

Trinity 24
2018

I take as my text today from the Collect:

....absolve thy people from their offences; that through thy bountiful goodness we may be delivered from all the bands of sins, which by our frailty we have committed....

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

As we are nearing the end of the Season of Trinity, the longest season of the Church Year, let us, for a moment, reflect on the Collect for this 24th Sunday after Trinity.

Reflection is good. We human beings, at the top of the pyramid of God’s Creation, are perhaps the most frail of his creatures. Our frailty lies in what makes us truly different in character from all other creatures, what sets us apart; that is, our ability to reason, to understand the difference between right and wrong, and to act on emotions rather than animalistic instinct.

That in itself is a cause for reflection. But, as we look more closely at this Sunday’s Collect, we find a certain penitential character, yet a certain hope for what is to come.

While Collects are pretty much taken for granted, many are magnificent not only in language, but also in cutting to the core of our faith.

This particular Collect, if we trace it back to its earliest form, has its origins in both the Leonine and Gregorian Sacramentaries, the two major sources for the 1549 Prayer Book. These two major liturgical forms found their way into the English Church through their use in various forms over the centuries before the Reformation.

We find the Collect to have been part of the Mass held at St. Peter's Basilica at the close of the Christian Year. The circumstances tie together its theme of "absolution" with the "power of the keys" given to St. Peter.

That particular Sunday celebration would have occurred just before the Autumn Ember Days, a time of fasting and abstinence in the Western Church. Originally, the Ember Days were associated with the crops, and occurred four times a year: the Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays that follow December 13th, the First Sunday in Lent, Whitsunday, and Holy Cross Day in September.

Of course, we still observe the Ember Days with fasting and abstinence but now they are more closely associated with ordination.

Today's Collect is magnificent despite its being relatively short. First, it beseeches God to forgive us our offenses, which most certainly over the past year we have committed in the sight of God.

Further, we ask that God do this through His bountiful goodness, a very apt expression, for no better word can describe God's Goodness. It is beyond our human imagination, and the word itself, "bountiful," conjures up visions of a cornucopia with its contents spilling over, silos bursting at the seams with the bounty of a fall harvest, and outdoor markets with fruit and vegetable stands overflowing. God's Goodness overflowing, overflowing for us who seek Him.

Over the year, through our frailty, we have committed many sins from which we seek deliverance. Yes, by our very nature, we are frail. And it is this frailty that leads to the corruption of our affections, and to our sinfulness. Indeed, most often we hear these two words used together as our “sinful affections.”

In the terminology of our 1928 Prayer Book, it is not that our nature is corrupt; rather, it is frail. This in itself is significant.

For example, if one takes the teachings of St. Augustine at face value, there would be reason to assume that the very nature of mankind is corrupt. While we identify St. Augustine with the concept of "Original Sin," he went much further, indeed, to the point of saying that human beings are so corrupt, they cannot beget children without sin.

Though severe, St. Augustine gets to the heart of the matter, identifying evil as coming from the misuse of freewill in beings who were originally created good. It was the perverted freedom of the will of the creature that gave evil its birth.

With the advent of the Reformation, a theological austerity became prevalent among the Protestant reformers, and we find Calvin, in particular, taking St. Augustine, perhaps, to the extreme when he issued his dogmas known as the Five Points of Calvinism.

In short, those Five Points are:

1. Christ died for the elect only, not for all of mankind;
2. Men are predestined to death as well as to life: God, by His inscrutable decree, created some men expressly to burn eternally in Hell;

3. Since the Fall, man is totally corrupt; the image of God in which he was created is completely destroyed; there is no natural goodness in man at all.

4. The Grace of God is irresistible;

5. Final perseverance; if a man has once received the Divine grace, he cannot be finally lost.

From the above, a lot of assumptions can be made as to the intentions of God on the one hand, and the corrupt nature of mankind on the other. Either we are destined to salvation, and nothing we do can alter our destiny; or we are doomed to eternal damnation, and nothing we do can change that, either.

Somehow, in the new theology of the Reformers, God's Loving Goodness is suppressed, and the beauty of all his creation desaturated, stripped of its vibrancy, much as if one takes a color photograph, and prints it in black and white.

Granted, the time was ripe for reform. Many evils had crept into the Church over the centuries since the Apostles. Luther was right in this respect; but, from the narrow Calvinistic approach, we are left floundering in a paradoxical sea.

Yet, from our orthodox Anglican point-of-view, there is hope, as we find in Vernon Staley's book *The Catholic Religion*, as he writes of our "Original Sin":

It is more of the nature of a serious defect than of a positive taint, and hence it is the object of God's compassion rather than of his wrath.

This issue of “Original Sin” in regard to our frail human nature has been a focus of much debate, much discussion, and has left a cloud of uncertainty hanging over those who aspire to living a good Christian life, trying to emulate our Lord and Saviour.

When we say that mankind was made in the "Likeness of God," we are referring to the threefold structure of the soul: memory, understanding, and will. We were created with the capability of knowing, serving, and loving God. We were also imbued with the intelligence to fulfill this purpose when God gave us moral freedom.

Evil, then, is the perversion of free will. But, the will cannot be truly free unless it is capable of choosing evil as well as good, and what worth is there in goodness unless it is freely chosen in the face of possible evil? God did not create evil. He has, however, allowed it to continue simply because, without evil, we would have no choice, no opportunity to exercise our free will.

As we find hope in the Collect for today, so St. Paul gives us hope in his Epistle to the Colossians when he says:

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel....

In essence, that hope to which St. Paul refers is the treasure that awaits us in heaven, not a reward for “being good,” rather the fruition of our faith in Jesus Christ, and the love that flows from that faith.

Our hope is realized through a living faith. It is cemented in the “Bountiful Goodness” of God, an overabundance of Grace, love, and mercy.

We have God’s assurance.

Even though by nature, we are frail, we may have confidence that it is not frailty that is the cause of our sin, rather, that sin is the result of our frailty.

We have assurance as Christians that God will absolve us of our sins through His bountiful Goodness if we ask Him.

We pray privately and corporately. We join together in making our "Humble Confession unto Almighty God" during the Holy Eucharist, and during Morning and Evening Prayer, as we petition for absolution. We must not only petition God through prayer and with our minds, but also with our hearts and our souls; and it must be reflected in our daily lives.

In striving to cope with our human frailty, we have the comfort of the Holy Spirit, we have the Sacraments, and we have each other in the fellowship of Christ's Church.

We also have confidence in the knowledge that Jesus Christ died on the Cross for all of us, for all of mankind, not just a select few.

Great theologians, such as St. Augustine, have been instrumental, throughout the centuries, in helping us to better understand not only our nature, but also our relationship to God. Often their approaches are quite severe in tone, understandably, as we often need this approach.

But, at the same time, we can find comfort and joy in God’s Grace, a gift of love to us.

In prayer, we ask that we may be filled with an ever-growing knowledge of God's Will for us; we pray for spiritual wisdom; and we pray for understanding of how to apply this wisdom in our lives.

We pray, too, for the power and the strength to conduct our lives according to God's Will revealed to us.

We see this expressed most powerfully in the words of St. Paul taken from today's Epistle:

...we do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power; giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.

As we approach the close of this Christian Year, let us review our lives in the inclusive terms of our Christian Duty, and seek God's forgiveness where we have fallen short, and offer Him praise and thanksgiving where we have found success.

When we go to God in prayer in expectation of the "now," as well as the future, let us ask for the strength to overcome our human frailty, and to choose what is right in His sight.

Moreover, let us listen. Prayer is not just a one-way conversation with God. We must take the time to listen as well.

With the “bountiful goodness” of God, we are blessed, and through His “bountiful goodness,” we may be "delivered from the bands of those sins, which by our frailty we have committed....”

Without Him we are frail; without Him we cannot help but fall. But we pray that we may be kept ever by His help "from all things hurtful, and led to all things profitable to our salvation." With God, all things are possible.