

Running to Obtain God's Promises

September 30, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There is no book on prayer, I believe, which is so satisfying in its teaching as the Book of Common Prayer and the Collects it contains. The teaching does not always jump off the page at us, but it *is* there and discovering it can only add to our appreciation of it. Next to the Lord's Prayer, the Collects provide the model for our approach to God.

The term *Collect* to denote this type of prayer is a survival in our Liturgy from the uses of the ancient Gallican rites, where it summed up, concluded or *collected* the thoughts, or petitions, of the several members of a congregation into a single prayer. The Collects in the Book of Common Prayer mostly derive from medieval sources, especially the Sarum Missal and Breviary.

Of those Collects in the Prayer Book, the one for today follows closely that written by Thomas Cranmer for the 1549 Prayer Book. You can find it near the

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bottom of page 182. It begins, true to form, with the contemplation of God and his power shown to us through *mercy and pity*, but I was struck by the use of the word *running*.

Children do a lot of running after things, not so much adults. On any given summer afternoon, even where I live, where the streets are quiet, a group of children will be playing together and they hear a distant sound, which catches their attention. It filters through the houses and gardens, through the trees and the driveways. It's the sound of music. It's *Mr. Softie* music! The children's play stops. There's a mad dash home to get some money, then a mad dash back, just in time to see the blue and white truck turn the corner and come down the street. The children are running to it, offering coins, calling out choices, grabbing the extended cone, tasting, savoring and the truck goes on its way and the music fades, only to be heard in other

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streets where there is more *running to obtain* the promises the music makes.

Running to obtain God's promises, as the Collect puts it, is indeed a vivid image and the child in us wants to go on calling up child-like images. Imagine people running to Bible study, running up the aisles in their eagerness to receive the bread and the wine, running to some small secret place to be alone with God. Sounds silly, all this running. Maybe so, for some, but I would guess not, in the eyes of God. That's why it's written here, in this Collect.

There is another word in this prayer that evokes childhood memories and it is the word used to name what a Christian should run to obtain: *treasure*. Is there anything more thrilling for the child in each of us?

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Perhaps as Christians we would do well to look with new, or, perhaps, very old eyes at a number of things and realize the extent to which they can be treasures for us. Look at the Bible on the lectern, the community of faces in the stained glass, the crucifix over the side altar, the cross on the high altar, the face of some beloved beside us, or, the image and personality of someone we love, but see no longer; the shining chalice as it comes to your lips; the soaring beauty of an anthem, some beloved prayer. Look at them and see them as the treasures of God, poured out in his immense generosity. So often do such things remain buried treasures.

“Grant unto us such a measure of thy grace that we may run to partake. St. Paul would like the image of running in this prayer. He was fond of evoking the scene in the city arena where athletes ran to obtain a prize, a *treasure*. He offers the image to us as the pattern of a *lively* and *eager* spirituality that is never

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satisfied with a passive, merely receptive stance to the things of God. Once again, we are reminded of God being all in all to us and within us. We actually ask God for the grace to pursue God so that we may partake of God. God at the beginning, God throughout the journey, God at the end of the journey.

There is a wonderful hymn in our hymnal (The Hymnal 1982, #694) probably one of the shortest and the words come the Sarum Primer of 1514:

God be in my head, and in my understanding

God be in my eyes and in my looking

God be in my mouth and in my speaking

*God be in my heart and in my thinking God be at my
end, and at my departing.*

Something of the same mystery is seen and felt in the experience of the disciples after the Resurrection.

There is a sense of Jesus being behind them in Jerusalem, with them on the road, and before them in

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Galilee. Come to think of it, they all did a lot of running. Mary ran. John ran. Peter ran. It's a good bet that the two friends on their way back from Emmaus broke into a run in their hurry to tell the disciples that they had seen Him.

What would it mean for us to *run* to obtain God's promise? **AMEN.**