



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

(Book of Common Prayer)

Lord, we beseech thee, grant thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow thee the only God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Found in the Gelasian Sacramentary and in the Sarum Missal for this same Sunday, this collect was translated from Latin into English for the 1549 Book of Common Prayer. However, in 1549 the first limb of the petition was rendered "*to avoid the infections of the devil*". This was changed into its present form for the Prayer Book of 1662, with its references to "the world, the flesh and the devil".

This expansion may have been suggested by the suffrage in the Prayer Book's Litany: "*From all the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil, Good Lord, deliver us*". Cranmer composed the Litany in 1544 (pre-dating the 1549 Prayer Book), drawing on mediæval Latin litanies. The wording "the world, the flesh, and the devil" is in fact ancient, and appears in mediæval baptism rites. The 1549 picks up the tradition in its orders for baptism where three of the questions put to candidates, in succession, are "*Dost thou forsake the devil and all his works? Dost thou forsake the vain pomp, and glory of the world..? Dost thou forsake and the carnal desires of the flesh?*".

In exploring its origin of "the world the flesh and the devil", it has been suggested that the trio can be discerned in the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9, with parallels in Matthew 13 & Luke 8). The seeds eaten by the birds could be seen to represent the cares of the world; the rootless plants withered by the sun, the temptations of the flesh; and the plants choked by thorny weeds, the work of the devil. Perhaps this is rather contrived. More intriguing as a possible background are the accounts of the temptations of Christ in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13. A case can be made out that the three dangers are reflected in these: the world, in the temptation of Christ to seek worldly power by casting himself from the pinnacle of the temple; the flesh, in the temptation to give in to hunger by turning stones into bread; and the temptation simply to worship the devil (though this is connected with worldly power again).

“The temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil” neatly summarises the distractions from our central aim and purpose: to live according to God’s will. Worldly importance, status and self-promotion are obstacles. Aiming for personal comfort and selfish indulgence is shallow. Deliberately entertaining all kinds of mischief hurts others and - undermining our human potential for good – hurts ourselves as well. No wonder we pray for “grace to withstand” all this, so that we are enabled to “follow thee, the only God”.

James Graham
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