

ADVENT 3 2021 ST GEORGE'S CHAPEL WINDSOR

This morning's Collect is a prayer for the clergy, the "ministers and stewards of thy mysteries", that they, might "turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just" and, as had John the Baptist, prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

It is a prayer included for the first time in the 1662 Prayer Book by the scholarly Bishop of Durham, John Cosin. It replaces a different, a simpler and a terser Collect to be found in the English Prayer Books of 1549, 1552 and 1559. Cosin was aware that, by tradition, ordinations were held around the time of the Third Sunday in Advent and so, especially in light of the readings about their prototype John the Baptist, some prayer for the clergy seemed appropriate. So it was that congregations began to pray for the "ministers and stewards of thy mysteries" that they might "turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just" and, as had John the Baptist, might prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

Perhaps you will keep this in mind until I return to it at the end of this sermon.

As, yesterday, I rummaged through my misty memory, it came to mind that I had touched upon this Collect in a sermon once before. Happily, I found it, tucked away in an old file. On the Third Sunday of Advent in the year 1985 (thirty-six years ago) I was preaching in Winchester Cathedral. It so happened that, not many days before, we had heard of the death of the poet Philip Larkin. A week earlier than my preachment, I had read, in one of the Sunday newspapers, an article about Larkin. It contained the words:

"For friends and admirers, one of the saddest things about Philip Larkin's death is knowing how much he feared dying and how wretchedly he spent his last few months."

The article spoke of Larkin's tendency to wake in the middle of the night and find himself horribly alone and frightened at the prospect of death – "unresting death, a whole day nearer now, / Making all thought impossible but how / And when I shall myself die." So Larkin continues in his poem 'Aubade':

".....Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.
This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die."

In my sermon on that Sunday thirty-six years ago, I went on to mention that Larkin had been an admirer of both Thomas Hardy and John Betjeman. These two men had shared his anguish at the thought of oblivion.

For Hardy also it was more than physical death that filled him with dread; “a loss past loss of fitful breath”. It was what he called “oblivion’s swallowing sea”. The dead, for Hardy, “were but Fortune’s sport” “Like men foregone” merged “into those whose story no one knows”.

And Betjeman, though a believer, knew the dread of oblivion. Lying in a hospital bed in Oxford before an operation, he muses on death while the church bells ring outside and says:

“O better far those echoing hells
Half-threatened in the peeling bells
Than that this ‘I’ should cease to be –
Come quickly, Lord, come quick to me.”

It was not only the animal fear of death that these great men felt. It was something far deeper; far more disturbing. What they felt, what they were threatened by, was something only human beings can feel and be threatened by – the prospect of meaninglessness. It is the possibility that it should all add up to nothing in the end; that there should be no purpose, no design, no direction. Such a possibility, I said to the cathedral congregation all those years ago, evokes within us a kind of terror and helpless rage – a sort of primordial fear of what we can only call “darkness”.

I mentioned earlier that, before the inclusion in the Prayer Book of our present Collect, there had been, in the earlier English Prayer Books, a different, a simpler and a terser Collect. It was as follows:

“Lord, we beseech thee, give ear to our prayer, and by thy gracious visitation lighten the darkness of our hearts, by our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Lighten the darkness of our hearts, by our Lord Jesus Christ.” The prayer seems to echo the Third Collect of Evening Prayer:

“Lighten our darkness we beseech thee O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all dangers and perils of this night. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In and through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, we Christians believe that God has lightened our darkness; given meaning to our lives. We have been assured that we are creatures of destiny.

Nevertheless, intimidated by the cynicism of a secular world, we have too frequently sought refuge in comfortable Christian enclaves, and we have forgotten that the ‘secular cynics’ whom we so much fear, themselves blinded by the darkness of which I have spoken, are sheep without a shepherd.

More than ever, we need leaders of the Church who speak not only to the safely gathered flock but to those around whose lives, though often they do not know it, are shaped and driven by the fear of ‘darkness’.

In Bishop Cosin’s Collect for this Advent season, we have prayed that “the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may . . . so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight.”

I said in that Winchester sermon many years ago:

“We need in the Church, as maybe never before, ministers and stewards who possess the intellect and the imagination, the thoughtfulness and the poetry, to turn the hearts and minds of the people of this country away from the despair that has been engendered by secular thinking towards the Wisdom of the Just. . . . For if we cannot meet the challenge, if we cannot bridge the gulf, if we cannot bring the meaning that we know of to bear upon the lives of those about us, it will be no good our smugly bemoaning the fact that so many have turned their backs upon God; it might well be we who will be judged – not others – for having failed to feed the hungry, really feed the really hungry, who surround us in their millions.”

I am content to say those same words in this place today, and to ask you to pray today’s Collect with all your heart.