

By Heart: Prayers of the Communion Service

The Downs and Valley Churches, Lent 2026

3. Lent 1 - 'Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts'

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(The Collect for Purity)

Through Lent this year we are looking at some of the prayers which we say regularly in our Communion service. Prayers which we have said so often that, without ever meaning to, we know 'by heart'. Today we look at the 'Collect for Purity', which begins that service. I guess that, in the almost 53 years since I was confirmed, I have said this prayer most weeks at least once. That's over two-and-a-half thousand times. It ought to be woven into the fibre of my being.

It is, and it probably is into yours as well. But it is so woven into me, and perhaps you, that it's easy to say almost automatically. It's just what we say when we come to church. Yet this prayer, like all the prayers we use, has its own story and its own truths. What are they?

Sometime in the late 14th Century a little anonymous book called *The Cloud of Unknowing* was written. It was a guide to prayer, in English, that sidestepped the increasingly sterile philosophical debates of the day about God, which were conducted in Latin, and emphasised that Christian faith was fundamentally about love. It opened with this prayer, in English:

*God, unto whom alle hertes ben open, and unto whom alle wille spekith, and unto whom no privé thing is hid: I beseche thee so for to clense the entent of myn heart with the unspekable gift of thi grace that I may parfiteliche love thee, and worthilich preise thee.
Amen.*

It was a prayer that had been written in the 8th Century by the Abbot of Canterbury in Latin. It was used through the Middle Ages in England by the priest, quietly, by himself, before he celebrated the Mass or Communion in Latin. The *Cloud of Unknowing* translated it into English, and therefore opened it up for anyone to use.

So it is a peculiarly English prayer with a history stretching back almost 1300 years, first in Latin and later in English. When we pray these words, therefore, we join a procession of what the Letter to the Hebrews calls 'the great cloud of witnesses', who have used these same words as they come to worship and pray. Think of it that way, and the 2500 times I have used it begins to seem rather puny in an ancient church. It must have been prayed literally millions of times by people in our churches.

Until the mid-16th Century, though, it was a private prayer, whether in Latin or English. But when Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, came to write the text of the Communion Service for the first *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549 he included the prayer, more or less as we know it, still said only by the priest but in the hearing of the congregation. Gradually congregations, over the centuries, began to join in, and when the services were revised in the later 20th Century it became the 'Prayer of Preparation', to be said by everyone. It's a threshold prayer, as we enter worship, a 'Here I am again, Lord' prayer, a kind of 'checking in' at the beginning of worship.

It's called a Collect – which is a specific kind of prayer that gathers our many prayers together into one and points them in the same direction. We come to worship from different experiences, directions and lives, yet here we are drawn together, gather our lives and thoughts from many different trajectories and point them in the same direction towards God.

Sometimes we think that in order to pray, to have sense of meeting God, we need a quiet room, a dark church, in order to find God. But this prayer begins with the reminder that God is everywhere, not just in church – 'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden'. We may not have been aware of God in the busy-ness of daily life, but God has been there in the hurly-burly of whatever we have come from, whatever we have been immersed in this week. The American Social Activist Dorothy Day once dropped into St Joseph's Church amidst the mad bustle of Sixth Avenue in New York. She said she had realised that 'sooner or later I would have to pause in the mad rush of living and remember my first beginning and my last end.'¹ This prayer begins that pause in everyday life, but it does not mark something completely different from everyday life, moving into a place where God is instead of a place where God is not. God has been with us in our outside-church life just as much as God is with us when we stop to worship.

But then when we think about it, we might become rather uncomfortable with this thought. God sees and knows everything: all hearts are open books to him, all our desires clear and there are no secrets from him. How does that make you feel?!

It can be scary. It sounds like George Orwell's 'Big Brother is watching you', or J.R.R.Tolkien's 'Eye of Sauron' in *The Lord of the Rings*. This is the ultimate surveillance system! Before God we are naked, transparent, completely laid bare. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, according to the Book of Genesis, we naturally squirm away and try to hide in the beam of this blazing searchlight.

Or do we? That might be our first reaction, but if we think about it perhaps we might also begin to feel some relief. Nothing is hidden, everything is known. There are no secrets from God. So there's no need to hide – hiding would be useless anyway. Those things which you're ashamed of, that you'd hate even your best friend or your spouse to know about you – God already knows. And actually it's all right.

I remember really getting to grips with this for the first time at a Quiet Day when I was at Theological College. There was a little secret, not very important but it felt embarrassing, that I had hidden away from everyone. The speaker for the day talked about how nothing was hidden from God, and that he still loves us anyway. Nothing at all. And it was as if something shifted in me. This thing which I was so embarrassed about, my little secret thought, was known by God. And he still loved me. After that the secret thought didn't really bother me any more, it sort of

¹ Quoted in Radcliffe *Why Go to Church?* p.20.

fizzled away like an old sparkler. When I spoke to an old friend about the secret that had tormented me a good few years later, he just laughed. 'Really?' he said.

So though our first reaction to this sense of exposure may be panic, once we work with it perhaps we recognise that it is a gift. Desires can be good as well as bad: what is the deepest desire of your heart, the thing you most long to see happen? You might not dare to say it to someone else because it seems too mad to hope for. But God knows and doesn't laugh. You have no secrets from him. The Sufi poet Rumi wrote, picking up Jesus's words from the end of Matthew's Gospel:

Lo, I am with you always means when you look for God,
God is in the look of your eyes,
in the thought of looking, nearer to you than yourself.²

And just as this prayer gathers our various prayers, and we pray together, its 'Collect' nature might also point to something else here. For we are not only drawing near to our fellow-worshippers, but also drawing closer to God. The medieval hermit Julian of Norwich wrote that God is the 'endless fulfilment of all true desires'³, and in recognising that God knows our desires to we perhaps also find, little by little, that those desires move in a new direction; we begin to sense more deeply which are right desires and which are not.

So now we move on to the next bit of the prayer. You might think that after that opening it would be time to confess sins, but there's a deeper wisdom here. We're not going there yet.

Because here we reach the heart of the actual prayer: 'cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit'.

I have been having trouble with my car recently. The cam belt needed replacing, but after that had been done the engine didn't run properly: when you accelerate, from time to time the car judders and won't pick up speed and all the warning lights come on. The garage decided that bits had got into the fuel delivery system and needed to be cleaned out in order for the car to run smoothly. It's been back to the garage twice since then.

I can't help seeing a connection with this prayer. Before we're even in a position to confess our sins, we need our systems to be cleaned out first. The embarrassing, but also liberating truth, is that unless we ask God to repair us first, unless God makes the first move, we're not yet in a state to pray the prayers of penitence. We can't even do that on our own. So we ask for the 'inspiration of your Holy Spirit'. It's a lovely image: 'inspiration' literally means 'breathing into', and again its taken from the Book of Genesis, where God breathes life into the first human being (Genesis 2.7). We ask for nothing less than a re-creation, a new start.

Fonts are usually placed close to the entrance of a church, so that you have to pass them in order to come to worship. Although this prayer doesn't mention water, or baptism, I often think that the idea is lying beneath it somewhere. In baptism we come with empty hands, simply offering ourselves. One of the reasons I love infant baptisms is because they so graphically illustrates that we have no qualification for the grace and love of God, other than our need. This prayer is a kind of re-enactment of baptism as we come, nakedly, openly, asking God to give us

² Rumi *Selected Poems* (Penguin 2004) p.13. See also Augustine *Confessions* 3.6.11, 'You were more inward to me than my most inward part.'

³ Julian of Norwich *Revelations of Divine Love* (OUP 2015) Ch. 59, p.128.

even the capacity to worship him. So that we may 'perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name: through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Our love is, of course, never perfect, and we can never 'worthily magnify your holy name' – unless we recognise our need and that our love and worship is somehow transformed 'through Jesus Christ' into something worthy. Even in our little village churches, bumbling along as we do, making our own links in the unbroken chain of worship over twelve or thirteen centuries, our unworthy worship is made acceptable and joins the worship of heaven.

Last year we had a day for Rural Churches in the Diocese, and Sally Gaze, who is an Archdeacon in East Anglia, came to speak. One thing she said particularly stuck with me. What does God think of our often rather homespun worship in village churches? she asked. It doesn't bear comparison with a great Cathedral or many of the town churches with larger congregations, beautiful choirs, and grand buildings, she said. They are like the pictures you might have on the wall of your sitting room, she said. Rural churches? Well maybe to God, she said, they are like the pictures by our children or grandchildren that we put on our fridges or blu-tac to the wall. Far from perfect, but painted with love and kept in the place where we see and value them. Because they are painted with love.

It is God's love, through Jesus Christ, that makes it possible for us to worship perfectly and worthily. God sees us as we are, knows us through and through, has given us life and breath and gives it to us again, so that we may join with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

And now we can get down to the work of confession, hear words of forgiveness, listen to the great stories of what God has done in our Bible readings and in the sermon, pray for the world and then come to give thanks and praise in the 'Great Thanksgiving', the eucharistic prayer, which is what we look at next week.

Lent usually coincides with the coming of Spring for us (in fact the word 'Lent' originally meant Spring, rather than a Church season). It is the time when, as you look up, you can see migrating birds scudding across the sky in formation. That, it seems to me, is a wonderful image of what we are doing as we pray this Collect for Purity together. Gathering, as the birds do, moving into formation and finding common direction as we move deeper into the awareness of the presence of God – who has, of course, been there with us all along.