

St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity

O God, our refuge and strength, who art the author of all godliness; Be ready, we beseech thee, to hear the devout prayers of thy Church; and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer was written by Archbishop Cranmer and his fellow Reformers for the first Book of Common Prayer of 1549. It is a translation of the Latin collect for the same Sunday in the Sarum Missal. Though the Sarum rite was established in Salisbury in the eleventh century, it came to be used throughout most of England, Wales, Ireland and (eventually) Scotland until the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Unusually, Cranmer did not reflect in English an underlying link between a couple of words in this prayer. "Godliness" and "devout" are, in effect, the same word in the Latin, a noun and an adjective with the same root; the prayer in English could therefore have been *"O God … the author of all piety … hear the pious prayers of thy Church"*. Or perhaps the word 'devotion' could have been employed to balance 'devout'. The message of the linked words is that God is the gracious source of our faith in him, the faith from which our prayers issue.

"Be ready" are words that strike me as strange. After all, in another collect (Trinity 12) we affirm that God is "always more ready to hear than we to pray". And God's readiness to hear our prayers is made explicit in the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:7, *"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you"*. Cranmer has with "Be ready" translated a word which can also mean 'be near' or 'be close to'. Asking God to be 'near to' our prayers would not sound well in English, and Cranmer has therefore created this phrase. It is one that seems to suggest – at least to my way of hearing it – that we are letting God know that we have plenty more praying to do. It is though we are saying to God, 'our many prayers will be on their way'. And, especially in these very challenging times, that surely is the case.

The opening words of this collect reassure us that God is indeed near to us in our prayers and in our hardships: "O God, our refuge and strength". These words draw on Psalm 46. That psalm affirms that *"God is our hope and strength: a very present help in trouble"* (verse 1); *"The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge"* (verse 11). In the psalm God invites us to *"Be still then, and know that I am God"* (verse 10a). If we are stuck for prayer, stillness before God offers a start. From the stillness we ask God to be the refuge and strength of all who endure hardship and distress.

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