

ASH WEDNESDAY

THE COLLECT

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

COMMENTARY

Since we pray this Collect morning and evening for over 40 days—for we use it on the Sundays of Lent as well as the 40 days of Lent—we really need to be clear as to its meaning.

To get to this meaning, I think we should be clear that for the reformed Catholic mindset of the English Reformation, fasting/abstinence was seen as having two aspects: the outward and the inward. Even as the two Gospel Sacraments are outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible grace, so fasting (though not a sacrament) has both the outward and the inward dimensions.

The Collect takes for granted that the devout people of God are actually fasting during the 40 days (by fasting is meant either reducing

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significantly their intake of food or else not eating from dawn to dusk, or from dawn to after Evening Prayer). This fact is not immediately obvious to those who merely have The Book of Common Prayer (1662) before them, but in the context of the sixteenth century, it was generally known and acknowledged that good Christian people fasted in Lent. Today, without the context of a Christian country providing us with the information, we rely upon the parish priest to instruct us in this duty of uniting with our Lord in his 40-day fast.

Therefore, what we have in the Collect is a petition to God the Father to assist us in performing the good work of fasting and, specifically, of engaging in the inward fast, without which the outward fast cannot be a good work in God's sight.

The Collect begins with remembrance of particular aspects of the nature and character of God the Father—'who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent'. Thus, as we open in prayer, we celebrate the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as our Creator and the God of mercy and forgiveness.

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Then we come to the petition based upon what we know of the nature and character of God: 'Create and make in us new and contrite hearts that we worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ...'

The inward aspect of fasting is the mortification of sin—through careful and devout self-examination and humble confession—and, on this basis, the creation or making of a new heart (that is, a cleansed and renewed heart wherein are godly principles).

Now, while the outward aspect of fasting can be done in our own strength and willpower (and can therefore lead to weight loss, better cholesterol readings, lower blood pressure and so on), the inward aspect, though intimately related to our desiring, is dependent upon the activity of the Holy Ghost in our souls to energise and to make worthy before God our mortification and vivification.

Christian souls desire above all else 'perfect remission and forgiveness' of their sins and, to gain this from the God of all mercy through Christ the Lord, they must worthily offer to God humble, penitent and obedient hearts;

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and they only can do so when they are being led by the Holy Ghost.

So in order to engage in inward fasting, the saying of this Collect—or a prayer like it—is absolutely necessary as an offering for the people of God to make to the Lord.

‘Worthily’ is a word that ‘Protestants’ tend to avoid, but here it emphasises that our self-examination, our sense of guilt for sins, our sorrow for sins, our penitence for sins and our looking unto the Lord for relief, must be in the name and for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ to be counted worthy before his Father. Thus we see our dependence on the presence and grace of the Holy Ghost to bring that worthiness into our offering of this good work of fasting to the Lord our God.

Let us pray this Collect in sincerity and with understanding, and as part of a practical commitment to the keeping of Lent as a duty unto the Lord.

THE EPISTLE. Joel 2. 12

TURN ye even to me, saith the Lord, with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning. And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and

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merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return, and repent, and leave a blessing behind him, even a meat-offering and a drink-offering unto the Lord your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts; let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet; let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them: wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God?

THE GOSPEL. S. Matth. 6. 16

WHEN ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. Lay not up

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for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Commentary by the Revd. Dr. Peter Toon.

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