



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for Whit Sunday

(Book of Common Prayer)

God, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

Reaching us via the Gelasian Sacramentary and the Sarum Missal, 1549 has given us this English version of the collect, which is also used today (adapted) by Common Worship.

The word Pentecost is derived from the Greek for fiftieth: there are fifty days between Easter Day and Pentecost, forming the season of Eastertide. Sources dating from the fourth century attest the observance of these fifty days of Easter, so it was widely established by that century. Related to it is the fifty-day period between the Jewish feasts of the Passover, around which time Jesus was crucified, and the Feast of Weeks. Acts chapter two describes the apostles and other followers of Jesus, gathered for the Feast of Weeks, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“Whit Sunday” as a name for Pentecost grew because of its association with baptism, when the liturgical colour is white. Early in Christian history Easter was the time for baptisms, with Lent as the period of preparation. It seems that as the numbers for baptism grew, the final day of Eastertide, Pentecost, became the traditional day for large numbers of baptisms.

“God” sounds, in English, a rather blunt way to start a prayer, as if God were being summoned. Many collects softened this opening to “O God”, the 1662 revisers especially editing the collects in this way. The translators and revisers perhaps wanted to address God in a more clearly deferential way, in line with the custom of the day of addressing a superior as ‘My Lord’. They may well also have appreciated that the vocative “O God” echoes the rhythm of the underlying Latin “*Deus*”, which is also comprised of two syllables.

The word “light” in the phrase “the light of thy Holy Spirit” may have been prompted by the thought of the flickering “*tongues as of fire*” that rested on the Apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:3).

This collect is a wonderful reminder that the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was not a one-off event. “The light of thy Holy Spirit” is continually available to our shape our thoughts, attitudes, and the whole orientation of our lives. Drawing upon the Spirit will give us the strength (which is the meaning of “comfort” in the prayer) to live the lives that God purposes for us in Christ Jesus.

James Graham

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