

Parts of the Eucharist: A Meditation on the Collect for Purity

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Today's discussion is on the second prayer in our Eucharist, which goes:

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, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. AMEN

Now, history first. We can trace this prayer back to the last decade of the 8'th century. It first shows up in a book of services put together by Alcuin, who was, we would say today, the minister of Education to Charlemagne. Those of you who were here last time remember the probably apocryphal story I told about this prayer, that it was composed by Alcuin for Charlemagne's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas day of 800 and of how it was designed to remind the great king that there was a still greater king who had his eye on him no matter how great Charlemagne became. And you see how it fits: "Almighty God to you all hearts are open..." Even the king's... "...all desires known..." Even the desire for power that uses piety as a mask. "And from you no secrets are hid..." Even the secret of how this crowning by the Pope and all the religious rhetoric surrounding it had a hidden worldly foundation.

If you want a more modern example of the same kind of thing, look at Rudyard Kipling's poem "Recessional," which he wrote for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. It says roughly the same thing in a very different medium:

God of our Fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle line,
Beneath whose awful hand we hold

Dominion over palm and pine. . .
Lord God of hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – Lest we forget!

Stanzas 3-5 continue in a similar vein.

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not thee to guard,
For frantic boast and foolish word. . .
Thy mercy on thy people, Lord!

And so the great Queen and her subjects at the height of empire are reminded of a power greater than theirs. And thus the powers that be are called to account for their standard hypocrisy by both Kipling and Alcuin.

So the Collect for Purity first shows up sometime around 800. Then it becomes part of what's called the Sarum Rite, which was the cycle of worship services used by the Diocese of Salisbury in southern England. This is the Medieval collection of services to which our current Book of Common Prayer is most closely related. In the Sarum Rite, this prayer formed part of the priest's private preparation before the communal Eucharist, the public service, began. The priest had a short service he said by himself before he went into the church to begin leading public worship. The idea behind this short service was to get the priest ready to lead. This prayer was part of that preparation. Now at the time of the Protestant Reformation the idea of the Priesthood of All Believers comes strongly into play. When Cranmer revised the Medieval services to create the First Book of Common Prayer, he said, in effect, "Well, all this stuff that the priest used to say privately, the congregation, who, after all, are all God's priests, will now say publicly."

A lot of the preliminary stuff which used to happen at the beginning of the Episcopal Service but which no longer happens because it makes the service "too long" was part of this priest's preparation. All that is left of the Medieval priest's preparatory service is this one prayer. In earlier editions of the American Book of Common Prayer this prayer came immediately before the regular recitation of the Ten Commandments, which happened every Sunday morning. You can see that if you are going to use the Ten Commandments as a means of examining your conscience this particular prayer might be an appropriate, although rather grim, beginning for it.

Structurally, this prayer starts out with a description of the relationship between God and human beings. All hearts are open to God, all desires

known to Him and no secrets are hid from Him. It all sounds rather invasive. A real intrusion into our privacy. On the other hand, I think what the prayer is asserting is that if we intend human change to be a project within which we seek God, that is, if we intend our growth to be something in which God is involved, then we had better be transparent to Her. You see, it's rather like the process of counseling. If you lie to and hide yourself from your counselor, it interferes with the healing process. In the same way, if we lie to God about who we are it gets in the way of the healing process – which is everywhere and always God's sole aim for human beings.

So our hearts are open to God – or we seek that openness in preparing ourselves for worship. The contemporary understanding of the word heart is that it involves the world of feelings and emotions. The medieval and ancient understanding of the word “heart” was that the heart was the seat of everything that made a human being a unique and individual person including his or her rationality. That's why later on in the prayer you find this rather strange phrase “. . . cleanse the thoughts of our hearts. . .” Not the emotions or feelings, but the thoughts of our hearts. It's archaic physiology, that says that the heart is the seat of not just the emotional, but also the rational. In fact, everything that makes me a different human being from you. But this individualistic private inwardness, what we are right now, is open to God.

Then, all desires are known to God. Now our desires are what lead us into the future. They are our connection with what we are becoming. To a certain extent they may even determine our direction. So not only does God know who we are right now, not only is our heart open, but also our direction is open, what we are becoming, is open. Then, from God no secrets are hid. Well, secrets are those undigested chunks of the past we carry around with us and which sometimes get in the way.

What the prayer asserts is that the whole relationship between human beings and time, our participation in time, is part of our relation with God: past, present, future. Notice that the assertion is that that's who God is. God is that being that has this timely relation to creation.

After we've described God, we say what we want God to do for us. “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts. . .” It's hard to understand this until we get to the third clause of the prayer, the purpose clause, the “why” clause that gives the reason for the request. The reason for the request is so that we can love God perfectly.

Now, don't fall into the trap of thinking that to perfectly love God means to love God without any error; without any mistakes or, for heaven's sake, don't think that to love God perfectly means to love Her with a constantly

high emotional sensation. That's not what perfect love is talking about. "Perfect love" refers not to what we give to the love but to what we are willing to receive from it. To love God perfectly means to be perfectly open and receptive to what is being given to us. Think about human love for an instant and you'll get the point. There's nothing quite as irritating in human love as a person who insists that what it means to love someone is always to give to them and never to receive from them. At least that irritates me. So to love God perfectly does not mean to have a highly excited set of feelings about God, if anything that gets in the way of an open receptivity. But it is that kind of openness, that kind of transparency toward God that, because it recognizes who God is and recognizes God as that which knows us, is ready to receive from God that which God has to give us.

So that's what perfect love, I think, is talking about. It's saying, OK, you're getting ready to worship God, and in your worship of God the important thing is not to understand God correctly, you're not going to do that anyway, so don't worry too much about it. Just a little, but not too much. What is really needed is an openness and receptivity to that which might come to you, to change you, to help you deal with your past, present and future, by means of what happens in this service of worship and in this community.

I'm going to digress for a minute and it's kind of a wild digression. Some of you may find it helpful, some of you may think I've gone more bonkers than usual. That is, that this business about receptivity defines not only what it means for us to love God, but also what it means for God to love us. God, I believe, is thoroughly receptive to what his creation offers him. In fact, for God to be perfect he has to be not only the perfect initiator but also the perfect listener. It has both amazed and distressed me that in talking about God's perfection and all powerfulness, we act as if what it means to be almighty is always to start everything. But in my experience, at least, that which tends toward perfection in human relationships tends toward a perfection of hearing, of listening, of awareness of what the other is, and is offering. True creativity can only be expressed within the context of receiving and using that which is given. And I think that's also true of God's creativity. It can only be expressed within the context of what the creation is and offers. This may not make us feel any better, but it sure as heck makes us important. God will do what he can do with the vineyard, but it is the vineyard – and this seems a strange way to put it except that it is the way Isaiah puts it – if the vineyard doesn't want to bear good grapes,

God honors the lack of desire.¹ There are consequences for that, but God honors it.

You see, you have to be careful in talking about God's omniscience and omnipotence. There is an omniscience and omnipotence to receiving as well as giving, to responding as well as starting. And if God is going to be what Christian theology says He is, He needs to be perfect in both realms, that of initiating and that of responding, that of receiving as well as that of giving. To have God perfect only in initiating leaves Him half perfect, and a half-perfect god is not perfect, but monstrous.

OK. That takes care of what it means to perfectly love God. Now, what about this "... worthily magnify your holy Name..." which is probably the most archaic lingo in the whole prayer. You know, Episcopalians tend to find phrases like that and hold on them grimly for centuries.

Comment: It sounds like something very political, from Charlemagne's coronation. Take Charlemagne down a notch or two (by reminding him who the real king is.)

Yes, because if Charlemagne is going to be magnified in his coronation, and that was the point of it, then of course, God does him one better – a kind of divine oneupsmanship.

Now it is also talking about something else. In the Old Testament, the concept of God's Name is always related to the question of who God really is as a separate individual. God's name does not refer to a deity of abstract qualities (omnipotence, omniscience, aseity etc.), but to a deity of concrete and unique historical acts and presence. And names are closely allied to the idea of our unique and personal identities. This is, perhaps, why there is sometimes a flash of irritation when someone who should remember our name hasn't. I'm very familiar with that flash of irritation because I have a hard time remembering people's names. Nevertheless, the reason we magnify God's Name isn't trivial. It's there because to forget one's name is somehow to erase the borders of our being a little bit. To forget a name is to fail to recognize a person. To magnify the name is to fully recognize the person.

But, whatever it is, to perfectly love God, it refers to our private inner response to God, this ready receptiveness. To magnify God's name can only be understood as the external expression of that inward receptiveness. In other words, once we have received, what do we do with it? Simply swallow it until we burst? No, the reception of what God has to give us isn't just for our sake, but for the sake of the human community and the whole creation.

So, always two things. Our hearts are to be cleansed, first in order that

¹Isaiah 5:1-7 Old Testament reading for Proper 22

we be receptive to what God has to say to us, but it doesn't stop there. That receptiveness only has meaning if it is outwardly expressed towards the rest of the world in our becoming who we truly are. Which is why who God is, which we discover in this service of worship, needs to be taken out of this building and expressed in the fullness of our life in the world. Otherwise the process has been short-circuited halfway through and loses its meaning. If worship doesn't help move us toward who we truly are, it is a failure and a nothingness.

So what we have here, to summarize it all, is a very dynamic kind of prayer. It's very concerned with spiritual movement. It says we need to relate to God through the fullness of what we are, through all kinds of time, past, present and future. The future makes us who we are as much as the past does. Our desire, our intention, our vision is as important as those secrets we have kept. And maybe our desires sometimes even are our secrets, who knows?

Then the process of worship is to so treat us, so affect us, inwardly that we are ready to receive what God is and express what we receive to the world, which is a very dynamic concept. It means that Christianity, when taken seriously, is not merely a matter of finding the right set of theological eggs and sitting on them until they hatch at some distant time in the future. It's a sense of constant movement, the intention of which is that we go out of this service different people than we came in. Maybe not very different – after all, if we change perfectly, all at once, then what's left to do? The rest of life is a bore. And you won't change that fast anyway, I guarantee you.

So what we are talking about here is similar to the process of cave building. Who we become because of our participation in this worship includes two distinct kinds of change: some things are dissolved or washed out of us and other things are deposited into us. The process of being emptied and filled, emptied of self, filled with God, is one traditional way to put it; eventually builds a personal life of a kind of beauty which is comparable to the inside of one of those limestone caves. But think about how long it takes to build one of those caves. How a few atoms deposited at a time eventually makes the structure. While both expecting and looking for movement, at the same time we must possess our souls in patience in relation to the whole of the process. But, while being patient, also be impatient. To open oneself to God is always to run the risk that, in fact, God may do something through one. When one listens, there is a chance that one will hear. Which is quite a surprising thing when it happens.

That's why this prayer is one of preparation for worship. It's saying listen. Expect change. Expect change to affect the whole of you. And then,

when you have received the change, move with it. That's what this spiritual life is about. It's not about being right, being right can ultimately be very static. It's not about being conventionally good. The line between righteous and self-righteous is thin. It's about receiving and giving. Our perfection is not in being right about what we believe or do, but in our being willing to receive and our being able to give.