the help of thy grace*, follows the acknowledgement of our own weakness and inability. Both alike leave no room for human complacency, or for the idea, fostered by the heretic Pelagius, that grace is not always necessary to secure right actions. This is one of several collects from the fifth century Sacramentary of Gelasius in which the error of Pelagius is repudiated.

We ask God to *accept our prayers*; just as in the collect of Epiphany I we ask him to "receive" them. We do not dictate what he shall do with them. That is a matter for sovereign love to decide. We do, however, go on to solicit his *grace*, not for the carrying out of our own purposes but in order that we may *keep his commandments*.

Prayer, then, is here seen in its true light. It is not an attempt to enlist God's help in schemes of our own making, but seeking to conform our wills to the divine will. Because *through the weakness of our mortal nature* this is so difficult, we approach him in humble love and trust, asking that he who has called for our obedience will enable us to carry out our obligations.

Not only in *will*, but also in *deed*. 1st John 4:7-21 and Luke 16:19-31 show the practical implications of our obedience. “He that loveth not his brother who he hath seen [presumably the rich man in the Lord’s parable *had* seen Lazarus laid at his gate full of sores?], how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”

Not only in *deed* but also in *will*. For good deeds may be done for wrong motives and so fail to please God. We know this from 1st Corinthians 13:1-3.

2nd SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O Lord, who never failest to help and govern them whom thou dost bring up in thy stedfast fear and love: Keep us, we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The shape of this collect was altered at the 1662 revision. In its original Gelasian form it began with the petition: “Make us, O Lord, to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy name.” What is now the acknowledgement, “who never failest”, followed the petition by way of explanation, “for thou never failest...”

It will be seen that the revisers have added a new petition. *Keep us we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence*. A simple prayer that we may love God’s name has been expanded to include a prayer for his protection. This is, in fact, implicit in the original clause. To know God’s name is to know his character, and to know his character is to put ourselves under the protection of him whose *good providence* orders all things for our good.

Who never failest: Such was the experience of Joshua, who at the end of a long, eventful life, could testify that “not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass” (Joshua 23:14). Such can be our experience, too, as we look to him in faith and trust. *To help* is missing from the original, but *govern* is based on the Latin word *gubernare*, which means to direct or guide, and refers particularly to the function of a helmsman who steers his ship safely through the rocks and shoals to the desired haven.

Twice in the present form of the collect *fear* is joined to *love*. This is not the fear of which St John tells us in his first Epistle (1st John 4:18), the fear which perfect love casts out. It is the “godly fear” of Hebrews 12:28, rendered “awe” in the Revised Version, and stands for that attitude of dutiful respect which should characterise every true child of God. Both senses of the word occur alongside one another in the hymn:

*Fear him, ye saints, and you will then
Have nothing else to fear.*

3rd SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may by thy mighty aid be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The thought of God's initiative in prayer confronts us in this collect. He gives us *an hearty desire to pray*. Prayer does not begin with us. It begins with God. He himself implants in our hearts those longings which he alone can satisfy. From this it follows that to have a sense of need carries with it the assurance that God can and will, satisfy that need. So we *beseech him mercifully to hear us*.

These last two words hardly represent the particular significance of the original, which requested that God might hear not *us*, but "our supplication". The Latin word for this, *deprecatio*, is applied to that part of the Litany in which help is sought against enemies of every kind and the response is: "Good Lord, deliver us." Here, too, is a prayer for God's protection against external foes and adverse circumstances.

In placing this prayer upon our lips, the Church presupposes our sincerity. Our desires are deemed to be *hearty desires*, springing from a real sense of helplessness. With heartiness, must go humility, for, as 1st Peter 5:5-11 says, "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble." It is when we cast *all* our anxieties upon him, that we find that he does indeed care about us (RSV).

The phrase *and comforted in all dangers and adversities* was inserted in 1662. It makes the petition positive as well as negative. We ask, not only to be defended in all dangers, but also to be comforted in all adversities. *Comforted* is a positive word, meaning "strengthened", "empowered", "established". See 1st Peter 5:10.

Notice too the preposition *in*. Not "from"; for we pray, not to be spared the trial of our faith, but to surmount it victoriously. His *mighty aid* is always there to make us strong.

4th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord. Amen.

Here is a prayer which might have been on the lips of Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. As for Christian, so for us, God is protector, sustainer, sanctifier and guide. As such he calls for trust, a sense of need, and obedience to his commands.

Luke 6:36 reminds us that our Father in heaven is merciful. The Psalmist too bears witness that "he hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our

iniquities...Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Psalm 103:10,13). This tender, solicitous, fatherly compassion we here implore in fullest measure, for without his aid, without his protecting care, *nothing is strong, nothing is holy*.

The second half of the collect underwent two slight modifications in the sixteenth century. The petition in the Gregorian Sacramentary was "that we may so pass through temporal *good things* [bona] as not to lose eternal good things". Our reformers added "finally". The prayer has thus, in the first place, been made applicable to all situations and brought more into line with Romans 8:18 : "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us".

Yet it is true that temporal good things can be a hindrance to spiritual growth and development. Perhaps that is a peculiar difficulty of our time in countries where the advent of the Welfare State seems to have provided everything that is necessary for the life of man; everything that is, but the most necessary thing of all, namely a continuing sense of our utter dependence upon God and the humility and gratitude that go with it.

The word *finally*, as Dr Massey Shepherd has said, "unnecessarily introduces a suggestion of rewards after this life and misses the true relation of external goods to temporal experience". We can experience the eternal things of God here and now. The circumstances which drag us down can, by God's grace, lift us up to the heavenlies.

5th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Grant, O Lord, we beseech thee, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by thy governance, that thy Church may joyfully serve thee in all godly quietness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer is based on St Paul's words to Timothy: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life, godly and respectful in every way" (1st Timothy 2:1,2).

God's providential government of the world is with a view to increased devotion on the part of his people. Because "he maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth" (Psalm 46:9) and causes the wrath of man to praise him (Psalm 76:10), we who bear his name should be all the more zealous in his service and ready *joyfully to serve him in all godly quietness*. Not the quietness of sleep; it is that peace of heart which is the mark of those who gratefully acknowledge God's governance and live by his Spirit.

World peace, so long as it lasts, is a challenge to us to seize every opportunity of proclaiming the gospel to every nation, and of deepening and establishing the life of the

Christian community in every place. We should pray for peace, not merely to avoid the restraints and sacrifices which war brings in its train, but in order to put ourselves more completely under the constraint of love and to be ready to spend and be spent in costly devotion to God's cause.

Another thought meets us in this prayer. No one can tell how much *the course of this world* has been influenced by the prayers of God's saints. There will be some surprises at the last great day! For:

*More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.*

6th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O God, who hast prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This collect recalls St Paul's words in 1st Corinthians 2:9, and Romans 5:5 (see RSV). In the first passage, which is a free quotation from Isaiah 64:4, St Paul is saying that through the Holy Spirit are revealed to us the "things God hath prepared for them that love him". These things the collect describes as *good* things. And well it may, for, more than any earthly parent, the heavenly Father knows how to "give good things to them that ask him" (Matthew 7:11). It is interesting to note that Clement of Rome, writing at the beginning of the second century, already adds the adjective "good" to his citation of this verse from 1st Corinthians.

The verse in Romans states that "God's love has been poured into our hearts ". It is not certain from the original Greek whether this means God's love for us or our love for him. Our collect when in Latin took it to mean God's love for us – "pour into our hearts such a sense of thy love"; our translators made it subjective – *such love towards thee*. Perhaps the difference is not so great after all. For it is when we realise how much God loves us and how wonderful are the good things which he has prepared for us both in this life and the next that our own love for him begins to well up in our hearts (see 1st John 4:19).

The Latin original had "in all things and above all things" in the second half of the collect. Up to 1662 our English version had the first phrase only; the second has been substituted for it ever since. God is greater than his gifts. When we can see, "in all things" he has given us, the touch of his own loving hand, we are led on to love him for what he is in himself, to love him *above all things*. Then, when God has the first place in our affections, we are on the road to *obtain* his *promises*, which *exceed all that we can desire*. For there is nothing we shall desire more than God himself. Like the Psalmist we shall find that all other goods are nothing in comparison with him (see Psalm 16:2).

7th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Lord of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This collect originally began with the invocation “O Lord of hosts”, a phrase familiar to us both from the Old Testament and from the *Te Deum*, where the original Hebrew word is retained – “Lord God of Sabaoth”. Cranmer has paraphrased it here with the words *Lord of all power and might*, power standing for God’s authority and *might* for his unconquerable strength.

This strength is exercised beneficently: *who art the author and giver of all good things*. We are reminded of James 1:17, where St James says that every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of lights, i.e., from the maker of the constellations which form the signs of the Zodiac. With him is “no variation or shadow due to change” (RSV). He is always in the ascendant. No Christian ever needs to consult a horoscope! God in his power and grace is ever ready to bestow upon us *all good things*.

So we ask him, first and foremost, to implant in *our hearts the love of his name*. The picture here is drawn from horticulture. Either the reference is to grafting, about which St Paul speaks in Romans 11:17-24, or else the word translated *graft* here signifies the sowing of seed. This takes us to the parable of the Sower in Mark 4:3-12.

The seed sown needs rain and sunshine and the right chemical properties in the soil if it is to grow and fructify. So we pray God *to increase in us true religion and to nourish us with all thy goodness*. In similar fashion the Bishop’s prayer at our Confirmation was that we might “daily increase” in God’s Holy Spirit “more and more”. Birth must be followed by growth if the new life of love of God and man is not to be wasted.

The thought of a garden is again suggested in the last phrase of the petition: *of thy great mercy keep us in the same*. A garden must be protected from weeds and marauding animals. Thorns and thistles must be kept at bay, unwanted growth pruned off and supports provided where necessary. All this the divine gardener will do in us as we pray.

8th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O God, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth: We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Until 1662 the opening clause of this collect in our English prayer books read as follows: “God, whose providence is never deceived.” The words of the Latin original, however, contain not only the thought that God in his providence is able to *foresee* everything, but

also that he actually *controls* everything (*cuius providentia in sui dispositone non fallitur*). John Cosin's improved translation includes both these ideas. God's ability to foresee everything, so that he is never taken by surprise is represented by the word *never-failing*; his ultimate control of everything comes out in the words *ordereth all things*, to which Cosin added, for greater explicitness, in *heaven and earth*. Compare the collect of Epiphany II.

God's government of *things...in heaven* is not difficult to believe, although St Paul seems to indicate that even "in the heavenly places" there are "spiritual hosts of wickedness" ranged against us (Ephesians 6:12). It is when we think of *earth* that the problem becomes more acute. Does God really *order all things...in earth*? Does he order evil? He answer is to be found in the original Latin word *dispositone*. God orders all things in the sense that he *disposes* all things, makes them serve his purpose.

God is not defeated by our wrong choices, He is able to make "all things work together for good to them that love him" (Romans 8:28). So we pray that he may *put away from us all hurtful things*, not in the sense that we may be spared all future suffering, but that the trials that come will no longer be able to hurt us; and that he will *give us those things which be profitable for us*. What those things are, he alone can know, so we must leave the disposing of them in his capable, loving hands. This attitude of simple trust is summed up in the words *we humbly beseech thee*.

At the same time we must co-operate with his leading. He will *put away from us all hurtful things* as we through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body (cf Romans 8:13) and he will *give us those things which be profitable for us* as we seek to do the will of our Father who is in heaven (cf Matthew 7:21).

9th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Grant to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This collect expresses as succinctly as possible the whole doctrine of grace. Without the grace of God, and the help of his Spirit, we can never hope to *live according to his will*.

The conviction that God's grace is absolutely necessary for Christian conduct and achievement found its champion in Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa (died AD 430). Pelagius had denied this; but the Church has always sided with Augustine, and with our Lord himself, who said to his disciples, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). Those who think otherwise should ponder 1st Corinthians 10:12: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

The collect's words are a valuable corrective to every form of humanism within the Church, every attempt to minimise the Christian's need of supernatural grace.

Note the recognition that our deeds are governed by our thoughts. As a man "thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). "Out of the heart", says Jesus, "proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries" and so forth (Matthew 15:19). The thoughts which a man harbours in his mind will ultimately reveal themselves in his life and conduct. How important is it to get our thought-life right! The best way to do this is to keep "looking unto Jesus" (Hebrews 12:2). Then shall we "be filled with the knowledge of his will and walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing" (Colossians 1:9,10).

Only those who know their own limitations and look to God in faith and prayer can truly be said *to live*. True life is life with Christ in God. All else is but a vegetable existence.

10th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Let thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions make them to ask such things as shall please thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The usual relative clause containing an acknowledgement of some aspect of the divine character as the ground of the petition which follows is missing from this collect. Its place is taken by the adjective *merciful* as applied to God's *ears*.

God is a Spirit. How then can he be said to have ears? Such anthropomorphism, i.e., speaking of God in human terms, is a regular feature in holy scripture, and it is easy to scoff at it. But how else can we represent to ourselves the activity of the deity? When we speak of God's ears, we mean that in him resides the very faculty of hearing. "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear?" as the Psalmist (Psalm 94:9). The one who provided man with organs of hearing can surely himself hear.

God *does* hear. So it is right to say that he has ears; on the analogy of our own auditory processes which he himself has created. They are *merciful ears*. Ready, not to criticise and to condemn, but to understand, sympathise, correct and encourage. So may we humbly and gladly come to him with our *petitions*.

The contents of those petitions will be limited by the measure of our understanding of God's will. For "we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). St Paul, however, in this same passage, asserts, no doubt on the basis of his own rich experience, that the Spirit "helpeth our infirmities" and "maketh intercessions for us with groanings which cannot be uttered".

Prayer is therefore seen to have its origin not in our needs, or even in our awareness of them, but in God's own purpose of grace of his children. The very desire to pray comes from him and is a link in the chain of blessing. Compare the collect of Trinity III.

His ears are not only open to hear our prayers, but his hand is ready to guide us into asking *such things as shall please him*.

11th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O God, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In Luke 18:9-14 we hear the cry of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner." In 1st Corinthians 15:1-11 St Paul tells us how, in his Pharisaic zeal for the law, he had persecuted the Christian Church. Christ himself had changed all that, and now Paul is able to say, "by the grace of God I am what I am". He declares the gospel, "how that Christ died for our sins, and rose again".

Christ's death and resurrection are the greatest demonstrations, not only of God's love, but also of his power, that "mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead" (Ephesians 1:19f.). It was that power which granted justification to the publican and a new-found liberty to Saul the Pharisee. The publican found *mercy* in God's pardoning grace; the persecutor experienced the divine *pity* for him in his blindness and was enabled to see that the way back to God is not along the road of self-achievement but by way of the Cross.

God's *commandments* are still there to be kept. We are to be *running the way* of them as athletes in a race. But to each one of us is given a *measure of grace*, sufficient for our need. Up to 1662 the petition ran: "Give unto us *abundantly* thy grace." The measure is an abundant measure, for it is "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Through him we can do all things. In him we are complete. "All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen" (2nd Corinthians 1:20). By trust and obedience we can *obtain* these *gracious promises*.

So we can be *made partakers* (the original word: Gelasius used here means *fellow-partakers*; compare "with all saints" in Ephesians 3:18) of God's *heavenly treasure*. This is not something that awaits us beyond the grave so much as something we can have and enjoy now in our possession of Christ, who is indeed the chiefest among ten thousand (Song of Solomon 5:10) and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:46).

12th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve: Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The collect teaches God's *accessibility*. He is always *ready to hear* the prayers of his children. Like a father, he knows what things we have need of before we ask him (see Matthew 6:8), and is delighted when, humbly and expectantly, we seek his face. It also teaches God's *generosity*. He is *wont to give more than either we desire or deserve*. His love fills up the gaps in our supplication, and his mercy turns a blind eye to our deserts. With the Psalmist we may exclaim, "If thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss: O Lord, who may abide it?" But "there is mercy with thee..." (Psalm 130:3f). How tender and loving God is to us!

The petition asks that God's abundant mercy may be *poured down upon us*. Water can do two things. It can *cleanse*, and it can *nourish*. So we pray that God, in his mercy, would cleanse our heart from every stain, from all *those things whereof our conscience is afraid*. We ask for his forgiveness. Then we pray that he will give us *those good things* which we need for our growth in grace and holiness. Upon what grounds can such requests be based? Not upon anything in ourselves. We cannot establish any sort of claim on God. Instead we plead the precious name of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who said, "If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14). His passion and his ceaseless intercession are our plea.

13th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Almighty and merciful God, of whose only gift it cometh that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service: Grant, we beseech thee, that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life, that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Corwin C Roach has entitled this collect "Basic Christianity". Our ability to serve God and to render him *true and laudable* (i.e., praiseworthy) *service* depends entirely on his grace. We cannot go it alone. At every stage of our Christian discipleship we need the gracious upholding of him who is the *almighty and merciful God*. For, as the hymn says:

...every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are his alone.

Of his only gift, i.e., of his gift alone, it cometh, i.e., it comes about, that we can serve him truly.

Our service here on earth is measured not by success but by *faithfulness*. Some indeed are permitted to see the fruits of their labours, and are able here and now to rejoice in all that God has achieved through their work and testimony for him. Others have to plod steadily on, unrecognised, unsung, believing that the day shall declare their work, of what sort it is (see 1st Corinthians 3:13).

Again, we learn that what we do in this life has some bearing on our future happiness. To *serve* God *faithfully* now is to *attain* his *heavenly promises* then, for heaven is simply and enlargement of the sphere of service (see Revelation 22:3f.) Eternal life is one and indivisible, and our present conduct is a pointer to our destiny.

14th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The author of this collect had in mind St Paul's great hymn of love, 1st Corinthians 13. Request is made for an *increase* in each of the theological virtues, in faith and hope as well as in charity, all three of which are mentioned in that well-known chapter.

Faith has been variously defined. To many it is little different from credulity. To others it means an intellectual assent to a set of theological propositions. True Christian faith is basically self-committal to a person, to God who makes himself known to us in Jesus Christ. Such faith is not at variance with reason, for it is our "reasonable service" (Romans 12:1) in response to that revelation; nor is it content to rest in outward forms or creeds, but it is always seeking to press through to the inward reality behind them, to a personal relationship with a personal God, who solicits our utmost trust and allegiance.

Hope looks to the future. To have hope is to be assured of God's unfailing purposes for ourselves and for the world. It means that in spite of all setbacks and disappointments, we hold resolutely to God's promises, believing, with Abraham, that what he has promised he is able also to perform (see Romans 4:21).

Charity, or "love", have both changed their meaning so much nowadays, that they need careful definition. Not lofty largesse or a self-regarding support of "good causes", not an emotional activity largely directed towards our own self-gratification, but a patient seeking of another's highest good through all frustrations and misunderstandings is what the Bible means by "love". This involves self-denial and self-effacement, and there will never be a time when we do not need to pray for an *increase* of these things.

The collect closes with a request that we may *love that which thou dost command*. How can we *love* a commandment? Does not obedience rest on a sense of duty rather than love? Not if we realise that faith is a personal response to a personal God.

15th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Keep, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy Church with thy perpetual mercy; and, because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The collects of the fifteenth and sixteenth Sundays after Trinity have much in common. Both are prayers on behalf of the whole Church, and both dwell on the thought of human frailty and the need of divine protection and guidance, and both come down to us from the Sacramentary of Pope Gelasius.

Those were the days when the Roman Empire was breaking up under the impact of barbarian invasions from the north, and there seemed to be a danger that the Church of God itself might be threatened with extinction. Today's collect looks in faith to God as the Shepherd of his people; next Sunday's invokes his aid as the divine Navigator.

Jesus is the Shepherd of the Church, i.e., of those who hear his voice and follow him. Of them he says, "they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (John 10:28). So here, the Church is called *thy Church*, because it belongs to God and he has pledged himself to keep it with his *perpetual mercy*. The original has *propitiatione perpetua*, and we are put in mind of the Good Shepherd who "giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). By his propitiation, his death on our behalf, we are set free from the worst that sin and death can do to us. This is the theme of the Comfortable Words in the Communion service.

Keep us...lead us. The eastern shepherd guards his flock from the dangers of the wilderness, and brings them to the places where they may find water and tender grass. So too the church in its human *frailty*, needs the constant care and provision of the Good Shepherd. The Latin word for *frailty* is *mortalitas*, i.e., liability to death. How many deaths we would have died had it not been for God's loving concern for us! In all times of danger and uncertainty we can go steadily ahead, confident in the certainty that God will lead us *to all things profitable to our salvation*.

16th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O Lord, we beseech thee, let thy continual pity cleanse and defend thy Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without thy succour, preserve it evermore by thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the Trinity 15 collect we are presented with the picture of God as Shepherd; in the Trinity 16 collect God is pictured as navigator. The word rendered *preserve* is the word *gubernetur*, which describes the work of a helmsman or pilot. The idea recurs in the collect of the fifth Sunday in Lent, in the phrase “that...they may be governed” (Latin, *te gubernante*, i.e., with thee as navigator).

The thought of God’s “perpetual mercy” in the previous collect is balanced by that of his *continual pity* in this. Luke 7:11-17 tells the story of how the Lord Jesus had *compassion* on the widow of Nain and raised her only son to life again. Such pity or compassion is the continual prerogative of God and is being exercised constantly on behalf of his children. Again and again he raises the Church and the individual members of it to newness of life and power.

Cleanse and defend. These words have reference to dangers, within and without. Applying our nautical metaphor we may say that cleansing stands for the proper equipment of the ship. The vessel must be seaworthy, the tackle in good order, the decks cleared for action. All unnecessary cargo must be jettisoned and the crew be well trained and alert to their several duties. By defence we imply that the ship must be saved from sailing off-course and be able to elude the enemy or engage him successfully. In storm and fog she must have a skillful hand upon the helm. As divine Navigator, God is well able to do these things for his Church.

At the time of our collect’s composition, the internal danger to the Church of God was Pelagianism, the external danger was Gothic invasion. The Church surmounted both these perils through God’s *help and goodness*. Because of his *continual pity* we too can sing:

*Thy mercy cannot fail us,
Nor leave thy work undone;
With thy right hand to help us,
The victory shall be won.*

17th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer is in effect a shorter form of the collect of Easter Day. It gives us the doctrine of grace in a nutshell.

We pray that God’s grace may do for us two things. First, that it may *prevent* us, this word, which also occurs in the Easter Day collect, means simply “go in front of”. One may go in front of another for two quite distinct and opposite reasons. One may do it in order to block the other man’s path, to *prevent* him, as we say, from going further. That is our modern usage of the word. But in the Prayer Book and our older English versions

of the Bible it still preserves its other sense of going in front of a man in order to smooth the way ahead of him and enable him to advance the more easily. That is the meaning here. It is almost a military word, and describes the work of a pioneer who hacks his way through a jungle in order to facilitate the movement of troops in that direction. It is interesting that Christ is described in Hebrews 12:2 as “the pioneer of our faith” (see RSV).

The very fact that we are praying this prayer shows that God’s preventing or prevenient grace has already begun its work in us!

Then we ask that his grace may also *follow* us. Christ by his example and his sacrifice has opened up the way before us. The Holy Spirit has put into our minds good desires as the Easter Day collect says. But in order that we may “bring the same good effect” we need God’s help alongside of us, with us and in us, if we are *continually to be given to all good works*. Indeed we often need a push from the rear, if we are not to grow weary in our well-doing!

The word rendered *continually* is the Latin *iugiter* which means “like an ever-flowing spring”. Grace is not spasmodic. Like the spiritual rock which followed the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness, it

*Ever flows our thirst to assuage;
Grace, which like the Lord the giver,
Never fails from age to age.*

18th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Lord, we beseech thee, grant thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow thee the only God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This collect from the Gelasian Sacramentary was formerly appointed for use the Sunday preceding the autumn ordinations. In the Latin, and in our own English version up to 1662, the petition ran as follows: “Grant thy people grace to avoid the infections of the devil.”

In the Bishop’s charge to those about to be ordained priest, the candidates are reminded that they have already determined, by God’s grace, to give themselves wholly to their sacred office, and are therefore urged to “apply themselves wholly to this one thing”. Such devotion is not likely to pass unnoticed by the devil, who will do all within his power to deflect the ministers of the gospel from their high ideal. Our collect in its older form impresses upon us our constant duty to pray for our ministers that, as St Paul says, “the testimony of Christ” may be confirmed in them (1st Corinthians 1:6).

By altering the petition in 1662, Bishop Cosin associated the thought of the collect more closely with our Baptism and the threefold vow of renunciation, faith and obedience which was then made, *Renunciation* and *obedience* are clearly here in view; *faith* is implied in the phrase *the only God*.

If God is *the only God*, then he alone is worthy of our complete trust and allegiance. As Jesus says, the great commandment is that “thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:37). We must serve him with *hearts and minds* which are *pure*: i.e., cleansed from all competing loyalties. God demands all of us there is.

The best way to avoid the moral and spiritual infection of the world around us and to withstand all the devil’s temptation is to become spiritually strong and healthy by deliberately following God’s commandments. With this collect in mind, each of us can say, “By God’s help, so I will” (see the fourth answer in the Prayer Book’s Catechism).

19th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee: Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the Gelasian Sacramentary this collect ran as follows: “Let the operation of thy mercy, O Lord, we beseech thee, direct our hearts, for without thee we are not able to please thee.”

Our translators in the sixteenth century inverted the order, so that the acknowledgement of our inability comes first, as indeed, experimentally, it must. They also added the words *and rule and in all things* to the petition, for we need a dynamic as well as a directive, and such rule and direction must extend to every part of our lives. The Bible makes no distinction between sacred and secular. The whole of our life must be made accessible to God’s leading and governing if we are to please him indeed.

It was Bishop Cosin in 1662 who made the reference to the *Holy Spirit* explicit. The Holy Spirit was given to be the Church’s guide and strengthener (see John 16:13f., 14:16f.). By him, as St Paul says, we are “sealed unto the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30), i.e., we are marked out as God’s own possession and put under his protection. Nor will he leave us until he has done that which he has spoken to us of (cf. Genesis 28:15). The Spirit is the guarantee of our full redemption (2nd Corinthians 5:5).

By the spirit’s gracious indwelling in our hearts we are renewed in the spirit of our mind and so are able to put on the new man (i.e., new nature), which is created in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:23,24). Thus can we *please* God, not by what we try to do ourselves, but by what we allow him, through his Spirit, to do in us.

How important that we should recognise that *without God we are not able to please him* and that we should therefore submit to the cleansing, healing, sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit.

20th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O Almighty and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that thou wouldest have done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The phrase of *thy bountiful goodness* represented, in 1549, the original Latin word *propitiatus*, which literally means “being propitiated”. Because this savoured of the mediaeval idea of the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice, Cranmer replaced it by this phrase which expresses the New Testament doctrine of full and free forgiveness through Christ’s death on Calvary alone. There, God’s *bountiful goodness* was shown forth, once and for all, and no further sacrifice is needed to ensure our access to him.

A mind set free from anxiety can be cheerful under all circumstances. Nothing can really hurt those who have committed themselves to the *bountiful goodness* of the *almighty and most merciful God*. They are those who, in the words of Ephesians 5:15-21, are always singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord, giving him thanks always for all things.

Those things that thou wouldest have done is a little ambiguous (is *done* active or passive?); perhaps “those things that thou wouldest have us to do” would be better.

21st SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Grant, we beseech thee, merciful Lord, to thy faithful people pardon and peace; that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve thee with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This collect is concerned with God’s gift of *peace*. True peace, both for men and nations, is bound up with acceptance of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Before there can be outward peace, there must be inward peace with God through Christ.

The prayer gives the conditions upon which peace may be enjoyed. First, there is the recognition of the *merciful Lord*. The adjective represents the Latin *placitus*, which means “appeased”. Through the Cross God has made it possible for men to forsake sin and enter into his peace. In the fulness of time Christ came and proclaimed peace to them that were afar off and to them that were nigh (Ephesians 2:17).

Secondly, there is the need for faith. *Grant....to thy FAITHFUL people...peace*. Faithful people are people who are *full of faith*, confidently believing that what God has promised he is able to also perform.

Thirdly, peace must be preceded by *pardon*. Peace comes to those who know themselves to be *cleansed from all their sins* in the precious blood of the Lord Jesus. Not only in the initial act of conversion, but day by day as they seek to walk in fellowship with him.

Lastly, *peace* must lead to service. It is to be enjoyed only by those who have been lifted out of themselves into larger sphere of service to God and man. Selfishness leads to constant worry and frustration. Self-dedication leads to the ability to *serve thee with a quite mind*.

22nd SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Lord, we beseech thee to keep thy household the Church in continual godliness; that through thy protection it may be free from all adversities, and devoutly given to serve thee in good works, to the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Thy household the church” represents the Latin *familia* or family. The Roman *familia* or household, which included servants and dependants as well as children, was bound together by *pietas*, which means “piety” or “dutifulness”. In the *pater familias* this showed itself in loving concern for those committed to his care; and in the family, a common loyalty to the head of the household and a desire to advance the honour of his name. As those who have been forgiven so much, we, the members of God’s household, should be ready to forgive one another.

The collect asks not only that through God’s protection the church may be “free from all adversities” but also that it may be “devoutly given to serve thee in good works”. Free...to serve. That is the only legitimate ground on which we can ask to be kept “free from all adversities”.

“Devoutly given” (*devota*) is a sacrificial word. It reminds us of the great thanksgiving prayer after Communion in which we present ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto God.

23rd SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O God, our refuge and strength, who art the author of all godliness: Be ready, we beseech thee, to hear the devout prayers of thy Church; and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of the most stirring incidents in the Old Testament was Sennacherib’s invasion of the southern kingdom of Judah, as described in 2nd Kings 18 and 19. His failure to capture Jerusalem was largely due to Hezekiah’s prayer (chapter 19, verses 14-19). Judah’s victory was celebrated in the well-known words of Psalm 46 which begins, “God is our refuge and our strength.”

This phrase forms the “acknowledgement” of our collect, as it does also of Martin Luther’s great hymn:

*A safe stronghold our God is still,
A trusty shield and weapon.*

As *refuge* God is our best means of defence. As *strength* he is our best means of attack. Both the breastplate of righteousness and the sword of the Spirit come from his hand.

To this description of the Gregorian Sacramentary added *author of all godliness*. There is a play on words here in the original between “godliness” (*pietatis*) and “devout” (*piis*) which may be rendered “thou author of devotion, hear our devoted prayers”. God cannot but hear the prayers which he himself has inspired.

To some it may seem like effrontery to ask God to *be ready*...to *hear* our prayers. Who are we to issue a command to him? Are we not aware, in any case, that he is “more ready to hear than we are to pray” (see Trinity XII collect)? The answer is that a good Christian prayer, “commanding” God to do that which he already wants to do, places the worshipper in line with the current of the divine will. The mood is acceptive rather than imperative, a reverent submission to what is already a fact.

Devote prayers are those which we *ask faithfully*, i.e., believingly. Jesus said “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will” (Mark 11:24). He also said, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7). These are the conditions of answered prayer. To pray in faith according to God’s will revealed to us in Jesus Christ is to *obtain effectually* our requests. For prayer is more than a subjective exercise. It actually achieves results both in the material and spiritual spheres.

24th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

O Lord, we beseech thee, absolve thy people from their offences; that through thy bountiful goodness we may all be delivered from the bands of those sins, which by our frailty we have committed. Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ’s sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Like the collect of the eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, this collect was originally appointed for use on the Sunday before the autumn ordinations. Both prayers contain an acknowledgement of human frailty and seek the grace of deliverance from sin and its evil consequences.

The transference of the collect before us to the last Sunday but one of the Christian Year is peculiarly appropriate. As the year draws to a close we cannot but be conscious of our many failings. So many things we hoped to do have been left undone. Other actions have been persisted in, which, when we recall them, bring a blush of shame to our

cheeks. Our sins have put fetters on us from which in our better moments we long to be set free.

The words *bands* may refer to the manacles put around the necks and arms of slaves like those which may still be seen in the Wilberforce Museum in Hull. When the Bible was being translated into a certain West African language it was discovered that the best word by which to render the word “redeem” was one which meant literally “to remove the head”. In the old slave-trading days, heavy iron collars had been put around the necks of the unfortunate captives, but had been possible on payment of a price, for a friend or relative to buy back a man’s liberty and so remove his head from the halter.

Absolve means “to loose away”, and this is what god through his *bountiful* goodness is able to do for us. In the words of Charles Wesley’s hymn:

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free.*

The past need hold no terrors for us, for “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1st John 1:9). The assurance of this fact is given to us every time we hear the Absolution pronounced in Morning and Evening Prayer or in the Holy Communion. “He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel” How sweet is his mercy!

SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE ADVENT

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A popular name for this Sunday is “Stir up Sunday”, from the opening words of the collect and from the fact that it was customary at this time of year for all members of a family to take its turns to stir up the newly-prepared Christmas pudding.

The collect however, speaks of the stirring up of our *wills*. We have reached the last Sunday of another Christian Year. But the Prayer Book does not allow us to fold our hands in self-congratulation. Instead, we are exhorted to new efforts, new achievements in the year we are about to enter. Christ is coming! Be up and doing!

The idea of rewards for Christian service in the second half of the collect has troubled many. Surely it is wrong to serve God for a reward, they say. But what is the reward of Christian service? The answer is – more service. See the parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30, especially verses 21 and 23) and St John’s great words in Revelation 22:3f. A greater capacity for service and a closer fellowship with God must be the goal of all our endeavour.



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