

*Lord of all power and might,  
Who art the author and giver of all good things  
Graft in our hearts the love of thy name  
Increase in us true religion  
Nourish us with all goodness  
And of thy great mercy keep us in the same,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

It is amazing what a prayer can do. In its Latin form, as collected by the Pope Gelasius in the 490's AD, and in its Prayer Book these few words have had an extraordinary power over the last 1500 years – for many of us they have wormed their way into our praying, and must have had a profound influence, though of course these things are impossible to quantify.

This collect has four of the great prayer requests, and they bear much thought.

### **1. Graft in our hearts the love of thy name**

I love the agricultural image here. The latin can mean 'plant', like a seed, or 'graft' like a plant onto a rootstock. I'm spectacularly bad at gardening, and have never grafted anything in my life – but I know what it means. Our hearts are fertile ground, and all sorts of things can grow there. False ambitions, the desire for wealth, fame, reputation, being loved. It can happen even in church. Putting on glorious apparel and walking last in the procession can make you feel quite important really.

I don't normally quote Anne Robinson in sermons, but in *The Times* once she was reported as saying this: 'I've spent my entire adulthood practising for being rich and famous, so it's been no trouble at all playing the part'. Paul, writing to the Romans in our Epistle reading, might characterise this as 'yielding your members to uncleanness' – giving yourself to things that will ultimately never satisfy and will in fact lead to death. So it's worth taking a long look at what is planted in your heart – and whether the primary desire, the first bud above the rootstock, is love of God – for love of God's name is love of God himself.

For me growing up in Yorkshire graft has always meant work, as in 'hard graft'. Picture God as a hard working gardener, working the soil, and grafting with his grafts. This prayer is an invitation to God to do some work on you, to clear away desires which are at best secondary, and at worst antagonistic, and to plant himself in your heart. It is a prayer which cannot be said often enough.

### **2. Increase in us true religion**

When I was ordained, David Jenkins, the Bishop of Durham, gave us his charge. 'For God's sake' he said, 'don't be religious. For men and women's sake be holy'. Some religion can be

stifling – a repetitive round of observances without meaning and ceremonies without purpose. That was, I think, what the Bishop meant.

I have rarely come across such religiosity, and I have put everyone close to me on guard in case I ever get that way myself. It is tempting in a magnificent place such as this, or even in an inferior one like York, or Southwell, where I've also been over the last decade, to get all religious, and I'm delighted that worship here is not religious but holy. It was Cranmer, or one of his colleagues, who put the 'true' religion into this prayer, understandably given their disdain of 'vain ceremonies'.

Discipline, repetition, the practice of prayer over a long period, the use of the psalms over a month or a year in daily prayer, the careful observance of the church's year, all help us grow in faith, and enable proper 'increase'. But not all religion needs to be repetitive, and there have been one off services which have kick started my faith, or deepened my believing. Often that has led to tears, which is embarrassing only when your the Vicar, or the Precentor, or the Bishop's Chaplain and in full view.

True religion is to have the discipline to put yourself in the place where God can do something with you – by having your Bible open each day, praying each day, worshipping with others regularly, and being open to the unexpected – what the spiritual writers call 'the sacrament of the present moment'. God forbid that we are so busy being religious that the holy passes us by. Paul, in the epistle, says we are now free from sin, and have 'fruit unto holiness'. Our practice of faith is all about that – getting better at being holy, not grinding ourselves into the ground.

### **3. Nourish us with all goodness**

Again, this is the most basic of images – the latin says *ut quae sunt bona nutrias* – give us good nutrition. In Mark's Gospel a second huge crowd is so focussed on Jesus that they have come miles from their homes with no food. What he has to say is more important than what their stomachs are telling them, but everyone has to eat. Again, Jesus feeds them miraculously, showing them that in a world which prizes plenty, a little from him can go a long way.

We are what we eat. A friend of mine once went on a different diet, and not had a cold all winter. Another friend has given up wheat and has found that her nails are growing much stronger, which she didn't expect. It is the same spiritually. We are what we consume, and the spiritual messages we take in are not always healthy. To be nourished with the goodness of God is to focus on him above all things. Just as any diet requires planning and discipline, so does a spiritual one. Thanks be to God then that we don't have to buy the food as well – it is there, freely for us, in the word of God, in our fellow believers, and in all these things by the power of the Holy Spirit. Be nourished – and if we are then there may be left overs too.

### **4. And of thy great mercy keep us in the same**

One of the problems of prayer is that it seems a bit impertinent to give God a list of requests, however virtuous they might sound in themselves. So I'm glad that this prayer adds 'of thy great mercy' to the latin. We are worth nothing except what God in his mercy

makes of us – and he gives us ultimate value because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We live and grow in him only because of his continuing mercy to us.

It is a fact of our lives that however we may have been grafted, increased and nourished in the faith, the next minute we'll be doing something stupid. Paul wrestles with this in Romans – we were servants of sin, and are now servants of God, but still do sinful things. His message is to 'become what you are'. Eternally we belong to God for ever. In our human lives we are influenced by sin, but we can demonstrate that we are not subject to it.

The final petition asks God to keep us grafted, increased and nourished. Like any plant, we begin life small but keen. Pray that the seed will germinate, that the graft will take. Then pray for growth, and that the growing plant will be nourished. And then pray that there will be no frost, or disease, or greenfly, or anything else that will bring the plant down. This life of faith is a constant battle, but will lead to fruitbearing and the joy of heaven.

## **Conclusion**

One of the joys of this place is the amount of foliage and plant life carved in its stones. For me and countless worshippers before us this building and its people have been a fruitful ground, a place where in worship, in prayer, in scripture and in the people of God we have found that goodness has been nourished, the love of God has been grafted, true religion has been increased, and that despite ourselves we have been kept in the same.

Thanks be to God then who has done this, and if we will let him will continue to do it again and again, that we might be so fruitful that others will find themselves included and grafted in too. For the sake of our Lord God, who is all power and might, and the author and giver of all good things. Amen.