



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for Ash Wednesday

(Book of Common Prayer)

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.

With a variety of origins in earlier periods, Lent emerged in the fourth century as a period to renew the shared Christian experience of living the new life granted through Christ's crucifixion, burial and rising. This engagement with the ideal had the effect of highlighting the failure fully to live this new life, and so Lent assumed the mood of collective penitence, with fasting and prayer.

For the 1549 Prayer Book, Cranmer composed this collect for Ash Wednesday to begin this period of penitence and renewal. Its first section is derived from the Sarum Rite's blessing of ashes. Three typical pairings of words or phrases are used: "new and contrite hearts"; "sins...wretchedness"; "remission and forgiveness".

How was it that Cranmer and his colleagues considered the collect a form of prayer, with its Latin structure, worth keeping, going so far as to create new collects using the same formula? I think part of the answer is that in both the early mediaeval times and in the case of Reformation England, rhetoric and elaboration in public speech were prized as effective tools of communication. Present-day culture has a different approach. It seems to prefer the intimate and immediate to the formal and public. The traditional collects rely on sonority and their stark simplicity, whereas modern prayers tend to be discursive. Contemporary prayers have the advantage of an appealing directness, yet the tightly composed and sophisticated collects still have a place in our liturgy. Their measured rhythm is one advantage. When I was working for the British Council of Churches, (as it then was) an Anglican clergyman and a colleague from another denomination visited a Pentecostal Church which wanted to join the Council. Both were invited to lead prayers. The colleague led *ex tempore* prayers, which were listened to in polite silence. The clergyman, however, prayed a collect. At the end of each phrase, the congregation voiced Alleluias and Amens, mounting in volume as the collect proceeded.

At the end of the collect, the cumulative response resulted in a thunderous *Amen!* That reaction demonstrated to me that there is still life in the collects.

Another virtue of the collects is that their vocabulary and themes are often based on Scripture, helping us draw upon our Biblical heritage. Part of that heritage is the shape or pattern of prayer which the collect mirrors. That shape is especially clear in the psalms, where God is addressed, his actions recalled, and his help sought. This collect for Ash Wednesday draws on Psalm 51 verse 17. The verse supplies the mood and in part the collect's wording, and embeds penitence as the central thread of Lent because the prayer is not just for Ash Wednesday but is repeated throughout Lent. Our contrition and our appeal for forgiveness in the collect are consonant with that psalm verse: *"The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise"*.

James Graham February 2026