



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for Ascension Day

(Book of Common Prayer)

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

The feast of Christ's Ascension into heaven has been long established; at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo wrote of it in a way that shows it was the universal observance of the church well before his time. Chapter one of the Book of Acts narrates the story of the Ascension, and we read there that before it occurred Jesus "*shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of (the apostles) forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*" (Acts 1:3). This reference to the risen Christ being among the apostles for forty days is the reason why Ascension Day falls on the fortieth day of Eastertide, always a Thursday.

The Trinitarian conclusion emphasises Ascension as an important feast day in the church calendar. The original Latin behind the phrase "world without end" literally means "*for the ages of ages*". This is not about the world's duration: it is a poetic way of saying "for all eternity". The hymn "*Praise God from whom all blessings flow*" puts it beautifully: "*while endless ages run*".

The Scripture which lies behind the composition of this collect is from one of St Paul's letters: "*If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth*" (Colossians 3:1-2). These verses inspired a prayer in Latin which features in the Gregorian Sacramentary, and this in turn inspired the collect for Ascension Day in the Sarum Missal. When the Cranmerian Reformers translated that collect for the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, a few of the Latin details were dropped, but there were also some additions and a substitution: "*our Redeemer*" in the Latin was changed to "our Lord"; "heart and" was added to make "heart and mind"; and another addition was "and with him continually dwell".

The collect invites us to set our *“affection on things above, not on things on the earth”*. I do not think this is meant to make us unworldly. Rather, it is a question about what is most important in our lives. Instead of being preoccupied with our worldly interests and concerns, we are to ask whether we prioritise loving God and neighbour. If we do so we shall be with our risen and ascended Lord *“in heart and mind”*.

James Graham

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