



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for the Sunday Next before Easter

(Book of Common Prayer)

Almighty and everlasting God, who of thy tender love towards mankind hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer first appeared in English in the Prayer Book of 1549. Lying behind it is the Sarum Missal's collect for the same day. "Next" in the title means "nearest", as preserved in "next-of-kin" (nearest relative); but the Sunday is now usually referred to as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. Earlier, this prayer appeared (in Latin) in the Gelasian Sacramentary. The only extant copy of this Sacramentary is from the eighth century, but its origin is much older than this. This collect (in modern English) is also the Common Worship collect of the day.

The literary structure of a collect is composed of various arrangements of these basic elements: (i) an address to God (invocation); (ii) a clause referring to an aspect of God's nature or of his relationship with us, which is the ground for the prayer (amplification); (iii) the heart of the prayer, setting out what is sought (petition); (iv) the consequences we ask to flow from the prayer (purpose); and (v) the pleading of the Lord's name as the basis for confidence that the prayer will be accepted (mediation). The amplification and purpose are, however, frequently omitted, and the latter is absent in this prayer. This omission is more than compensated for by the very extended amplification, "who of thy tender love towards mankind hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility".

That long clause highlights "the example of (Christ's) great humility" in taking human flesh and dying upon the cross. This is drawing on Scripture, which would have struck Cranmer and the compilers of the 1549 Prayer Book as especially apt. The key text is verse 8 from Philippians 2:5-11, which is the Epistle of the day's Prayer Book communion. The verse reads, "*being found in fashion as a man, (Christ) humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*".

The petition in this prayer has two parts. One looks forward to Easter, and asks that we should collectively share in Christ's resurrection. The other asks that "we may ... follow the example of (Christ's) patience". 'Patience' strikes me as an underestimation of Christ's enduring suffering, mental and physical torture, and death. Throughout Holy Week, which Palm Sunday heralds, the church will be re-entering the story of Christ's humility and his patience so that we deepen our faith in the one who suffered the unimaginably terrible "death upon the cross".

James Graham

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