

The Church of England now offers two collects for each Sunday. The collect is the prayer which 'gathers up', or 'collects' our prayers and gives them a shape and a theme. They are not just an Anglican thing: the collects which Archbishop Cranmer (whom we remembered this week, martyred nearly five centuries ago) gave us in the *Book of Common Prayer* are generally translations of Latin prayers which had been around for a thousand years or more.

As clergy we sometimes have a discussion about which of the collects to use. Some of the Common Worship collects are very like their Prayer Book originals, and that makes their language and construction sometimes complex. Sometimes the newer Alternative collects put things more concisely. Well, I was determined this week to have the collect *Common Worship* originally selected for the Third Sunday of Lent. It's not a Prayer Book one, but was written by William Reed Huntington, Rector of Grace Church, Broadway, in the late 1800s for the American Prayer Book.

"Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified; mercifully grant that we, walking the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace..."

I was determined to have this because the canons of York Minster had had an argument about it a few years ago. One of my colleagues was keen to simplify it: "whose most dear Son went up to joy after he suffered pain...entered into glory after he was crucified..." and so on. There was a worry that the collect as it stands was being too clever for its own good, is the question. But this collect is one of the few I can recite from memory, and I think that's down to the very complexity we wondered about simplifying. There's something memorable about the repeated construction "went not...but...entered not...but" which straightening it out would lose.

In fact Huntington took the construction from a phrase in the Book of Common Prayer, in the service called The Visitation of the Sick, and weaved it into the prayer. As I have pondered on it since, I would say that the complex negatives are vital. It was not just that Jesus entered into joy and glory after a time of pain and the crucifixion. It was that the joy and glory Christ now enjoys are inextricably bound up with his passion and death. The only way to glory was by bearing the cross. The only way to joy was by bearing pain. There is an implication for us that the life and peace we long for is inextricably bound up with walking the way of the cross. We do not get to dodge the suffering which Christ bore: it cannot be separated from the path to glory.

In his letter to the Romans Paul spends three chapters talking about being reconciled to God, freed, forgiven, justified and redeemed by God through faith. He describes this as the present experience of the Christian: "we *have* been justified...we *have* peace...we *have* access to his grace". It may come as a surprise then that he immediately says that there will be suffering and that not only should we not run away but we should actually rejoice in it. Until the end of this world there remains a cross to carry and suffering to face. He goes even further in Romans 5: the sufferings of the faithful Christian, whatever they may be, are

things we should 'boast' about, because they show that we are walking in the way of Christ.

It is not that there will be joy and glory after this pain – a bit like the distant view of a pub means you can cope with the last two miles of a long day's walk. It is that the sufferings we have to bear are a necessary path we have to take. Sufferings and hardship, says Paul, help us to remember that all of our freedom is from God, and all we can do, in any situation, is to trust God alone. As Paul puts it, through and in this suffering we learn endurance and character and true hope. God is as present in our troubles as our joys, and all are part of the way of the cross. When we face hardship and persecution and suffering in this life, we do so because we faithfully follow Christ, and find him in them. We don't do this because there will be joy later. We find Christ in each act, each moment, and if that is a hardship, then that is the way Christ walked first. We will not get home without hardships and trials, and in them we find life.

All of which probably sounds insufferably pious if you are in the middle of something awful. But I have various people in mind when I say that in living through pain and crisis is the hope of glory. I think of people rebuilding their lives after they were torn apart by one event which called the last 30 odd years into question. People who are facing an illness with no cure. Parents who walked the way of suffering with their youngest child, incurably ill and who died before Christmas. A friend whose adult child simply vanished, and has now been missing for five years.

I think of churches torn apart by politics and persecution. Institutions facing an uncertain future and seemingly imploding. People left shattered by the loss of job and security. As Christ did not, could not, go up to joy without taking all the pains of humanity into himself, so we, walking in his way, will not be immune from that pain, and must hold on, with what little we might have left, to the Christ who shares that pain with us. That's the costly personal discipleship which is a theme of Lent, I suppose.

And, if our current situation is to be beside still waters and in pleasant places, then our task is to share that pain with others, to stand with people in difficulty, to enter the darkness with them, and with them to look for its redemption, its completion. If you do this, please don't try to explain suffering away, to give it a reason. It will be enough to hold the hand of the people you are with, and to pray that they will know Christ's presence even at the darkest times. It will be enough to reassure people that, if it's dark, Christ is still there, that if it hurts, Christ has suffered too. It might just be possible to say that such times can deepen our faith, but it's probably best to assure people that God will not let them go.

Our sufferings and difficulties are part of the humanity which Christ willingly embraced. In him they are ultimately given meaning and purpose, though that can seem a long way away in the middle of it all. I hope you'll pray with me that people you and I know who are walking the way of the cross will find that it is the way of life and peace. And I hope you will hold their hand, and bear their pain, because our hope is in the Christ who walks this way, and leads us to life and peace. Amen.