

Forgotten Gems of the Book of Common Prayer
Lenten Study Program – St. Hilda’s Episcopal Church, Monmouth
Lent 2011

Session III – A Review of Collects and of the Catechism.
An Introduction to Proper Prefaces

Turn to the bottom of page 255 in The Book of Common Prayer and tell me whether or not, according to the structure of a collect you have learned, this prayer is a collect. It isn’t labeled as such, in fact, it isn’t labeled at all.

Response; Collect!

Yes, it’s a collect. 1. It refers to a characteristic of God which leads us to hope for the granting of our petition: “. . . to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid

. . .” 2. It states a short, focused petition: “. . . Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts . . .” and 3. Proclaims a positive result from the granting of the petition: “. . . that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name . . .”

And does anyone know, since the BCP neglects to give its traditional title but informal title, what that title is?

Response: Lucy Goman: *The Collect for Purity*

Bingo, It must be an osmotic effect from living with a priest.

Lucy: I won’t answer any more questions!

Even in the so called “modernized” version of Rite Two some old fashioned words remain. “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may **perfectly** love you . . .”

What does it mean to perfectly love God? Does that mean to love without error, defect or failure? What kind of perfection are we talking about?

Response: This is a request, we don’t expect to be able to do it, but it is our hope.

That’s a good beginning. Anyone have any other ideas? In relation to God, what does human perfection mean?

Response: Without sin?

I suppose, although I'm a bit leery of the possibility of that. And in the Christian tradition it's not usual to pray for something we know it's impossible to receive. So whatever it means . . .

Response: Can you say that again?

Sure. It's not usual in the Christian tradition to pray for something which we know before hand is impossible for us to receive. We pray for things which God can, in fact, give us.

Response: Perfectly love you. Last Sunday we had Jesus telling the Samaritan woman at the well that people need to worship in spirit and in truth. We read the Eugene Peterson translation and it was worshipping from that place within yourself which is as true as you can possibly be.

Response: Without hesitation?

Again, an important part of surrounding the question and coming to terms with it. Many theological questions are multi-faceted and understanding them is assisted by approaches from three or four different metaphors. So what each of you has suggested is, I think, a part of a legitimate response to my question. I'll give you Jon Goman's reading on perfect love, please understand this as my own idiosyncratic understanding.

Response, Anne Moore: Which, of course, is right.

Well, yes, and you're free to disagree with me, if you're willing to be wrong.

To perfectly love God means to love him in such a way that loving God is the totality of the foci of your life. That does not mean that you make no mistakes in the process of loving. I can love a person in such a way that they are the focus of my life, but because of sin, ignorance, incapacity, I can still be in error in relation to that which I completely love. It's important to realize that perfectly loving God doesn't mean that I have to be perfect. That's the important point. To perfectly love God means to be fully focused on God. It doesn't mean to do everything right.

When I'm studying I sometimes find myself slipping into a complete unawareness of anything going on around me. Lucy can vouch for this. I'll be inside a book and she'll speak to me three times before it penetrates. Now that is a close to "perfect" focus on the book, but it doesn't mean I understand the book correctly. I can have that focus and still be desperately mistaken about what the book is trying to say.

Response Anne Moore: And it's a less than perfect focus on the wife.

Although, in the case of God, a perfect focus will include loving all things God loves in creation. If I achieve a perfectly loving focus on God, Lucy will be included as my focus

acknowledges God's, and therefore my, love for her! Never argue with a theologian – it just doesn't pay.

Response: If we talk about perfectly focused on God what is the opposite?

Chaos.

Response Anne Moore: I was going to say the same thing!

It would be a chaotic situation in which there is no center and in which one has no perseverance in caring.

Response Bill Mosier: I think of that chaos as focused on oneself. You jump from one place to another, but it's all focused on self.

I'd agree, Bill, with one little reservation. I don't think you're describing the ultimate opposite, but the penultimate opposite. As long as a person has a concept of self as distinct from other there is a possibility of conversion to love. One is still thinking in terms of a connected personal story taking place against a social background. That story may be corrupted because it operates with a false sense of self-importance, but there are still possibilities in self-centeredness as long as there is also an acknowledgment of otherness. The possibility of salvation becomes more problematic when that sense of otherness disappears and self is all that is left. Then a sense of distinction between self and other collapses. Then it becomes not just a focus on me, but there is nothing but me upon which to focus. In a world devoid of the restraining presence of otherness, all sense of boundaries becomes lost and there is nothing more than the present moment.

So, to escape any more theological speculation, I'd point out that sometimes you run into prayers in the BCP that are collects but don't announce themselves as such – such as the Collect for Purity. Sometimes one finds language, even in the “contemporary” parts of the BCP which is really rather old fashioned. Looking at a couple of those old fashioned terms will be our next project.

There is, by the way, an interesting but probably untrue story about the *Collect for Purity*. The story goes that it was written by Alcuin, court theologian to Charlemagne, for his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day of 800 AD. Charlemagne went to Rome to be crowned by the pope, in what could only be described as a 9th century case of political I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine. Alcuin was aware of the political overtones of the event and of their masquerade as Christian piety. And the coronation was certainly a case of power considerations dressed in devotional garb and traditional Christian language. In this collect, according to the story, Alcuin is subtly calling Charlemagne to account. He says, OK, Charlemagne, even you have no secrets from God. He sees through this masquerade and knows how much is devotion to Him and how much your use of Him for your own aims. Your political success does not make you holy. Even you, O Great Emperor, need the thoughts of your heart cleansed in the midst of your triumph. Charlemagne had the resources to hire the best help available and brought Alcuin from York to France to serve as the spark plug in renewing

scholarly life in the Frankish empire. Perhaps the man also had enough skill and guts and pastoral sense to call his employer to account.

Note by the way, that we ask God to cleanse the **thoughts** of our hearts, not the **feelings** of our hearts. Today we associate heart with feeling. But in the 9th century the heart was the organ of intellect. This causes all sorts of problems in translating not only Medieval theology, but also the New Testament itself. In New Testament Greek, if you are “in the heart” of something it means that you are thinking clearly about it. This is an important example of the persistence of archaic cultural assumptions and linguistic usages even in “modernized” liturgies.

That’s enough about that.

Just to skip around a bit, notice that in the consecration prayer we used in tonight’s Eucharist the words of institution for the cup read like this: “Drink this, all of you: This is my blood of the new Covenant, which is poured out for you and **for all** for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.” (Note that the forms of the Great Thanksgiving supplied in Supplemental Liturgical Materials Expanded Edition, Church Hymnal Corporation, 1996 all use the inclusive “all” language.) How is this different from the standard reading we use from the Book of Common Prayer?

Response, Anne Moore: Poured out for all? I love that – I always say that anyway.

Good for you, because the history of the Greek text as derived from Semitic languages supports that reading. (See Augustine Stock OSB, The Method and Message of Mark, Michael Glazier, 1989, p. 361. The same point is made by Joachim Jeremias in The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966, p. 179-182.)

Anne Moore: All right!

In ordinary Greek the word for “many” is, as in English, opposed to the word for “all.” But in Biblical Greek, especially in those passages having roots in Semitic word usage, the word for “all” and for “many” are the same. There is no grammatical way to tell the difference as these languages lack a special word for “all.” Context becomes the key to meaning. For theological reasons, I prefer that the cup be poured out for all. The Episcopal Church is not Calvinist. We do not necessarily believe in predestination – especially double predestination, that some people are predestined to go “up” and others predestined to go “down.” Now you may believe that if you wish, and be an Episcopalian, but it constitutes a private peculiarity. And the Episcopal Church is pretty good at tolerating private peculiarities. If you want to belong to a church which says that everyone needs to believe double predestination there are other Christian groups you will find far more congenial than the Episcopal Church.

But for the Episcopal Church, God predestines to bliss. If the unblissful happens it’s not because he chose it for you. Therefore, when God acts for salvation, when the blood of Christ’s life is poured out, it is poured out for all the creation and not just for parts of it. So on theological, not just linguistic grounds, I prefer the “all.”

Response: The “all” seems to fit in with our baptismal covenant better.

I think it does. It also fits with the power and character of God, who is love. That God is love means he doesn’t just express love now and again or when he’s in a positive frame of mind, or just toward certain people in certain situations. He is love, and that means love through and through, always, for everyone, without exception, now and forever. Period.

I could thoroughly back this from John’s gospel. Over and over again John makes this point. And it is odd that Christians, in the face of that, have tolerated so many ideas about God which fly in the face of understanding love as fundamental. If the blood of Christ is poured out for many but not for all, what about the folks who are left over? What is their relation to love and how do we square John’s Gospel with these leftover people? Where is the thru and thruthness of divine love for them?

So here is an interesting change in the wording of the Eucharistic prayer that has considerable theological and ethical implications. The church is still thinking about these things and has not yet reached the end of consideration.

That’s sort of the amusing, speculative beginning. I may as well go on to confirm my position as an odd if not heretical thinker by returning to the catechism for a minute. Look on page 851 in the BCP. You will see a small section on the creeds. This section is an immense reticence. It says extraordinarily important things in a very soft voice.

Question #1 reads: “What are the creeds?”

Response: “The creeds are statements of our basic beliefs about God.”

This answer is deceptively simple. It says the creeds are statements of our beliefs. It does not say that creeds are statements of ultimate truth. Believe me, the folks who wrote the catechism intended this question to be understood in this way: Creeds are human creations, not divine revelations.

Response: Weren’t they written by a bunch of white men?

Well, some of them probably weren’t white. But they were all men, at least as far as we know. (Although I’m not sure the texture of results would have been different had they all been women! All anything in particular is the problem.) I’m going off subject for a second, so watch out. The position of women in the 4th century, when these creeds were formed, was rather powerful. We lost sight of that a bit later. For instance, so far as we know, the first person to institute systematic Bible study in a Christian community was a woman, the wife of the bishop of Iconium in Asia Minor. If you look at things which have made a difference in the life of the church, you frequently find a woman at the bottom of them.

Now, if you want someone who can stand at the altar and put on a good show, hire a man. If

you want someone who will actually see that things run, hire a woman.

Another example of this, if you were a 4th century bishop and wanted to see the Byzantine Patriarch, John Chrysostom, you would have to apply through the head of the bishop's household. The guy who keeps the calendar. Guess who she was? A deaconess named Olympia. She had charge of all the deacons in Constantinople, by one count approximately 250. That's a significant staff to direct. If you wanted to see the Patriarch, be nice to her.

After John Chrysostom was deposed and exiled Olympia maintained a correspondence with him, which was, by the way, perhaps not a safe or prudent action. But she did so, and, with utter irony, we have his letters to her, but not her letters to him. It's a bit like trying to grasp the fullness of a conversation by listening to one voice in it. (See Goman, The Ordination of Women: The Bible and the Fathers, 1976.)

So women could occupy important positions and wield significant power. I wouldn't be surprised if a few of the bishops who showed up at Nicaea to write a creed had wives back home who indicated appropriate ways to vote.

Now, back to business. If the creeds are statements of our basic beliefs about God, certain important things follow. First, creeds serve as models for how intelligent, devoted, focused human beings think about God. They are models, probably the best models we can get, but they are not laws. I run into people who will not say certain portions of the creed because they think they don't believe them and that creeds constitute statements of accepted fact rather than models which point the way. Such a reluctance to recite creeds in public worship makes them end points rather than foundations and, therefore, is a signal of misunderstanding of what the purpose of a creed is. (For a discussion of the position of creeds in the Christian life, see the first Chapter of Oliver Quick's Doctrines of the Creed, Charles Scribner's Sons, many ed. See also. John Burnaby's The Belief of Christendom: A Commentary on the Nicene Creed, SPCK, 1959, Chapter 1.)

There is an additional problem. A creed does not tell its reciter how to understand it. For instance, the creed says Christ died to save us from our sins. It does not say **how** that saving is brought about by the death of Jesus. Christian theologians have expended immense amounts of energy theorizing about different ways it might have happened. You are not required to believe any of the different theological theories. To be a Christian you are only required to believe that Christ's death has saving power, not any theory of how that saving power is expressed.

Another example is the Virgin Birth. The creed asserts that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. It doesn't tell us how to understand that word "Virgin". Do we understand it biologically? Do we understand it in some symbolic way? Do we understand it in terms of the understanding of virginity in ancient Hellenistic culture? (Quite distinct from our understanding, much more concerned with public image and much less with biological condition!) Do we understand it as an ancient way of trying to say something about the way Jesus related to humanity? These are all legitimate ways of understanding and professing the Virgin Birth assertions of the creeds – and the creeds don't tell us which one of the smorgasbord of understandings to chose. Thus the creeds constitute a foundation or platform on which we

stand in order to think about God, to explore God, to try to move toward God. The creed does not constitute a cage whose intent is to confine our thought.

Ans: An example of how to explore God?

Let's see. One might begin with one's own experience. How do you experience God? I am assuming that all Christians experience God one way or another – whether that experience is self-consciously identified or not. You may not know quite how to articulate your experience God, but that's all right. Then the question comes, does the way you experience God seem, somehow, to dovetail with what you read in the creed? I would begin the exploration by looking at one's own life, asking, does this life mesh, somehow with the creed? Do I read something in the creed I find illuminative of my experience? If you do, but it is not quite clear, then I would suggest that you ask your Vicar for some discussion time.

The second stage to searching for God is to share your search with other people. We tend to find God in our own experience much more clearly if we are willing to share the depth of our experience with other Christians.

This is only a suggestion about how to begin to search. And remember that the search is not for the simple, the obvious or the easily discovered. Be patient. Ask yourself why you are seeking and remain grounded in that.

Everything in our worship is there to help us toward God. A creed isn't simply a neon flashing light which says, "You have to believe these things." We are saved in the nature and quality of our relationships, not in our abstract beliefs. The question is not whether you abstractly believe the creeds, but whether the creed is somehow representative of the nature of your lived, experienced, relationship with God.

In the early church, every separate Christian community wrote its own creed. In the winnowing process to determine which creeds were to be used and which discarded, the church elected to preserve the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. Early Christian literature is littered with other creeds. Why? Because it was perceived as important to the progress of the spiritual life to be able to write one. Because individual churches understood themselves as responsible for the spiritual lives of their members and therefore crafted tools to guide those lives. I sometimes have my students take a key idea and try to express it in a paragraph of their own writing. The value is not just in taking the language from someone else, but in making the language one's own. To assume that the creed is an abstract body of propositions which one must believe in order to be some kind of adequate Christian simply empties creeds of spiritual significance. They are tools for the journey, not means of rendering the journey unnecessary by freezing one's relation to the key elements in the Christian tradition.

Response: You need to go down to Berkeley. When I was there there were several Churches which never did the creed for that very reason it. They may be over it by now.

I hope so. We could go around this table, and would find all sorts of different experiences

of God. Does that mean that because God works in various ways in our lives that we can't form a united community? It doesn't mean anything of the sort. Those of you who have experienced good marriages know that a significant variety of perspective improves the final dish. The strength of the Christian community is augmented by the exploration and expression of a variety of perspectives in a unity of community. The creed is the symbol, the expression of unity, built more around what we agree is worth talking about than an exact interpretation of what we are to say. Why do you think there are four gospels telling basically the same story? Because the strength of the Christian community is difference expressed in community. We do not all have to believe the same things. We are certainly not all in the same place in our spiritual journey. We come to creedal statements from quite different personal stories. Given this, it would be surprising if we interpreted the creeds in the same way, and if we did, the church would be utterly poverty stricken. But we say them together, in a conviction that they catalog what's worth discussing, that they exclude certain understandings the church has discovered don't work, that they provide a foundation, not a limit.

Response: That goes also for the interpretation of holy scripture.

I love the Jewish perspective on this. (Draws schematic page of the Talmud on easel paper.) This is a model of a page of the Talmud, which is, after the Torah, the next most holy book of Judaism. In here, in the center of the page, is a snippet of the Torah. This is commentary #1, commentary #2, #3, #4 and so forth. These commentaries are all different explanations of this one passage of the Torah. To the orthodox Jew, the whole schema, disagreements and all, is divinely inspired. Why is that? Because God is truth, and truth emerges not from holding a correct opinion (creeds understood as propositional statements to be assessed as true or false would be a collection of correct opinions), but it emerges in the discussion of revelation within the community. There's a wonderful story Christians would do well to consider, about two East European rabbis. They met to do what Rabbis do best, talk about Torah. Because you can't be a Jewish rabbi and talk about Torah without disagreeing with the next rabbi over, they would get together and, of course, the discussion would get lively to the point that their wives were quite irritated because they forgot to come to supper. Long about dawn, after an all night conversation, one of the rabbis throws up his hands and says, "You win. Your interpretation is correct. I can't think of anything more to say." And the first Rabbi says, "Ah no! We can't stop now. Here is the answer to my position." The first Rabbi says, "Thank you very much." And they go at it hammer and tongs again.

This story shows people who believe that truth emerges in an engaged community. I sometimes think we Christians are too caught up in finding the right answer, the true answer, the answer which would enable us to stop being a community because we no longer have to talk to each other about the most important thing in the world, who God is in our lives. Once we have the final answer, once we know the final truth, then there may be nothing more to be said. Then we can stop talking and the community is no longer necessary. Once every individual knows the truth about God, what more is there to say?

The illusion that we attain certainty, even in science, tells us more about our wishes than about the objective world. The same is true in theology. What makes Christian communities

work? Not agreement about creeds. What makes such communities work is forgiveness when you step on each other's toes. But forgiveness is not a belief, but a process we experience in relation to each other. It's a process which can be thought about, intellectually discussed. But ultimately, if it is to be real, it must be experienced and lived. We must become habituated to reconciliation as a way of life. The same is true of the creed. If they are believed merely to be true statements about God, all their life giving potency is lost. I have experienced this in several churches. Therefore people frequently don't say the creeds because they think they are false. But the creeds were never intended to give us true statements about God, but to provide the foundation necessary for enabling honest and focused conversation. Which is my response to the churches that don't use them: you are missing out on the foundation for conversation. If I'm going to have a conversation with someone, we have to agree on a language – When I talked with my father about math we had to talk about numbers, vectors, things like that. That's the language of the discipline and if you don't use the language of the discipline you aren't talking about math. For the Christian community, the creeds provide the language, the language of Christ died to save us, the language of God the creator, the language of the church as the body of Christ and of the Holy Spirit giving life in the present moment. These sorts of things are the agreed on vocabulary of Christian life. The creed doesn't say we mean specific things by the words we use, but that we agree to use these words and not others when we address each other about our fundamental experiences. That leaves us with a great deal of freedom but also with a definite direction and a definite root system.

So the catechism says that the creeds are not statements about the truth about God, but they state of our basic beliefs about God. The whole meaning of creeds would have been changed if the folks who wrote the catechism had said the creeds are statements of the absolute truth the church knows about God. But they don't say that.

That's enough about that. In the last ten minutes, to show that I can be completely scatter brained, I want to introduce you to another part of the Book of Common Prayer which doesn't get the attention it deserves: the Proper Prefaces. If I were looking for a Proper Preface where would I go to find one?

Response: I found just found out a couple of years ago.

You use them all the time!

Response: I know, but they are hard to find!

That's my point! If we are not careful, the obscurity of the Proper Preface involves a breach of hospitality to strangers who not know their way around our worship. But, after I have told you, then you will know forever. Turn to page 377 in the Book of Common Prayer. I used to say that when visitors at Sunday service got blank looks on their faces because the priest was saying something not in the order of service that meant we were at the Proper Preface.

What is another name for the Eucharistic Prayer, the Prayer of Consecration? What does the word "Eucharist" mean?

Anne: They've got to know!

Response: Thanksgiving.

Yes indeed, the word "Eucharist" comes from the Greek word for "thanksgiving." The question is, then, for what are we giving thanks? The main thing for which a Christian gives thanks is God's gift of Christ to his creation. But that's a pretty broad topic. How many facets are there of that gift? The Proper Prefaces give us a list of different ways we are thankful to God for the gift of the Christ. Look at Proper Preface #1, *Of God the Father*. "For you are the source of light and life, you made us in your image, and called us to new life in Jesus Christ . . ." A statement of powerfully cogent reasons to be thankful. Light, life and meaning, all traced back to their source in God's gift of Christ are reasons for thanksgiving!

Of God the Son. "Through Jesus Christ our lord; who on the first day of the week overcame death and the grave, and by his glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life." Here is a second reason for giving thanks for the gift of Jesus. And so on through all the proper prefaces. Each details a specific reason for giving thanks for God's gift of Christ to us.

Let me go over the last one, the *Proper Preface for the Commemoration of the Dead* on p. 382. ". . .through Jesus Christ our Lord; who rose victorious from the dead, and comforts us with the blessed hope of everlasting life." Because of Christ we may hope for everlasting life – and that's a reason to be thankful. So even through our grief there are reasons to give thanks to God. Certainly not all thanksgiving requires unrestrained joy or suppression of an awareness of the patterns of pain that weave themselves through our being.

Where do proper prefaces go in the Eucharist? Let's start with the *Sursum corda*. *Sursum corda*, where are you? (Rite II, page 361)

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

(Comment: You know it well!)

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

(Comment: Great. Not a single "up" in the room!)

We use Rite II regularly and there's still one person at St. Anselm who insists on saying "We lift them up . . ." It's correct in Rite I but incorrect in Rite II. There is no "up" in Rite II.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him(God)thanks and praise.

Response: We also have a person who also does that every week.

The priest goes on to say, “It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” Then read the rubric at the bottom of the page. *Here a proper preface is song or said on all Sundays, and on other occasions as appointed.* So that’s where the proper preface fits. During Lent are you using a Eucharist Prayer which has a proper preface?

Response: We’re using Prayer A.

OK. Next Sunday listen for the Proper Preface in this spot. It will be there.

Look for just a second at the Lenten proper preface (BCP p. 379) and then I’ll let you escape. You even have a choice of two. We’ll look at the first. “Through Jesus Christ our Lord; who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin.” Now here’s the reason for giving thanks: “By his grace we are able to triumph over every evil . . .” Now that’s a reason to give thanks – because of God’s gift of Christ to his creation we are able to triumph over evil. And, just in case one’s not enough, we get a second reason for giving thanks: We are able through this same gift “. . . to live no longer for ourselves alone, but for him who died for us and rose again.” – which is the positive way of stating the previous negative. Triumphant over evil is the same thing as living no longer for ourselves. (Note that we are not instructed to live solely for others, just not to live as if others didn’t exist. See the discussion earlier in this note.)

Proper prefaces come at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer in order to systematically express the reasons for giving thanks for the gift of Christ to the Christian community, to the church, to the human race, to the creation. That means that they are pretty important.

I generally am not able to hold a complex idea in my mind for long. I automatically simplify.

These proper prefaces take an immensely complicated gift, the gift of Christ, and break it down, season by season, to give us a panorama of reasons for thanks. This is a significant part of our spiritual awareness as it ties us to the great central core of the faith: the incarnation of Jesus. The Prefaces also present to us, service after service, the varied intent of God’s primary gift of himself to us. They are worth watching for.