

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE ON SUNDAY JUNE 25, 2017 BY
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SERIES ON THE COMMUNION SERVICE (2) - THE COLLECT FOR PURITY

Let's begin with some history.

Around about 596 A.D. Pope Gregory the Great was wandering past a slave market in Rome. There he saw some fair-haired and fair-skinned slaves. He asked what sort of people these were with their fair hair and fair skins – so un-Italian. He was told that they were Angles. He replied, “Not Angles, but Angels.” It was this Pope Gregory the Great who sent Augustine – a Benedictine monk and the prior of an Abbey - to go overseas to these Angles' country and evangelise them ... and he became St Augustine of Canterbury. And it was this Pope Gregory the Great who wrote the prayer that starts our Communion service Sunday by Sunday. It is known as *The Collect For Purity*. It's a really old prayer. It wasn't in the people's Prayer Books at all until the 1500's. It used to be a prayer that the clergy said in the Vestry before they came into the church to celebrate the Communion Service. But when Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was putting our English language Prayer Book together in 1549, he it was who chose this prayer from the Communion liturgy that was used in Salisbury, and he made this *Collect For Purity* the starting prayer for the Communion Service. It has been used in Anglican worship for 500 years.

It starts with a statement of address to God. “Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, and from whom no secrets are hidden ...” That could be rather a daunting beginning! All that we are and all that we know is known by God. We could put a harsh Victorian-era interpretation on this – but I think that would be wrong. The statement of address to God gets a lot of its content from the first part of Psalm 139. “O Lord, you have searched me out and known me ... you are acquainted with all my ways ... there is not a word on my tongue, but you, Lord, know it altogether.” Isn't it great that we begin our time of Holy Communion by saying in this prayer that God knows us through and through ... we are not mere numbers in a vast, heavenly database. Rather we are known by God intimately and deeply ... personally, individually. In its metaphorical way of speaking, the Bible says that God knows us so intimately that even the hairs of our head are numbered (Matthew 10.30). Far from being a scary, worrying statement at the start of our Communion Service, the fact that we are known so well by God is a wonderful, filial thing. Our hearts are open to God and God loves us. There is no secret corner in our hearts and God loves us. This is the God to whom we come in our worship – a God who knows and loves us. When we say this *Collect For Purity* together at the outset of our liturgy, we say it warmly, lovingly, responding to the warmth and love that God has for us – knowing us through and through.

So the *Collect for Purity* goes on and has a petition for God's action. “... cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit ...” We know that it is our brains that are the source of our thoughts rather than our hearts. We won't get hung up on this small anatomical detail. At the very outset of our worship we pray that God will invest us with the Holy Spirit and will cleanse our thoughts ... protect us from wandering thoughts ... keep us from unworthy thoughts during the time of our worship ... guard us from unholy thoughts as we spend time with friends in church.

Of course, we all do get wandering thoughts ... have we put the oven on at a warm enough temperature to cook lunch? If it rains during church will the washing get too wet? Perhaps I ought to buy some bread on the way home. Oh ... what did the preacher say just then? Where are we up to in the service? **Must** he sing so loudly? Where **did** she get that hat? Our prayer in the *Collect for Purity* is that we might be cleansed of these excursions in our thoughts – and for the hour of the service, concentrate on God. As always, prayer is a co-operative effort between God and us. We don't just utter words in prayer, and then fold our arms, sit back and wait for God to do something. We utter words in prayer, roll up our sleeves, and do what we can to help the prayer to be granted. We pray that God will cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, and we have to make conscious efforts to keep our minds and thoughts on track. God and we work together in prayer, and when we do that, we find that prayer often has the effect that we desire.

The *Collect for Purity* starts with an address to God, moves into a petition for God's action ... and then gives a statement of result. "... that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name." Perfectly love God; worthily magnify God's holy name. I tell you, these are pretty large things we're aiming at. Large they may be ... achievable they are, too. When our thoughts are under control, and sometimes by sheer gritty effort we keep our thoughts from wandering all over the globe ... then we can perfectly love God, and worthily magnify God's holy name. As we make our way through the Communion service in this sermon series, we shall come across the ways in which we worship God and magnify God's name in the eucharist liturgy.

When you think about a person's name, you are actually thinking about the whole person and not simply their name. A name is a sound by which we are identified from everyone else. Let me throw a name out at you ... Queen Elizabeth II. I can tell you now what has just happened ... in your mind's eye you see a picture of the Queen ... in your opinion-centre, you know your opinion of the Queen – whether you think she is a good person or not. A person's name is a short-hand way of expressing everything you know and believe about someone. It's true for everyone in church this morning, God's name is also a short-hand way of expressing everything you know and believe about God. God's holiness ... God's graciousness ... God's care and protection ... God's activity in the church and the world through God's followers ... these things and many more are summed up and expressed in that word "God" – the name of God. When we worthily magnify God's holy name we magnify God, and simultaneously we put the Lord's Prayer into action – "Hallowed be your name" – we are using God's name in a holy way, a reverent way, a worthy way.

Perfectly loving God and worthily magnifying God's holy name – you know what that is? That's worship. In the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah saw his vision of God in the temple in chapter 6 of his prophecy, we read, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne ... and the seraphim called to one another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of his glory!'" They were perfectly loving God ... worthily magnifying God's holy name – that's worship. As we pray the *Collect for Purity* each week we are in fellowship with the seraphim who worship God, asking that we may worship God just as they did in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6:1-3).

Pope Gregory's prayer is being used around the world today in Anglican Communion services in many languages and in many locations. We address the God who knows us through and through, and loves us. We pray that God will give us the strength to control our wandering thoughts, that, as a result, we may love God perfectly and worthily magnify God's holy name.

And that's only the start of the Communion Service. We are going to learn so much over these next few months. Let us now turn to our Prayer Books, page 119. At the bottom of that page, let us now pray aloud together the words of the *Collect for Purity*.

"Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: 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."