

Trinity 24

I take as my text today from the Collect:

....absolve thy people from their offences; that through thy bountiful goodness we may be delivered from all the bands of sins, which by our frailty we have committed....

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

It's hard to believe but we are nearing the close of the Season of Trinity, the longest season of the Church Year — just one more Sunday to go. Then, with the First Sunday in Advent, we begin a New Year, that is, a New Year in the Church Calendar, and, certainly, not with the revelry of a secular New Year.

But, for a moment, let us reflect on the Collect for this 24th Sunday in Trinity. What we find is a certain penitential character but not without hope for what is to come.

Collects are pretty much taken for granted, and it's not often that we take the time to look closely at them. Yet many are magnificent, not only in language, but also in cutting to the core of our faith.

So it is with Collect for Trinity 24.

If we trace it back to its earliest form, it has its origins in both the Leonine and Gregorian Sacramentaries. We find this Collect to have been part of the Mass that was traditionally held at St. Peter's Basilica at the close of the Christian Year, and the circumstances associated with it tie together its theme of *absolution* with the *power of the keys* given to St. Peter.

The setting would be the Sunday just before the *Autumn Ember Days*, a time of fasting and abstinence in the Western Church. The *Ember Days* originally were associated with the crops, occurring four times a year and still observed today with fasting and abstinence but they are more closely associated with the ordination of clergy. Specifically, they are the Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays that follow December 13th, the First Sunday in Lent, Whitsunday, and *Holy Cross Day* in September.

Now, today's Collect for Trinity 24 beseeches God to forgive us our offenses, and most certainly over the past year we have committed many offenses in the sight of God.

Furthermore, we ask that God do this through his *bountiful goodness*, a very apt expression, indeed, how better to describe **God's Goodness**; it is beyond our human imagination and the word itself, *bountiful*, conjures up visions of a cornucopia with its contents spilling over; silos bursting at the seams with the bounty of a fall harvest; and outdoor markets with fruit and vegetable stands overflowing with produce — **God's Goodness** overflowing, overflowing for us who seek him.

It brings to mind our own celebration of *Thanksgiving* each year when we take a special day to offer our thanksgiving as a nation for all the goodness with which God has endowed us, not only for the fruits of the earth but also for the freedom to enjoy them and to worship him, the source of all goodness.

Most certainly, over the year, by our *frailty*, we have committed many sins from which we seek deliverance. By nature we are frail. And it is this *frailty* which leads to the corruption of our affections and to our sinfulness.

In the terminology of our **1928 Prayer Book**, it is not that our nature is *corrupt*, rather it is *frail*. The difference here is significant.

For example, if one takes the teachings of St. Augustine at face value, there would be reason to assume that the very nature of mankind is *corrupt*. While we identify St. Augustine with the concept of *Original Sin*, he went much further, indeed, to the point of saying that human beings are so *corrupt* they cannot beget children without sin.

Though severe in his teaching, St. Augustine gets to the heart of the matter, identifying *evil* as coming from the misuse of *free will* in beings who were originally created good. It was the perverted *freedom* of the *will* of the creature that gave *evil* its birth.

With the advent of the Reformation, we find Calvin taking St. Augustine, perhaps, to the extreme when he issued his dogmas known as the *Five Points of Calvinism*.

In short, those *Five Points* are:

1. Christ died for the elect only, not for all of mankind;
2. Men are predestined to death as well as to life: God, by his inscrutable decree, created some men expressly to burn eternally in Hell;
3. Since the Fall, man is totally *corrupt*; the image of God in which he was created is completely destroyed; there is no natural *goodness* in man at all.
4. The Grace of God is irresistible; and
5. Final perseverance; if a man has once received the *Divine Grace*, he cannot be finally lost.

From the above, a lot of assumptions can be made as to the intentions of God on the one hand and the *corrupt nature* of mankind on the other. Either we are destined to salvation and nothing we do can alter our destiny; or we are doomed to eternal damnation and nothing we do can change that either.

Indeed, from the narrow *Calvinistic* approach, we are left floundering in a paradoxical sea.

But from our orthodox Anglican point-of-view, there is hope, as we find in **Vernon Staley's** book *The Catholic Religion*, as he writes of our *Original Sin*:

It is more of the nature of a serious defect than of a positive taint, and hence it is the object of God's compassion rather than of his wrath.

This issue of *Original Sin* in regard to our frail human nature has been a focus of much debate, much discussion, and has left a cloud of uncertainty hanging over those who aspire to living a *good* Christian life, trying to emulate our Lord and Saviour.

When we say that mankind was made in the *Likeness of God*, we are referring to the threefold structure of the soul: *memory*, *understanding*, and *will*. We were created with the capability of *knowing*, *serving*, and *loving* God. We were also imbued with the *intelligence* to fulfill this purpose when God gave us *moral freedom*. We are endowed with *reason* — we alone, as no other of God's creature are so endowed.

If *Evil* then, is the perversion of *free will*, the *will* cannot be truly *free* unless it is capable of choosing *evil* as well as *good* just as we must be *free* to choose to love God or to reject him. God did not create *evil*; however, without *evil* we would have no choice, no opportunity to exercise our *free will*.

As we find hope in the Collect for today, so St. Paul gives up hope in his Epistle to the Colossians when he says:

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, for the hope, which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel....

In essence, that *hope* to which St. Paul refers is the treasure that awaits us in heaven, not a reward for *being good*, rather the fruition of our *Faith* in Jesus Christ and the love that flows from that *Faith*.

Our *hope* is realized through a living *Faith*. It is cemented in the *Bountiful Goodness* of God, an overabundance of *Grace*, *Love*, and *Mercy*.

We have God's assurance.

Even though by nature, we are *frail*, we may have confidence that it is not *frailty* that is the cause of our *sin*, rather *sin* is the *result* of our *frailty*.

We have assurance as Christians that God will absolve us of our sins through his *Bountiful Goodness* if we ask him; but it is not just asking but also being contrite, truly confessing and repenting our sins.

So, we pray privately and corporately. We join together in making our *Humble Confession unto Almighty God* during the **Holy Eucharist**, and during **Morning** and **Evening Prayer** as we petition for *absolution*. We must not only petition God through prayer with our minds, but also with our hearts and our souls; and it must be reflected in our daily lives. In striving to cope with our human *frailty*, we have the comfort of the **Holy Spirit**, we have the **Sacraments**, and we have each other in the fellowship of Christ's **Church**.

We also have confidence in the knowledge that Jesus Christ died on the **Cross** for all of us, for all of mankind, not just a select few. He died that all of his **Creation** may attain to eternal life.

Great theologians, such as St. Augustine, have been instrumental, throughout the centuries, in helping us to better understand not only our nature, but also our relationship to God. Often their approaches are quite severe in tone, understandably, as we often need this approach.

But, at the same time, we can find comfort and joy in God's **Grace**, a gift of **Love** to us.

In prayer, we ask that we may be filled with an ever-growing knowledge of God's **Will** for us; we pray for *spiritual wisdom*; and we pray for guidance and understanding in how to apply this wisdom in our lives.

We pray, too, for the strength to conduct our lives according to God's **Will** revealed to us.

We see this expressed most powerfully in the words of St. Paul taken from today's Epistle:

...we do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power; giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.

As we approach the close of the *Christian Year*, let us review our lives in the inclusive terms of our *Christian Duty* and seek God's forgiveness where we have fallen short and offer him praise and thanksgiving where we have found success.

When we go to God in prayer in expectation of the present as well as the future, let us ask for the strength to overcome our human *frailty* and to choose what is right in his sight; and let us take the time to listen as well.

Thus, with the *Bountiful Goodness* of God, we are blessed, and through which we may be *delivered from the bands of those sins, which by our frailty we have committed....*

Without him we are *frail*; without him we cannot help but fall. But we pray for his assurance that we may be kept ever by his help *from all things hurtful, and led to all things profitable to our salvation.*