



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

(Book of Common Prayer)

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.

This collect first appeared in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549, and is based on its Latin equivalent in the Sarum Missal. The brevity of the collect in English is a reminder that the Latin collects were often very pithy. With highly inflected Latin you can pack a lot of meaning into a few short words and create rhythm from agreeing word endings. English cannot emulate the taut compression of Latin. It is not an inflected language, so it needs 'prop-words' to indicate syntactic relationships. English, though, does have compensatory resources of its own that can be used to create balance and pattern. It was sensitive of the Cranmerian reformers to use the natural stresses and rhythms of English in the Prayer Book instead of trying to force English into an inevitably unsatisfactory imitation of the very different Latin.

The Sarum Missal collect was also set for this Sunday in the Church's year, which is usually also known as Passion Sunday because the focus on Jesus's suffering and crucifixion is intensified at this stage of Lent. Modern collects make the emphasis on Jesus's passion overt, referring to Christ's suffering on the cross. There is, however, no such direct reference to Jesus in this short prayer. As a result, on first pondering this prayer it can come across as somewhat disappointing, even rather colourless. There is, though, something in the structure of the prayer which makes it well-framed. The alliteration in "great goodness ... governed" is memorable in a prayer designed to be read aloud and heard. And the two sets of pairings, "governed and preserved" and "body and soul" are typical of English collects.

There is, however, an indirect reflection of the theme of Passion Sunday. Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34) have Jesus crying out just before he died, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This is a quotation from Psalm 22:1. That portion of verse in the 1662 Prayer Book is slightly expanded: "My God, my God, look upon me; why hast thou forsaken me?" Those words "look upon me" come from the translation of the psalms by Miles Coverdale (1488-1569), which were incorporated into the 1662 Prayer Book.

For his translation he used the mediæval Latin Bible (the Vulgate), which in turn is based on an ancient Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint).

I think it is not too far-fetched to see “*look upon me*” in Psalm 22:1 as echoed in today’s collect in the words “mercifully look upon thy people”. As we picture, then, Christ on the cross asking God to look upon him, to see his plight and to remember him, we are invited by this collect to ask God to look upon us, to behold us, and to recognise our own frailty and our need for “thy great goodness”.

James Graham

March 2026