

17th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C (2025)

The more attentive among you might have noticed that the Collect that I prayed at the beginning of Mass did not match that which is printed on your bulletin: both are translations of the original Latin prayer, which is at least 800 years old; however, though that which is printed is arguably the better translation, it is rendered in very clunky English. The version that I used was a modern form of that which was translated by Thomas Cranmer for the Book of Common Prayer; and, though rendered in far more majestic and intelligible prose, it fails to translate the original faithfully. In his Collect, Cranmer asks God that ‘we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not our hold on things eternal’. Not a bad sentiment, you might think; but it lacks one crucial word that changes the whole meaning of the prayer and, thus, our intention and request of God. The Collect that you have printed renders the same phrase in this way: ‘Grant that... we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure’. Notice what Cranmer omitted? Only one word – in Latin, the word ‘bona’, in English ‘good’.

So why on earth does any of that matter? you might say: it’s just a prayer, and it’s only one word. Well, there are two important things to emphasise here: first, that the Collect that we pray at the beginning of Mass is important; not least because, as its name implies, it collects together all of our prayers for a particular liturgical celebration, and offers them to God in intercession for the

whole Church, as well as for the community of which we are a part. The Church's Collects are ancient prayers that convey generations' worth of adoration, thanksgiving, repentance, and supplication; just as they articulate and sum up our own prayers, often at times when we do not know what to pray, or when prayer itself is elusive. And, secondly, in the case of this particular Collect, the omission of that one word 'good', not only changes the intention of the whole prayer; but, crucially, it changes our understanding of the nature and purpose of life and, ultimately, the relationship of the faithful Christian with God. So what did Cranmer mean by missing out the word 'good', and why does it matter? Well, for all his skill as a word-smith, and as the author of one of the foremost and best-known collections of prose in English literature, Dr Cranmer was a convinced Protestant and architect of the first English Reformation, whose theological outlook on the human condition was almost entirely negative. And, as has always been the case when religious zealots ascend to positions of power and influence, the first thing to go out of the window is fun, and any sense that life is good. This was no more clearly the case than during the Interregnum of the 17th, when the dour and wicked Puritans banned theatre-going, and abolished the celebration of Christmas. Such fundamentalism always seeks to eliminate joy in the name of the divine, and to make life as miserable as possible for others, due to a dangerous and misconstrued belief that such severe and enforced self-denial is pleasing to God, which it is not.

And, so, what of Cranmer's Collect? The difference between it and the Latin original is that the latter acknowledges, rightly, that life isn't unremitting awfulness; and that God does not intend it to be so. S. Augustine, C5th Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, taught that three transcendentals – attributes of the divine nature, reflected in creation - have the power to reveal God to us, and to lead us to him. These are goodness, beauty and truth – inherent qualities of reality, that point us towards the ultimate source of perfection, God himself. And so, in articulating that we do indeed experience the goodness and good gifts of God during this brief and transitory life, that ancient Latin Collect makes clear that, *contra* Christian Puritanism (both historic and contemporary), God reveals himself to us in the inherent goodness of the created order, and fills our lives with his gifts and blessings, whether we always perceive them or not.

So, if this insight ought to change our outlook on life and our relationship with God - that he wills our good, and longs for us to share his goodness and good things; then the Collect's request becomes one, not of a total rejection of all things temporal and earthly, but a plea that we might enjoy and use the good things of life for God's glory, and for the betterment of all human life, in accordance with Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. But the prayer also implies, quite correctly, that we should only do so with open eyes, and a healthy sense of detachment; and in such a way that we do not become so distracted

by, or so engrossed in, them that we fail to acknowledge their origin, and allow them to draw us away from God, and our responsibilities and obligations to him and to one another.

Because, the Collect, properly translated, prays that 'we may so pass through good things temporal that we lose not our hold on things eternal', which is actually to pray that we may discern the goodness of God in all that is good; and that his own goodness might lead us ever closer to him, through the material and sacramental things of this life, until we attain unto the life which is to come. And what this means is that everything that is truly good in our lives is a participation in the goodness of God, and has the potential to unite us to him. Our world, our worship, our relationships, our times of recreation, our service of others, even our work – all are manifestations of God's goodness, if only we will allow him to reveal himself to us in the ordinary and mundane elements of life. God is present in all that is good, beautiful, true and loving; but we will only experience his presence if our hearts and minds are receptive to his grace, and our wills are open to his will for us, as Jesus enjoins us to pray that they might be in the Lord's Prayer.

So often we convince ourselves that God is elusive or distant, which in turn causes us to become disheartened and led away from him by our attachment to the things of this world, which obscure his grace, and confuse our true needs and intentions in prayer. But, God is ever-present; and, sometimes, we need a

recalibration of the spirit, in order to re-orientate ourselves upon the source of all goodness, beauty and truth. And so, perhaps, over the coming week, we might take the time and make the effort to be more attentive to the things that bring us joy – to our relationship with Jesus, and to our relationships with one another; to the beauty of God's creation, and to the absurdities of life that make us laugh. And, if we do that, we might not only discern God's presence, but also, with Gerard Manley Hopkins, be able to say, 'I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand'.

If nothing else, today's Collect should remind us, in spite of the inevitable sorrows and struggles of life, our personal failings, and the burdens we must bear, that our lives are full of goodness and the potential to do good. If only we would slow down, inhabit the sacrament of the present moment, count our blessings, and give thanks, then we might know and experience God and his goodness more fully and more often. Compared to so many, whose suffering and deprivation is inconceivable, our lot is indeed cast in a fair ground. The antidote to despair and self-pity is always thanksgiving; just as there is nothing wrong with enjoying life and its many blessings, as long as they lead us to, and not away from, God. The good things of this life are necessarily provisional, but they are given so that we might be receptive to God's love, and share in his life. God's goodness and mercy are never-failing: whether we perceive them and receive them is entirely up to us. Amen.