

Chapter 4

Collects, Epistles and Gospels

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer makes provision for collects, Epistles and Gospels to be used at Holy Communion on every Sunday and holy day of the year, as well as during Holy Week and on the Monday and Tuesday after Easter and Whitsun (Pentecost).¹ This makes a total of 90 days that are specially catered for, although in any given year there will only be 87 that are actually used. This is because the prayer book provides for six Sundays after Epiphany and for 25 after Trinity Sunday, whereas there are only 28 such Sundays (taken together), not 31. Thus, if there are six Sundays after Epiphany, there are only 22 after Trinity, and, at the other extreme, if there are 27 Sundays after Trinity, there is only one after Epiphany. In years when there are 26 or 27 Sundays after Trinity, the excess is made up by using unread collects, Epistles and Gospels from Epiphany, though the prayer book does not specify which ones should be preferred.²

1. See Sargent, *Day by Day*, pp. 16-33; M.R. Dudley, *The Collect in Anglican Liturgy: Texts and Sources 1549-1989* (Runcorn: Alcuin Club; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

2. Logically it should be the fifth and/or sixth Sunday after Epiphany, which are both rarely used otherwise, but this is not specified in the rubric. Before 1662 there were only five Sundays after Epiphany in the prayer book. If a sixth Sunday occurred, the collect, Epistle and Gospel for the fifth Sunday were repeated. That actually happened in 1565, 1576, 1603, 1614, 1641 and, possibly, 1660, although the Book of Common Prayer had been abolished in 1645 and was not brought back into general use until the following year.

On other days, the collect of the previous Sunday will be used, except that the Christmas collect is read every day from 29-31 December and the collect for the Circumcision of Christ is read every day from 2-5 January. About 80-90 per cent of the collects, Epistles and Gospels are taken (sometimes with slight alterations) from the Sarum rite and have remained substantially unchanged since 1549.

The title of this section changed over time. In 1549 it read: 'The Introits, Collects, Epistles and Gospels, to be used at the celebration of the Lord's Supper and Holy Communion, through the year; with proper Psalms and lessons for divers feasts and days'. The Introits were Psalms containing something proper to the day and were chanted as the priest made his entrance.

In 1552 the Introits were dropped and the proper Psalms and lessons were printed in a separate table.

In 1662 the title was abbreviated to read: 'The Collects, Epistles and Gospels to be used throughout the year'. The omission of any specific reference to Holy Communion was due to the fact that the collects were also used at Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Epistles and Gospels were read when the service was no more than an ante-Communion.

Collects

The collects are 83 in number.³ The origin of the word is uncertain and various etymologies have been proposed. The simplest is that it is the Latin *collecta*, meaning 'gathered together', which suggests that they were intended to be a kind of summary of the theme for the day.⁴ Another possibility is that it is an elision of *cum lectione* ('with the reading') meaning that it accompanies the reading of Scripture. This would fit the use of the collects here, but not in other places where they occur in the prayer book (as in Morning and Evening Prayer). A third suggestion is that the word conveys the idea that the priest prays on behalf

3. The word 'collect' is pronounced on the first syllable. The number is different from that of the Epistles and Gospels (of which there are 90 each) because there are nine days when the collect is that of the previous Sunday or feast day. They are Christmas 1, Monday to Thursday in Holy Week, the Monday and Tuesday after Easter and the Monday and Tuesday after Whitsun (Pentecost). On the other hand, there are three collects for Good Friday, leaving an overall deficit of seven.

4. Collects are unique to the Western (Latin) Church. In the Eastern Churches, prayers are invariably longer and more ornate.

of the people who are gathered together with him, as opposed to the versicles and responses, where the priest and the people pray separately. Whatever the true derivation is, there is no doubt that the collects are brief prayers, densely packed with detail. Many people dislike them and some have objected to their use, for this reason. They believe that prayers should be more expansive, allowing people to absorb them more easily. Opponents of this have always argued that there is virtue in brevity, and it is certainly true that, in an age when few people could read, the collects could be committed to memory by those who wanted to do so. Modern worshippers may find it difficult to enter into the spirit of the collects because they are so condensed; they have to be studied and learned before they are likely to make much of an impression. For the student, however, they are packed with theological observations that provide ready material for teaching and preaching, particularly when they illuminate the scriptural passages that accompany them.

A collect normally has the following structure:

1. The **invocation**. This mentions the name of God, along with one or more of his attributes and often of something connected with redemption. Three collects (those for Advent 3, St Stephen's Day – 26 December – and Lent 1) are addressed specifically to Jesus Christ, but the others are all addressed to the Father. None is addressed to the Holy Spirit.
2. The **doctrine** on which the succeeding petition is based. However, in twelve of the collects no specific doctrine is expressed.
3. The **petition**.
4. The **aspiration**, or purpose for which the petition is offered.
5. The **termination**, which is usually a plea of Christ's merits, but may vary depending on the person of the Trinity involved. This is often accompanied by praise to the Holy Trinity, mentioned by name. There are three types of termination which can be outlined as follows:
 - a. the *general* plea: 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. This occurs, sometimes with very slight modifications, in 52 of the collects.
 - b. the *specific* plea: 'through the merits of etc.' There are thirteen instances of this type of ending.
 - c. the *extended* plea, which is either doxological ('to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen') or descriptive ('who liveth

and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end'). Seven of the collects have a doxological termination, while ten others have a descriptive one.

One collect (Advent 2) does not have a termination in the usual sense at all.

In the 1662 prayer book all the collects end with 'Amen', as suggested by Matthew Wren, bishop of Ely. Before that time, 'Amen' occurred only intermittently.

Of the 83 Collects, 59 derive to a greater or lesser degree from the Sarum rite. No fewer than 77 were wrought by Thomas Cranmer and they are now regarded as supreme examples of his literary style and genius. Four more were the work of John Cosin, bishop of Durham, and were inserted for the first time in 1662.

Most of the collects in the Sarum rite were taken from earlier sources, in particular, from sacramentaries traditionally linked to the Roman Church. Three of these are of particular importance and collects traceable to them are indicated here, using the numbers assigned to them by their modern editors, as follows:

1. The so-called Leonine or Verona sacramentary, compiled about 600 and edited by L.C. Mohlberg, *Sacramentarium Veronense* (Rome: Herder, 1956).
2. The so-called Gelasian sacramentary, originating in the seventh or early eighth century, edited by L.C. Mohlberg, *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Aeclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli* (Rome: Herder, 1968).
3. The so-called Gregorian sacramentary, which claims to date from the time of Pope Gregory I the Great and was sent to Charlemagne by Pope Hadrian I, who intended that it should replace the Gallican sacramentaries then in use in Gaul. It proved to be insufficient to meet the needs of the Gallican Church, and so a supplement was added, probably by Benedict of Aniane sometime shortly after 800. Eventually both the original sacramentary and the supplement were adopted in Rome itself and taken together, they became the basis for later editions of the Roman liturgical books. The combined sacramentary was edited by J. Deshusses, *Le Sacramentaire grégorien*, three volumes (Fribourg: Presses Universitaires de Fribourg, 1971-82). Numbers 1-1018 refer

to the sacramentary proper and numbers 1019-1805 to the supplement.

The Sarum missal was edited by J.W. Legg, *The Sarum Missal: Edited from Three Early Manuscripts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916).

Advent 1: This collect is read every day of Advent. It was composed in 1549, probably by Thomas Cranmer. It can be analysed as follows:

1. The invocation. This is to Almighty God, putting the emphasis on His sovereign power.
2. The doctrine. This is contained in the phrase 'give us grace', because we cannot do anything spiritually worthwhile without the grace of God at work in our lives.
3. The petition. This is also asking for grace for particular purposes:
 - a. to cast away the works of darkness
 - b. to put on the armour of light (Ephesians 6:10-20).
4. The aspiration. This asks for the petition to be fulfilled:
 - a. now in this mortal life, which Jesus Christ the Son humbled himself to share with us (Philippians 2:7), so that
 - b. when he comes again in his glorious majesty, to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to eternal life.
 - c. What we receive now are the first fruits and promise of what is to come in eternity.
5. The termination. We pray through him (Christ) who reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever.

Time and eternity intersect in this collect, reminding us that what is eternally true can and ought to be manifested in our lives here below, right now.

Advent 2: Composed in 1549, it reflects the new emphasis on the Scriptures. For this reason, this Sunday is frequently known as Bible Sunday. The structure is clearer than in the collect for the first Sunday in Advent:

1. The invocation. God is here addressed as 'blessed', not because we have blessed Him, but because He dwells in the

perfect state of blessedness to which we aspire. It may also be understood as our response to the blessing that He has poured out on us.

2. The doctrine. God has caused all the Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Note that the collect does not say that God wrote the Bible Himself, nor does it commit itself to anything like a 'dictation' theory. *That* He has caused the Scriptures to be written is sure; *how* He has done it is left unstated.
3. The petition. We pray for the ability to hear them, to read them, to pay attention to them, to learn what they teach us and to commit it to our hearts and minds.
4. The aspiration is that by patience and the comfort that we derive from reading His Word, that we may accept and retain the blessed hope of eternal life. Note the repetition of the word 'blessed' which reflects the divine origin and purpose of the hope that we have received.
5. There is no specific termination.

Advent 3: The Sarum collect was used from 1549 to 1662, when it was replaced by the current one. The third week of Advent is an Ember Week, making the new collect particularly appropriate. It was probably composed by John Cosin, bishop of Durham. The collect is unusual in that it is addressed directly to Christ and also in that no doctrine is given.

1. The invocation. This is to our Lord Jesus Christ, who sent his messenger (John the Baptist) to prepare the way just before his first coming.
2. The doctrine. None is specifically stated.
3. The petition. We pray that the ministers of the Gospel may be like John the Baptist, preparing the way 'by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just'.
4. The aspiration is that at his second coming in judgement, Christ may accept us as his own.
5. The termination. The three persons are one God, living and reigning in eternity.

Advent 4: Taken from the Gelasian (1121) and Gregorian (805) sacramentaries, as well as from the Sarum missal, where it is similar to

one of the *excita* ('stir up') collects, the one used for the first Sunday in Advent. It was slightly revised by Cranmer and again in 1662.

1. The invocation. This is short and to the point, mentioning only the word 'Lord', which links the Father to the Son.
2. The doctrine. This comes as a parenthesis within the petition and at the end of the aspiration. It is a statement that we are held back (from doing God's will) by our sin and wickedness. The words 'in running the race that is set before us' were added in 1662. After the aspiration comes the phrase 'the satisfaction of the Son our Lord', referring to his atoning death for our sins.
3. The petition. The Lord is asked to raise up His power, to come among us, and with that power to help us.
4. The aspiration is that God's bountiful grace and mercy will quickly help and deliver us. The words 'help and' were added in 1662.
5. The termination. Glory is given to the Son, to the Father and to the Holy Spirit in that order (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:14).

Christmas: The second of two collects provided in 1549. The first one was dropped in 1552. The words 'as at this time' were inserted in the Scottish liturgy of 1637 and retained in 1662 to replace the earlier 'this day', because the collect was intended for use throughout the Christmas season.

1. The invocation. This is once again to Almighty God, returning in this respect to the first Sunday in Advent.
2. The doctrine. This collect is strong on doctrine in a way that the Advent collects are not. In particular:
 - a. Christ is the only-begotten Son (John 1:14).
 - b. Christ took our nature on himself (Philippians 2:7).
 - c. Christ was born of a pure virgin (Matthew 1:20-23).
 - d. We are born again and children of God by adoption and grace (Romans 8:16). The Epistle and the Gospel are similarly rich in theological content.
3. The petition. We pray that we may be daily renewed by the Holy Spirit.
4. The aspiration. This is contained in the petition.
5. The termination. Similar to Advent 3.

The juxtaposition of three holy days immediately following Christmas has been explained in different ways. For some, it represents different

kinds of martyrdom – Stephen in both will and deed, John in will and the Innocents in deed. For others, it commemorates Stephen as the first martyr, John as the beloved disciple and special friend of Jesus, and the Innocents, whose suffering was the direct result of Jesus' birth.

St Stephen (26 December). The collect comes from the Gregorian sacramentary (62) and the Sarum missal, where, however, it is addressed to the Father and not to the Son as it is in the prayer book.

1. The invocation. This is subsumed in the petition and is restricted to the single word 'Lord', as in Advent 3, which is also addressed directly to the Son.
2. The doctrine. This is also contained in the petition. It states that we suffer in this world for the truth of Christ. Doctrine returns towards the end of the collect, where we are reminded that Christ stands at the right hand of God, ready to help all those who suffer for him.⁵
3. The petition. This comes in three parts, all based on Stephen's vision in Acts 7:55-56:
 - a. We ask to be given the grace to look up to heaven as Stephen did.
 - b. We ask for a vision of the glory to be revealed.
 - c. We ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
4. The aspiration is that we may learn to love and bless our persecutors as Stephen did. The wording of the original was modified in 1662. From 1549 onwards it had spoken of learning to love our enemies, as Stephen prayed for his persecutors. Here, however, we are asking to pray for our persecutors, while Stephen prayed for his murderers. The change seems to reflect the conditions of 1662, when religious persecution was a living memory for many and still a danger for some.
5. The termination refers to Jesus as our only Mediator and Advocate, an appropriate ending in the context of this commemoration.

St John the Evangelist (27 December). This collect first appeared in the Leonine sacramentary (1283) and then in the Gregorian (67). It was expanded in 1549 and again in 1662.

5. This is slightly odd, in that Christ is usually said to be seated at the right hand of the Father. The difference is that seating was the privilege of the king. Everyone else stood in his presence.

1. The invocation. God is approached here as a God of mercy.
2. The doctrine. No specific doctrine is mentioned, though the general teaching of John is.
3. The petition. We pray that God will send His beams of light onto the Church, that it might be enlightened by John's doctrine. In the Sarum missal this enlightenment was confined to individuals; in 1549 it was extended to the whole Church.
4. The aspiration is that we may walk in the light of the truth and so attain the light of everlasting life. The theme of light is a particularly Johannine one and recurs throughout this collect. This entire phrase was added in 1662.
5. The termination is in the standard general form.

Holy Innocents (28 December). This collect from the Sarum missal can be traced back to both the Gelasian (42) and Gregorian (75) sacramentaries. The invocation was partly rewritten in 1662.

1. The invocation. This is to Almighty God. The next phrase, 'who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast ordained strength', was added in 1662.
2. The doctrine. No specific doctrine is mentioned.
3. The petition. We pray that God will mortify the sins in us and strengthen us by His grace.
4. The aspiration is that we may glorify God's name:
 - a. by the innocence of our life (like that of the children)
 - b. the constancy of our faith
 - c. until the day we die.

Christmas 1. The collect for Christmas Day is used.

Circumcision of Christ (1 January). This collect is closely connected to one which is found in the supplement to the Gregorian sacramentary (1743). It is not in the Sarum missal.

1. The invocation. This is to Almighty God.
2. The doctrine. Christ was circumcised and made obedient to the law of Moses in order to do all that was necessary for our salvation.
3. The petition. We ask for the true circumcision of the Spirit. The 1549 prayer book had said 'thy Spirit' but it was altered in 1552. The question is whether it was a typographical error