

Meditations for a Retreat

October 14, 2017

Calvary Church, Pittsburgh, PA

The retreat offered a series of meditations on collects from the Book of Common Prayer interspersed with periods of silence.

Proper 23 The Sunday closest to October 12

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

I have a small collection of hymnals, and some years ago, I was excited to get a copy of the then-new United Methodist Hymnal. Quite vividly, I remember flipping through the pages, noticing new hymns and so forth. As you have probably noticed, hymnals, including our own Episcopal Hymnal 1982, often have section headers, and I was also looking to see how the United Methodist Hymnal was organized. I was intrigued when I came across a section called “Prevenient Grace.”

Prevenient Grace. At the time, this was a new term for me. The second word, “grace” is pretty easy to sort out. This is God’s gift to us. Grace might be our very salvation or, more usually, as God working in us and our world. Then there is “prevenient.” If you break down that word into its Latin origins, it means, go before.

Prevenient Grace. The idea is that God sometimes works in us to draw us toward God. Do we choose to become Christians? More to the point, do we choose to have faith? Well, of course we do. But prevenient grace also means that sometimes our choice is assisted by the great gift of God working in our lives before we know we are ready.

In older prayer books, this collect began, “Lord, we pray that your grace may always *prevent* and follow us...” Prevent. It’s archaic English, but it means “go before”, just like “prevenient.” We are asking for God’s grace to God before us and to go behind us. We are asking to be surrounded by God’s grace.

To pray that God’s grace may go before us is to acknowledge that we won’t manage it on our own. This collect is a beautiful reminder that we need God. Sometimes we need God in order to find God.

In this collect, we also ask God for “good works”. And here the sequence is important. Christians have argued for centuries about good works. Can we earn our salvation by doing good works? Does God love us more if we do more good works?

What depth of theology and teaching we find in this little prayer! We are reminded that all our good works come from God. They are not a reflection of our will, but of God’s grace. We do not do good works so that God will love us. Quite the opposite. We do good

works *because* God loves us. We do not, and cannot, do good works to earn our salvation. Instead, we do good works because God has already saved us.

Prevenient Grace. This idea changes everything. It makes our whole lives about God, not about us. To speak of prevenient grace is to speak of a God whose grace and glory shines through your life and mine. To speak of prevenient grace is always to see possibility. If God's free gift of grace can work in your life and in my life, then God might work in anyone's life. There is no one beyond God's grace. All that we do, everything, is meant to be done to the glory of God.

We cannot and we will not live to the glory of God on our own. As we say in our baptismal promises, "I will, with God's help." To do good, we must be surrounded by God's grace. I invite you do reflect on those times when God's grace has gone before you. And perhaps you will ponder how you might be even more open to God's grace working in your life.

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Proper 25 The Sunday closest to October 26

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

We are immediately struck by the familiar trio: faith, hope, and charity. These three words have been softened by popular culture. Faith and hope are not, for Christians, gentle feelings, but are rather strong acts of will — to believe in and to long for things unseen. To have faith is to put our whole trust in God alone. To have hope is to believe relentlessly that there is, by God’s grace and mercy, a better life ahead.

In this collect, we read of “faith, hope, and charity.” This is the trio as it was translated in the King James Bible, but we may be used to hearing “faith, hope, and love” in more modern translations of the Bible. Either way, we must take care when we pray this prayer.

“Charity” may well be misconstrued as a kind of patronizing gift to someone whom we perceive to need our extra things or our spare change. Charity in our world too often is merely a tax deduction or a good way to get rid of old clothes. Charitable tax deductions and gifts of our extra things are not bad, but they are not what this prayer is talking about.

We often hear the trio of “faith, hope, and love” at weddings, because couples often choose 1 Corinthians 13 as the epistle. “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” We have perhaps been trained to think of love, especially in the usual context of a wedding, as an emotion. This is romantic, Hollywood-style love, and fireworks at key moments are not out of the question. Or maybe we think of love as something encapsulated in a greeting card, filled with sentiment.

Charity, or Christian love, is not like this at all. It is action, not feeling. Christian love is for everyone, not just for one special person or just for our family. Christian love is sacrificial and generous. It is a way of life in which we strive to love others as Christ has loved us. When this prayer asks for charity, it is this bold Christian love that we are praying to receive.

So when we pray for the gifts of faith, hope, and charity, we are making an astonishing request. We are asking God to increase in us monumental trust in God, confidence in our future, and selfless love. All this we ask so that we might love what God commands. And what are those commands?

We are meant to love not just the Ten Commandments and what we might think of as “rules” from the Old Testament. Jesus too has given us plenty of marching orders. We are to love God with our whole being. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and he made sure to tell us that our neighbors are not just those who live next door to us. We

are to love as Jesus has loved us. We are to pray for our enemies. We are to give freely and without restriction to those whose needs are greater than ours.

We ask God to make us love these things, because to love God's commandments requires conversion in our hearts and minds. On our own, we will love our possessions more than we love giving them away. On our own, we will love those who are familiar to us more readily than we love those who might frighten us. On our own, we will love human comfort more than Gospel adventure. To change our orientation — to change the center of our world from ourselves to God — we need God to help us love what God commands.

What would your life be like with an increase of faith, hope, and charity? What has your life been like when you have loved what God commands?

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Proper 27 The Sunday closest to November 9

O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life: Grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

In his epic commentary on our prayer book, Marion Hatchett gives the history of this collect. It was written for the English prayer book of 1662 by Bishop John Cosin, originally used for the sixth Sunday after the Epiphany. The lessons for that Sunday included 1 John 3:1-9, on which this prayer is based. It's worth hearing that lesson in full:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God.

The epistles of John contain lovely, poetic language about God's love. But of course if we are going to speak honestly and fully about love, we must also speak of those things that resist love. Likewise, if we are going to speak about God and God's works honestly and fully, we must at some point also speak about the Evil One and the forces of wickedness which rebel against God.

Our collect reminds us that we are in the midst of a cosmic struggle of good versus evil, of God's works versus Satan's works. If this seems farfetched, just look at the news. Or we can look at our own lives, lives in which we do both good and evil deeds. The cosmic struggle of good and evil is as near as our own hearts.

Jesus Christ came into the world to subjugate evil, to show once and for all that God's love is stronger than the forces of evil. Gazing at the Cross, it might be possible to think that evil had one. After all, God's own Son hung on the Cross in apparent defeat. But that same Cross shows forth God's sovereignty. There God willingly suffered for us and with us, offering God's very self for our salvation. We know the story by now, but it

always bears repeating. On the third day, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. The empty tomb shows us that God's love is stronger than the powers of empire, stronger than human fear, stronger even than death itself. Christ's resurrection is also a promise of our eternal life with God.

This tiny collect, in only 82 words, manages to draw us into most of the high points of the Christian faith. We are reminded of the mystery of the Incarnation, as we remember why Jesus Christ came into this world: it was to destroy the forces of evil. We are reminded of how, in baptism, we are grafted into Christ's body the church and made children of God, heirs of eternal life.

But as we draw near to the end of our liturgical year, we begin to focus on the end times, on our need of repentance. The scriptures make clear that resurrection follows death; repentance follows dying to our sins; and our purification requires the destruction of what corrupts. Fearsome ideas, and with good reason. While we do well to tremble somewhat at the prospect of our inevitable judgement and the struggle to be made worthy, we also do well to rejoice, for we have a savior in Jesus Christ, a savior who has come into our world to show us Perfect Love, to redeem us from our captivity to sin, and to destroy the power of the devil.

In the coming quiet time, I invite you both to give thanks that we have a savior and to ponder what must else must be destroyed in our own lives as we prepare to meet Jesus Christ one day. What might it be like for us to see ourselves first and foremost as children of God?

O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life: Grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Proper 28 The Sunday closest to November 16

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

At ordinations, those who are being ordained make a declaration which says, in part, “I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.” While some Episcopalians have, at times, wished to diminish the importance of scripture, the ordination service rightly sets forth the important and true belief that the scriptures are God’s word and that they reveal for us what is necessary for our salvation.

Our tradition has long permitted a wide range of teaching about how to read and interpret the scriptures. We are not confessional, so we neither require nor forbid inerrantist or literalist or allegorical readings of the scriptures. But to go too far down the road of how we read the Bible is to get away from the main point, which our collect beautifully puts before us.

It is God who caused the scriptures to be written for our learning. And why? For our learning. And then we get to what really matters. It is not the kind of learning that is about memorizing facts. This learning is different. The scriptures are meant to aid us in embracing and holding fast to the blessed hope of everlasting life. And lest we think that “everlasting life” means that the scriptures are only about the life to come, I remind you that we sometimes receive Holy Communion with these words: “The Body (Blood) of our Lord Jesus Christ keep you in everlasting life.” That is, everlasting life is not just something to enjoy in the life to come, but in this life. To put it another way, everlasting life is life in God, or the abundant life of which Jesus spoke.

This collect is perhaps most memorable for the phrase about how we are to receive the scriptures, as we ask God to help us “hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.” This prayer was freshly composed by Thomas Cranmer himself for the 1549 prayer book just 13 years after William Tyndale had been martyred for translating the scriptures into English. No one in the church in 1549 would have taken the scriptures or the ability to hear them in their own language for granted. Filled with gratitude for God’s word, Cranmer uses conventional and very rational language at first. The scriptures are spoken of like any lecture might be, we want to hear, read, mark, and learn. But then there is this wonderful image of inwardly digesting.

Those who know their scriptures well will immediately think of several places when God’s word is digested. Jeremiah the prophet speaks of his joy at discovering God’s word, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jeremiah 15:16).

Ezekiel’s vision includes vibrant imagery:

But you, son of man, hear what I say to you; be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth, and eat what I give you.” And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it; and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. And he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. (Ezekiel 2:8-3:3)

And then there is Revelation:

So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.” And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. (Revelation 10:9-10)

All these things might be in the minds of those steeped in scripture, but the word “inwardly” guards us against the slightly terrifying prospect of having literally to eat the Bible. Bitter stomach, indeed.

To speak of inwardly digesting is to place the Bible in a sacramental context. Sacraments are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. So too the scriptures are external, tangible books, but the real power is their inward power to reveal God’s glory to us and to change our hearts.

Let us embrace the scriptures with the zeal of those who are embracing something good once forbidden. I invite you to ponder what the scriptures mean for you. And how might you inwardly digest them so that God’s hope pervades your being, that we might dwell in God’s abundant life in this age and the age to come?

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Proper 29 The Sunday closest to November 23

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

This collect is offered on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, sometimes called Christ the King Sunday. The lessons and this prayer focus us on the kingship or the complete sovereignty of Jesus Christ. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Kings, rulers, emperors, prime ministers, and even presidents are subject to the power and authority of Jesus Christ.

It is not the way I usually hear most of us talking about Jesus. We like friendly Jesus. We like stuffed-animal cuddly Jesus. Or, in the immortal words of Ricky Bobby played by Will Ferrel, “Dear Eight Pound, Six Ounce, Newborn Baby Jesus, don’t even know a word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent.” He insists on praying to Jesus as an adorable baby.

It’s funny, to think of someone always praying to a cute baby Jesus, never adult Jesus. But we too often domesticate Jesus in our own ways. We pay attention to his teachings that we like, and we move along quickly when we come to the bits that challenge us. I can’t recall ever having heard one of the television preachers, so-called biblical literalists, preaching about the commandment that those who would follow Jesus must first sell all that they own, give the money to the poor, and *then* they can become followers of Jesus.

The love Jesus, to really love Jesus, we have to read and be transformed by the whole Gospel, both the parts that come easily to us *and* parts that challenge us. It is, I think, actually very helpful to think of Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords, because that makes clear that Jesus — and Jesus alone — has his first claim on us.

Many centuries ago, the first Christians got into trouble for professing Jesus as Lord, because to say that Jesus is Lord meant that Caesar was not Lord. If we say that Jesus is first for us, that means that Jesus is first, not nation or family or even our own selves. It is radical, costly — and impossible without God’s help. But it is also deeply joyful and the source of peace amidst trouble to trust in the Kingship and Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not the sort of king who exhibits tyrannical power. He does not force us or anyone to follow him. He rules with mercy, not with might. Unlike earthly rulers who favor the rich and powerful, King Jesus cares especially for the vulnerable and poor. Jesus does not bear grudges, but stands ready to forgive and redeem all those who repent. This is gracious rule. Literally, a kingdom that is founded on grace.

The hope for God’s kingdom in our time must not be placed in possessions nor might nor power nor anything earthly. Rather, we place our hope in Christ alone, whose rule

can bring unity and reconciliation across seemingly impossible divisions. Christ alone can create abundance from scarcity. Christ alone brings hope where there was only fear. Christ alone can redeem us from our sins.

To be sure, the Gospel is crystal clear that our task is not to wait for God to magically fix what we have broken. No, the Gospel tells us that we — individually and collectively — must repent. We must bind up wounds, heal division, beg forgiveness, love the unlovable, and announce Good News. All this we must do for and in Jesus Christ, is citizens of his most gracious kingdom.

In Christ, we have hope for reconciliation between ourselves and God, between ourselves and all other people. Come Lord Jesus, quickly come.

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.