

Trinity 6. 2021 Havant

This sermon is “*The Tale of Two Collects*”, although to be more precise, it the tale of two versions of the same collect!

“*Collect*” is the traditional name for the special prayer assigned for a particular week or day in the Church’s calendar. Various explanations are given for the rather odd word “collect”, but one possibility is that it collects or gathers up the prayers that each member of the congregation has privately made during the silence after the priest said, “*Let us pray*”.

In this morning’s collect for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, we prayed,

*Merciful God,
you have prepared for those who love you
such good things as pass our understanding:
pour into our hearts such love toward you
that we, loving you **in all things and above all things**,
may obtain your promises,
which exceed all that we can desire;*

Like most of the collects this is a translation of an ancient prayer going back to the very early days of our Liturgy. It may even have already been in use in Rome before St Augustine came to Canterbury and that he brought it with him at the very origins of the Church of England - 1500 years ago. So it’s got quite a history. It did however suffer a bit of a mangling when the first English Prayer Book was produced. In the PB translation we prayed “*Pour into our hearts such love towards thee, that we, **loving thee above all things**, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire.*”

Did you notice the difference? This morning we prayed that we might love God “**in and above all things**” but in the BCP version it was that we might love God “**above all things**”.

The difference isn’t trivial. The PB version suggests that there are all sorts of things we might love of which God is the greatest. Behind this lies the thought that among all the things in the universe, God is the greatest. That can’t be right: God isn’t the greatest thing in

the universe, but is rather the creator and sustainer of all the things in the universe. As St Paul said to the people of Athens, *“In him we live and move and have our being.”* Without God, there is nothing else, and whatever there is can only really be understood in that light.

So in the ancient prayer, God is not the greatest of all objects of our love - but is to be recognised, known, and loved for himself of course but also **in everything that exists**. Indeed had God not been their creator and were God’s own existence the foundation and mainspring of their own, they quite simply would not exist at all. Truly to know and understand the things that are requires us to recognise that nothing exists in its own right, but only, always and in permanent dependence on God.

This prayer teaches us then that it is right and proper for us to love the things of this world, because they are of God - and not otherwise. To love the things of this world as ends in themselves, apart from God’s purposes for them, is at least to miss the point, and is at its worst idolatry - setting a creature in the place of God.

That has far reaching implications for how we live our daily lives. If it is true that we should love God in everything God has made and done, we should be looking for God’s hand, for what is divine, in everything, including every single moment and aspect of our lives. It is only if we see those things as God’s creation and gift that we can love them properly.

This doesn’t come naturally of course. We have to allow God to train us to discern what he is up to and reveal to us when we are beginning to value things as ends in themselves. This is why the traditional disciplines of faith are so important - but that’s the subject for another sermon.

God is the real object of the love we have for the things he has made, it is obvious that loving them for his sake is not a matter of having warm feelings about created objects but of knowing God as the source and justification for our delight in them.

I am by no means an uncritical admirer of modern liturgical texts, but I am profoundly grateful that the compilers of Common Worship have got the Church of England back on track - in this respect at least!