

Ash Wednesday, the First 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.

For the Epistle: Joel 2:12-17

The Gospel: St. Matthew 6:16-21

Seeing that we shall pray this Collect morning and evening for over 40 days (for we use it on each of the 40 days of Lent as well as on the Sundays in Lent), it behooves us to be as clear as possible about its meaning.

Historical Note

Our Collect for Ash Wednesday was composed by Archbishop Cranmer, using as his base, the Latin Collect prayed at the benediction of the ashes on Ash Wednesday in the medieval English Church. Before the ashes were laid upon the heads of the members of the congregation the priest said, “*Remember, man, that thou art ashes [dust] and unto ashes [dust] shalt thou return.*” What follows is an English translation (which seeks to preserve the original collect’s style) of the old Latin Collect that was used with the imposition of ashes:

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast compassion upon all men, and hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost not impute the sins of men by reason of their penitence; who also dost succour those who labour in necessity; Vouchsafe to bless [+] and sanctify [+] these ashes, which thou has appointed us to bear upon our heads after the manner of the Ninevites, in token of humiliation and holy devotion, and in order to the washing away of our offences; and, by this invocation of thy holy name, grant that all those that shall bear them upon their heads, to implore thereby thy mercy,

may obtain from thee both the pardon of all their offences, and also grace so to begin today their holy fasts, that on the day of Resurrection, they may be counted worthy to approach to the holy Paschal feast, and hereafter to receive everlasting glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

By using the relative clause, Cranmer’s Collect preserves the Latin style (in contrast to the modern “You have compassion upon all”) but is shorter and designed to be free of any possible suggestion of works-righteousness.¹

Having completed our historical inquiry, allow me a final word – Lent is not about historical research but is about devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. May our abstinence and fasting in Lent be adorned in gospel righteousness.

Commentary on the Collect

In the Reformed-Catholic mindset of the English Reformers, fasting (as well as abstinence) was seen as having two aspects – one outward and the other inward. Similarly to the manner in which the two Gospel Sacraments are outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible grace, so fasting has both an outward and an inward dimension. We shall return to this in a moment.

Something which may not be obvious to the person who merely has *The Book of Common Prayer* open before him is that at the time at which Cranmer composed this Collect, it was taken for granted that devout Christians would have actually fasted during the 40 days of Lent (by fasting is meant either reducing significantly their intake of food or else not eating – either from dawn to dusk or from dawn until after Evening Prayer).

In contrast to this, for many Christians today the Lenten fast is a novelty and some seem to give no thought whatsoever to the ancient disciplines embraced by the faithful in Lent. But such would

¹ The Reformers dropped the use of ashes on Ash Wednesday in order to avoid superstition and misunderstanding. Today many churches have restored their use, believing that their symbolism can be rightly appreciated in this time and place.

not have been the case within the context of the sixteenth century (and before), when it was simply taken for granted that good Christian people collectively fast during the 40 days leading up to Easter. Whereas the people would have been taught and encouraged along these lines through channels available to a national Church (and a Christian country), today we rely upon the parish priest to instruct the people as to our duty to be united with our Lord in his forty day fast.

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent. We begin our prayer by remembering particular aspects of God the Father's nature and character – *who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent.* Thus as we open in prayer we celebrate the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as our Creator and the God of mercy and forgiveness.

Create and make in us new and contrite hearts. The Petition is based upon what we have just confessed concerning God's nature and character. We are asking him for the mortification of our sins. This is the inward aspect of fasting and it entails: (a) careful and devout self-examination, (b) humble confession and (c) God's gracious work to create in us a heart which is cleansed, renewed and filled with godly affections.

It is possible for us to accomplish the outward aspect of our fasting by means of our own willpower and in our own strength. We may even achieve certain good ends such as weight loss, better cholesterol readings, lower blood pressure and so forth. Such is not, however, the case when it comes to the inward aspect of a godly fast. Though our wills are certainly involved, the inward aspect is dependent upon the activity of God the Holy Ghost – present both to energize us and to make our efforts worthy before God.

That we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness. "Protestant" readers may have an initial aversion to praying that what we do might be considered "worthy"

in God's sight. But this need not be so. Cranmer was not advocating works-righteousness and this prayer does not suggest that we earn or merit God's favor. What we are asking God is that our self-examination, our sense of guilt for our sins, our sorrow over sin, our penitence and our Christ-ward gaze for relief might be made worthy in the Father's sight. And we are confessing that any such worthiness will be owing to the presence and grace of the Holy Ghost, who is able to sanctify both us and our offering (of good works and fasting), so that both we and they are accepted by the Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord. The end of all this is that we might receive the *perfect remission and forgiveness* of our sins. To gain this from the God of all mercy (through Christ the Lord) we must worthily offer to God a humble, penitent and obedient heart; and this we can do only when our efforts are led and sanctified by the Holy Ghost.

Let us sincerely pray this Collect each day in Lent, keeping in mind that our goal is that both the outward and the inward aspects of our fasting would (by his grace) be pleasing in God's sight.

Peter Toon & Jason Patterson