

The collect for this morning is notable for being the shortest collect in the prayer book. Furthermore, it is the one used in place of pronouncing absolution, when a layman or deacon is reading the offices, since only priests and bishops are to pronounce absolution.

This collect contains just two parallel clauses: the first asks God to grant pardon and peace to His people, and the second provides some explanation of those terms. Pardon is forgiveness of sins and preservation in the consequences of those sins. Peace is described here as quietness of mind.

Sometimes we are bombarded by so many thoughts and worries as almost to be paralyzed. A quieted mind can focus and receive the love of God and return the love of God. Pardon brings about peace. Knowledge and confidence in the promises of God allows us to obey in confidence. Pardon grounds us. Peace empowers us.

In times when the noise of the world will not leave us alone, or when we are distracted and our minds are anything but quiet, this collect would remind us of our position in Christ, independent of any of the external circumstance that surrounds us. We must first remind ourselves that God is true and that his word is reliable and cannot fail. Secondly we remind ourselves that Christ died for us and that we, being baptized into the Church, identifying with His death and resurrection, are dressed in the righteousness of Christ. These facts ground us in peace and allow us to obey in faith – to do what we must do even when it is very difficult. Yet faithful obedience is key to our long-term growth in holiness so that the salvation that is objectively ours would be evident to the world. Finally, all of this must be based upon God's word. A familiarity with the Bible is key for the Word of God is the unchanging standard to which we can always appeal.

Now what we just described was the putting on of the armor of God: the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Word of God. Against such preparations, the accuser and the malign evil spirits in the world cannot bring us to ruin. Let me assure you today that who we are in Christ, that our position in the family of God, is sealed by God Himself, by the Holy Spirit in our lives. No accusations or personal failings or physical needs can take that away. The armor of God helps us to know this fact deeply, and not just to nod in agreement with the preacher.

So in our epistle we see three things. The first is that we are under spiritual attack. Besides being tempted to sin, we are also constantly accused by the devil who seeks to undermine our confidence in God's word and keeps us second guessing our own actions.

You cannot change the past. You must move forward in the Truth of God.

The second thing we see in the epistle is God's provision to us to silence these spiritual attacks. This is the armor of God which we just briefly described. Putting on the armor of God is the way in which we remind ourselves of the reality of who we are in God.

The last thing to note in the epistle is that these attacks seek to divide us from each other. We think that they only happen to us individually, that we are unique in our weakness. This is not the case. We all will suffer such attacks. What is the solution to this? It is to have the confidence to share our needs with, and to pray for, to intercede for each other. Every Christian needs to be engaging in prayer for other Christians. In our reading, the Apostle Paul himself asked for intercession from the Ephesian Christians. This is amazing. We think Paul was impervious to spiritual attack, but we see here that he was often quite afraid. He needed help to speak the truth boldly, to not allow his circumstances to undermine his confidence in God and thus to undermine his ministry. If Paul needed the prayers of the saints, then we too absolutely need each others' prayers. We are not individuals. We are a people called by the name of Christ. We need to be a praying people if we are to be a people of confidence and therefore a people of peace.

This idea of intercession for each other is particularly highlighted in the gospel lesson this morning. It speaks of a father, a nobleman, in distress for his son who was sick and dying. He was from Capernaum on the Northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, but had heard that Jesus, this miracle worker, was in Cana which is about 16 ½ miles away. The physicians attending upon the son were unable to do anything, so the father's last and only hope was Jesus. This particular account is only mentioned in the Gospel according to St. John, not in the synoptics. However, it is reasonable to place this man with the many people who clamored to Christ for healing during His Galilean ministry. This is described in Matthew chapter 4, starting at verse 23:

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.

And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he

healed them.

And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan.

The father was evidently one of this crowd. To whom do we turn when we have no other hope? We turn to Jesus, and this father was no different, pleading that Jesus would come to heal his son.

Yet Jesus rebukes the nobleman, for his faith is in some measure deficient. "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." Did this man have a measure of faith? Absolutely. He travelled over 16 miles to convince Jesus to come. Yet had this been his first impulse? Likely not. This father probably made the trip out of desperation. Again, he had no where else to turn. And we see in him too a lack of imagination, of understanding who Jesus really was. A miracle worker is not the same thing as the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus didn't need to be present to heal the son, and yet the nobleman couldn't imagine that this was the case. His desperation kept him from seeing beyond the single solution upon which he was fixed – that Jesus had to come to Capernaum.

Jesus' message to this man is, "I know you, I know your son. I am God and am aware of all. I am present with you and with your son even when I am here. Faith doesn't require seeing. Faith *is* seeing. Go your way; go to your home. Your son is well."

Here we see the next step of progression of this nobleman's faith. He believed Jesus word. God spoke and the desperation of the man was calmed. He then was able to obey Jesus' command. And be certain that this was indeed a huge step. For a man to have desperately travelled so far to then just turn around for home without, it seems, any protest is quite incredible. Of course, Jesus has a way of speaking to our hearts that brings assurance and peace. Confidence in the word of Jesus brings peace. Yet this nobleman must still have had lingering doubts in his mind, which likely grew as he approached home. Would he find there health and wholeness, or would he find mourning for his dead son?

Of course he did not arrive at home before the final answer was known. His servants met him prior to his arrival with the news that his son was well. "Thy son liveth." And as we

continue the narrative, we find out that the fever fully left him at about the same time that he was petitioning Jesus.

The result? The faith of the father was confirmed even more, and his testimony to his household brought forth faith in Jesus more broadly. Through this man's intercessions for his son, God was glorified and the mission of Christ was advanced. The nobleman's journey was a journey of faith. His faith began in desperation, for he loved his son and had no where else to turn. Many of us have begun our journey with Christ in this way as well. Then on meeting Christ, on learning about Him and from Him, our faith increases, is perfected, giving peace leading to obedience. Yet in the midst of the journey, doubts still linger. Was his a fool's errand? Was he duped by this man who was simply trying to avoid making the trek to Capernaum? Notwithstanding the doubts, he pressed on toward home believing the word that had been spoken confirmed finally in receiving the good news about his son. Then the doubts were fully driven away and were replaced by greater faith and greater glory.

I hope that you all can see your own journeys of faith in this nobleman's journey. Faith is a gift which God increases over time through the trials of life. If we do not experience struggles, if our faith is not tried by the attacks of the enemy, then we do not grow in Christ. It is through such trials that God is lifted up in the world. There is no way around it. Putting on the armor of God, reminding ourselves of the complete pardon we have received, is essential to standing firm and to growing in Christ.

Finally, let us take the example of St. Paul to heart here. Do we pray to escape tribulation? We must not miss the fact that it is through these trials that the gospel is spread. It was through tribulation that St. Paul spread the gospel. He was persecuted everywhere he went, but was critically instrumental in converting the Roman Empire to Christianity. He was confined to house arrest when he wrote our epistle this morning. I'm sure he prayed for his freedom, but also submitted himself to God's will knowing that his imprisonment was being used by God for the spreading of the gospel and to the edification of the Church for we have the prison epistles because of Paul's arrest.

And even the illness of the nobleman's son resulted in the furthering of Christ's message – that the Kingdom of God was at hand and that He was the King, the Messiah of the Jews. The

challenge isn't to have peace when things are going well. The challenge is to have peace in the midst of a world that is bent upon our destruction. Life is like marching through a swamp – every step is difficult. We might find some solid ground for a few steps, but then it is back into the muck. Yet soldiers struggle on because they believe in their missions and because they are devoted to their leaders.

May we today be reminded that we are pardoned, that our sins are forgiven. It isn't that we are merely tolerated by God, but that He welcomes us in love. He wants our devotion for we already have His. We are reborn in baptism into His family. We worship here with our brothers and sisters. Any of the accusations against us, any of those lingering doubts that suggest that we are too fallen to be loved by God, must be crushed under the surety of God's promises. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil... that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

And may the word of God established in our hearts assure us that we are indeed pardoned. May God's sure pardon, won for us by Jesus Christ, still our hearts and quiet our minds. And may the peace which we receive from God in Christ by the Holy Spirit, be used in our lives to for the furthering of the kingdom.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

AMEN.