



## *St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd*

### The Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent

*(Book of Common Prayer)*

**We beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

This is a 1549 translation into English of the underlying Sarum Latin collect, and therefore in one form or another it has been prayed on this day, Lent 3, since the eleventh century, and it will have had a history earlier than that. The translation added “hearty”, meaning heart-felt, to “desires”. 1549 also added “against all our enemies”. Perhaps that addition was inspired by verses from the psalms like that of Psalm 138: “*Though I walk in the midst of trouble, yet shalt thou refresh me: thou shalt stretch forth thy right hand upon the furiousness of mine enemies, and thy right hand shall save me*” (verse 7).

The collect for the third Sunday after Epiphany also contains the phrase “*Stretch forth thy right hand*”. Since I am married to someone who is left-handed, I have become sensitive to the bias towards the right and the suspicion of the left which the preponderance of right-handedness has given most societies and cultures. This deep-seated attitude lies behind the good connotations associated with the right side; it also explains the figure of speech which attributes right-handedness to God.

There are many Scriptural references to God’s right hand being powerful, as when Moses praises God for the Hebrews’ escape across the Red Sea: “*Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power; thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy*” (Exodus 15:6). God’s right hand rescues his people, something asserted again and again in the psalms, as for example in that verse 7 of Psalm 138.

God's right hand in Scripture, however, is not just a powerful ally in conflicts and a protective shield in the face of trouble: it is a loving, leading hand too. Psalm 139, for example, expresses this:

*“Whither shall I go then from thy Spirit :  
or whither shall I go then from thy presence?  
If I climb up into heaven, thou art there :  
if I go down to hell, thou art there also.  
If I take the wings of the morning :  
and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea;  
Even there also shall thy hand lead me :  
and thy right hand shall hold me.”* (Verses 6 to 9)

These verses, especially the last one, make me picture a child being lovingly held by the hand and led by an adult, a picture of God's love for each of us.

This collect is an appeal to all those 'right-handed' characteristics of God: his saving power, his shielding us, his gentle leading. We are looking to him “to be our defence”, our protector. The prayer invites us to reach out our hand to meet his.

*James Graham  
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