

Year A – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – 25 June 2017

When you turn to the middle section of the Book of Alternative Services, you will see a fairly large section, which is dedicated solely to the propers for the weeks. The propers are simply the prayers and readings, which the authors of the lectionaries have assigned to guide us through our daily and weekly worship.

Every week, without fail, there is a prayer, which we call the collect for the week. It is written to, appropriately enough, collect our prayers and concerns and guide us in the way that we participate in our worship. It is basically a summary. It summarises the message in the readings and the place in the church year in which it is found.

This week's collect is an excellent example of this sort of summary.

*O God our defender, storms rage about us and cause us to be afraid. Rescue your people from despair, deliver your sons and daughters from fear, and preserve us all from unbelief; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and ever.*

Today's gospel lesson is certainly not a love and respect kind of word. It doesn't talk about the good times to come when the Kingdom of God arrives. It is telling us, rather specifically, of the storms, which will rage around us and cause us to be afraid, the very real danger that we may fall into despair and fear and the need to keep a vigil watch on the sin of disbelief. *If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

I'm not going to ask you to put your hands up or anything, but how many of you are in a situation right now where you have come to feel that you are in a household, which is being maligned? If you're not in one right now, then can you remember one from the recent past? I would suggest that we have all been there at one time or another. No matter what we do, no matter how pure our motives and our Christian respect for the situation and the people involved, we are still accused of being the guy wearing the black hat. Now, I'll bet that during that time of sorrow, your priest could have stood in front of you and told you a million times to keep the faith, time heals all wounds, you'll be stronger for it in the long run. All seemingly useless platitudes with little to no use for you in your particular situation. A great help these are when you're in the middle of a heart-breaking experience. Touché.

But here I am telling you now that you have to keep the faith. Often, when we hear about people finding the Lord, turning their lives over to Jesus Christ, it is in conjunction with a life-threatening experience or the shaking up of one's whole lifestyle. When we are the hardest pressed for meaning and understanding, when we are about to become a people in despair, something happens and we find God. We stumble upon that saviour who cares about even the smallest of sparrows and knows the number of hairs upon our heads. But it isn't that we have done anything except maybe come back to the basics. God was always there, listening to our pleas for help, offering a hand up. Why does it take so long for us to feel that hand then? Why does God seemingly wait until the brink of disaster to offer a saving grace?

The answer is inside our own hearts. I know that when I look back on a situation I can usually see that my despair over God's absence was unfounded. You see, God was always there right in front of me but I was so busy looking at myself, at my own problems and my own sorrow, I didn't see that God's tears were creating that puddle which was growing at my feet. Had I but

looked up instead of down, I would have recognised that God was always there. God was always caring for me and loving me through the situations, which I had created in some way or another.

I referred earlier to the image of the bad guy wearing a black hat. That is simply an image. As we sit here we are sin-filled creatures. We can't help that. We are also forgiven creatures. Jesus died for our sins. He picked up the black hats which we wear everyday, strapped them on his back, and carried them to the cross. When he died for our sins, he didn't disintegrate those black hats - they still exist - but he did remove the guilt that comes with wearing them. The fact that we have sinned is just that, a sin, and sometimes it's good to see a reminder of our human nature. But it is equally good that we see that the heaviness of our human nature is being borne by someone else. We must never grow too comfortable with that, nor must we ever take it for granted. But it is essential that we allow ourselves to see that we are wrong sometimes but that we are also saved nevertheless.

When we worship as Christians, we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins. Through the reception of the Holy Eucharist we step forward to accept that forgiveness which we have already been given. We can't receive that forgiveness too much unless we have ceased sinning. Like I said, we can't receive that forgiveness too much, nor too often.

In our other worship book, the Book of Common Prayer, there is an important line in the service of Holy Communion which says something to the effect of, "All you that are in love and charity with your neighbours, ...: Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort."

Love and charity with your neighbours. That is a tall order sometimes. How often have you actually been completely in love and charity with all of those around you? How often have you not harboured any kind of ill will toward someone else? Personally, I find for myself that it is not often. It's tough to really be in love and charity with all those around us, and possibly, it is even harder to be in love and charity with ourselves all the time.

The thing is that our gospel today, and even the collect, is reminding us that sometimes we do fall off the love and charity wagon. Sometimes we do fall into despair and become afraid. And often, we have just cause for it. But the Christian life does not end there. We have to look up and see God looking at us with our dusty black hats. We have to accept the hand, which God extends to us, whether that be through the sacraments at the Eucharist or through our growing ability to forgive those who have sinned against us or through our humility and acceptance of others' forgiveness for our sins.

None of this is easy. It doesn't happen over night but we have to keep the faith. We have to recognise that in God's own time, all our wounds will be healed and God will make us stronger for it in the long run. Platitudes? Yes. Eternal and divine truths? Yes. Why should we accept them? Because God has always worked out good things for us, like our forgiveness through Jesus' death on the cross and our eternal life through Jesus' resurrection.

When I'm feeling hard done by and ripped apart by the storms of life, it helps me to think of how God must have felt when His first son had to die so that the rest of the family could live. God gave us God's very self so that we could then pray for and receive defence in the storms which rage about us and cause us to be afraid.

May we always know the eternal presence of our loving God and may we never take for granted the gift we have been given of forgiveness for our imperfect lives.