

26 March 2023—The 5th Sunday of Lent

We are in the last week of Lent: Holy Week begins next Sunday. Let's go back 4½ weeks to Ash Wednesday. Turn to page 217 in the Prayer Book; we prayed this prayer: "Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

This prayer was written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, appearing in the first Book of Common Prayer of 1549. It is a very 16th Century prayer in content and tone, with some unfamiliar words. As with most Prayer Book prayers, called "Collects," another old word, the prayer begins with an address to God, "Almighty and everlasting God," followed by a statement about God: "...you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent..." While it may not strike us, this is an extraordinary statement because most 16th Century reformers endorsed the doctrine of total human depravity. That is, human beings, although created good, because of Adam and Eve's sin, are loathsome to God, deserving only wrath and punishment. Certainly, some of Cranmer's prayers reflect this belief. Yet here is a bold assertion: "...you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent..." God is loving and merciful to sinners. *God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8). Remember this when overcome by past mistakes, when sin seems in control, when you despair of God's mercy. From Psalm 103, *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us...he remembers that we are but dust...* (verse 12 & 14b). Pray Psalm 103 every morning—at least regularly—to remind you of God's mercy.

Then follows the Collect's petition: "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts...". A powerful truth is stated. Remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus, *...you must be born from above* (John 3:3); 'born anew' and 'born again' are also possible translations: All three apply. Paul wrote, *If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, the old has passed away, everything has become new* (2 Corinthians 5:17). We all fall into the rabbit hole of doing the same thing repeatedly, thinking the same thoughts without thought, saying the same words obsessively, hoping for a different result. To be converted, our actions, thoughts, and words must be converted. This happens first in the heart—the core of who we are, and it is not a do-it-yourself project otherwise you would never advance beyond your own wisdom and capability. God's wisdom and ways are beyond human wisdom, beyond human capacity. A new heart will be given us, both new and 'contrite,' another old word. Contrite means being sorry, remorseful.

This is, too, is crucial. Do we not spend spiritual energy rationalizing or pretending to forget the past? This leads nowhere. Our past sins remind us of what we are capable. Our past sins have been used by God to lead us to who we are today. We are sorry for wrongs committed and those committed against us; we offer all our past to Christ for healing and transformation. We admit our wrongs and grieve the wreckage.

Now we pray for the result: "...that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness...". We face our powerlessness to change without God. However powerless, we are not helpless. *Our help is in the Name of the Lord* (). Because God is "all mercy" we are forgiven perfectly—we may yet suffer mortal consequences of our wrongs, but the spiritual consequences will be transformed into blessing for us and others.

One more old word: we pray to obtain "perfect remission." Remission is reduction, decrease, lessening. I think it means this: we are not made holy all at once. Our deeply imbedded patterns of thought, speech, and action will want to reassert themselves. We ask God for 'perfect remission,' the reduction, decrease of being prone to sin. Although temptation never leaves us, we ask that our obsession with wrong, self-serving, hurtful words, deeds, and thoughts die more as we live more in Christ.

As most Collects we end with a Trinitarian doxology, an outburst of praise. We pray to God the Father, in the Name of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. I end today with a slight variation. God the Father grant this prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.