

Every Sunday when we gather for worship, our prayers begin with what's called the "Collect of the Day." It's a short prayer, so it can be forgotten as easily as it's read!

The word *collect* is used because it's a prayer that gathers up (collects), into a few words, what might otherwise be the rambling prayer of the congregation. It's pronounced COLL-ect, rather than coll-ECT because the word is being used as a noun rather than a verb – like we have PRO-duce, but the verb is said pro-DUCE.

... anyway, back to the *collect*. Each week of the liturgical year has a specific collect appointed, and, in addition to Sunday morning, this same collect is prayed again at Morning and Evening prayer all week. This short, concise prayer can be a point of focus, something to contemplate, meditate on; this short, focused prayer is (usually) loaded with theology and spiritual meaning.

The collect appointed for today is a particularly ancient one. It comes from one of the oldest liturgical books we have,¹ it's from the 700s. Dozens of prayers/collects from this very old book are part of our Book of Common Prayer. This continuity in the use of these prayers gives us a somewhat unbroken connection with our ancestors in the faith, and gives us a way to stay connected to the old ways, the ways the ancient church understood God, the human person, and the human relationship with God.

Today's collect has remained "in use" for about 1300 years, despite all the changes in the church and in the world; despite the great East/West split of the church in the 11th century; despite the political and violent divisions of the church through the Reformation in the 16th century,

¹ *The Gelasian Sacramentary*

despite the intellectual assaults on the spirituality of the church by the Enlightenment in the 18th century, and despite the impact of contemporary culture, that today has those outside the church convinced the theology and the spirituality of the church have nothing to offer the world.

Given all these huge shifts in thought, politics, theology, culture, it's remarkable to think we're still praying this same prayer; and it's kinda tragic that it's so easy to miss it at the beginning of worship. It's so easy for it to lose its significance to our common spiritual life.

The collect was the way the ancient church gave concise, intentional expression to dense theological and spiritual understandings; the formalized and repeated collect was a way of sharing these understandings across time and place (and the same can be said of liturgy).

"Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself."

We can glide across the surface of this prayer, hearing the words, unaware their depth. Hearing perhaps a simple, maybe even predictable prayer to God that we be made "good people" worthy of salvation. The kind of prayer we might be used to, expecting in church.

But there's a lot going on in this collect, and we'll miss it if we don't practice looking for it. In fact, If we don't know to look for it, we might miss the spirituality of the church altogether, finding and experiencing only its culture instead. There's a most ancient spiritual understanding being expressed in this week's collect, but we'll miss it if we only hear what we're expecting to hear.

Purify is a word that comes up a lot in Scripture and in the spiritual writings and theologies of the ancient church. To purify is to remove what's been added that doesn't belong, remove what's not supposed to be there, what's accumulated. In the context of the collect, it's kind of like limescale on the inside of a kettle [stay with me] the limescale builds up overtime; it's not the kettle's fault that the limescale is there, being a kettle doesn't mean there must be limescale, it's just what does tend to happen if you're a kettle. Even with the limescale, the kettle still functions, but that build-up, if it's not ever taken care of, will eventually get in the way of being a kettle.

To purify then is really to restore. The collect prays for our conscience to be restored, our interiority to be restored to that state of wholeness and freedom and function intended by God. A spiritual state that's just not possible when our conscience has accumulated a whole bunch of stuff from the culture we live in, when our inner self is cluttered with the junk of the world. We still function, but if we don't acknowledge what's there and choose to do something about it, it will effect who we are and how we live.

This collect assumes the human spiritual state is taken seriously; it was written and originally prayed by those who understood, through inquiry and practice, that only through spiritual purification/restoration, can we ever be ready, and able, to receive the transforming life-giving Spirit of Christ into our own being completely.

That's different, I think, from what the church today takes seriously. Today, the "culture" of the church, tends to emphasize the importance of what we do, how we act, what we believe. That we should be good people, try our best to love our neighbor, we should be generous, kind.

We know there are expectations on us as followers of Jesus, and we likely struggle with our own shortcomings as disciples, relying on force of will to change ourselves. But the ancient church, still speaking today in our prayers and our liturgies, reminds us it's through spirituality that we become the people God calls us to be, not through culture.

The ancient church thought deeply about spirituality, interiority, about the human 'state of being.' Spiritual practice, spiritual disciplines, the spiritual life was crucial, because to 'know' God, to be in right relationship with God, depended on our spiritual state and this was a process, a life, chosen and entered into, and practiced, it is, still, the Christian Way.

By way of contrast, our culture would have us believe the most important thing is what we know or believe, or how we act. These things aren't of no value, but they are insufficient if we truly long for transformation, of our own lives and the world we live in.

This is a time of year perhaps, when we're especially called to be mindful of the fullness of our spiritual reality as followers of Jesus. We are headed toward the birth, the Incarnation, toward our annual beginning-again of Jesus' story – if we're not tuned-in, spiritually, at the beginning, we risk this world-changing, reality-shifting story being little more than an aspect of our shared culture, an essentially inert tale we re-tell nostalgically once a year.

Christmas has us at something of a crossroads: culture will carry us along, wherever looks and feels good in this moment in time, the spiritual path, in its eternal, unchanging truth, will lead us to transformation of being, in Christ, to freedom and to fullness of life.

Today's collect is a signpost for us, as individuals, and also a signpost for us as a church. Sixty or so years ago the culture of the Episcopal church was a huge draw for a massive number of people. Over the decades as the culture outside the church shifted, millions have drifted away from the culture that's inside it. There's never been a more perfect time for us, as a church today, to re-engage with the spirituality of the church, an ancient, essentially unchanging spirituality that's always been there, but for too long has been hidden in plain sight.

There's never been a more perfect time to pray for the purification/the restoration of our collective interiority, and for us to reconnect with the insights into the spiritual life that are embedded in our prayers and our liturgies.

I believe it's only through expressing and living into its spirituality that the institution of church can be a relevant and life-giving destination for a world that will never stop longing for God.

The collect this week is our signpost for the way, perhaps this week we might hear in it:

Restore the fullness of our inner selves, Almighty God, by developing our awareness of your ever-present grace that we might rightly prepare ourselves, body, mind, and spirit, to receive the transforming presence of Christ in our lives. Amen.