10 June 2012
The First Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Isaiah 43 vv. 16–25
Luke 7 vv. 36–end

O Lord, open our lips
Not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences

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I had the honour of representing the Church of England at a series of events in Transylvania. Dracula was not involved but it was fairly gothic. We flew in on Ryanair and flapped home under our own steam. At the end of my visit I was presented with a certificate and a medal of merit. I asked my interpreter what the certificate meant and he told me that it meant nothing at all. I had done nothing to merit my merit.

This ties in with our theme from the Prayer Book this evening. Cranmer followed the course of St Augustine in most theological matters. In this he had much in common with fellow Reformers in Europe and in England, particularly in his understanding of human salvation. In brief, he did not believe that there was anything that we could do to earn the assurance of being saved. Only the grace of God, mediated to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and reinforced by the action of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, could rescue us from the predicament that otherwise undoubtedly awaited us.

This presented him with an immediate literary problem when it came to the preparation of a form of worship to take the place of the Latin Mass in England's churches. Many of the collects of the Sarum Rite – the short prayers attached to particular Sundays and feast days – had been composed at a time when the Church was dealing with Pelagianism, the heresy which taught that we contributed to our own salvation, and were therefore very sound in their denial of any power inherent in human beings to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Others, however, contained the Latin word *mereamur* in their concluding petitions. This otherwise pedantic point must be mentioned because *mereamur* is translated roughly, 'that we may deserve . . .'. The verb and the English 'merit' have the same root. You will not find any positive references to meriting or deserving anything in the Prayer Book collects.

But, for those who have not already spotted the source of the phrase I have chosen to talk about this evening, 'not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences', *merit* survives in the consecration prayer of the 1549 Order for Holy Communion, and is transferred to a post-communion prayer in the Prayer Book of 1552 and all subsequent revisions. The reorganisation of the text and redistribution of words belongs to another kind of discussion, although it demonstrates Cranmer's reluctance ever to throw away a good line. In this context, it is referring to sacrifice. Members of the reformed Ecclesia Anglicana were strongly discouraged from thinking of the Holy Communion as a sacrifice, and much of the energy of the anti-Roman propaganda campaign was invested in persuading people that they were being saved from the appalling idea that Christ was sacrificed by the priest each time the Mass was celebrated. Instead, Reformed doctrine taught that Christ's sacrifice was 'one oblation of himself, once offered', and that the only sacrifice that took place in the celebration of communion was the 'living sacrifice' of faithful lives lived in devotion to God.

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Our debt to the historians, notably Diarmaid MacCulloch and Eamon Duffy, who have presented subtle, nuanced and fascinating accounts to correct the caricatures of the period, is considerable. Yet language can be a compelling thing and Prayer Book language at its best is extremely compelling. The graceful, resonant, balanced alternatives, 'not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences', escape from bitter doctrinal controversy to present us with a picture of God – perhaps two pictures of God.

You may have seen medieval Doom paintings. St Thomas's church in Salisbury boasts a very fine example of the genre, as does Wenhaston Church in Norfolk. These typically show the damned being dragged into hell by hideously grotesque demons, while angels draw the saved up into heaven. A pair of scales features somewhere in the scene, usually presided over by the Archangel Michael, who weighs the souls of all and decides their fate. There is something of that underlying the idea of a God who weighs merits. On the other hand, a God who pardons our offences seems to do this without having to refer to a system of qualifications, or a scale of prices. This is not a God who can be cajoled or bribed. The image is one of sheer, undeserved generosity.

The Gospel narratives offer many memorable illustrations of divine largesse. There are the feeding miracles, the large catches of fish, the healing of people too timid to ask for anything on their own behalf. The theme is echoed in parables – the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son come to mind. Examples of people being generous to Jesus, however, are a rarer species, and when they turn up, they have difficult elements. The story of the woman who anoints Jesus's feet with vastly expensive perfumed ointment (commentaries suggest it was worth an average worker's wages for a year) occurs in more than one place, and the details are consistent. She had a dubious reputation in the town and the reaction of those around Jesus is a mixture of shock that he should allow her anywhere near him, and moral indignation over the profligate use of something normally applied in very small quantities.

Jesus is not prepared to put up with narrow criticisms. But instead of issuing an instant rebuke to his host, who is a Pharisee, significantly, and therefore well versed in the law and skilled in techniques of argument, he challenges him with an apparently unrelated question. The subject matter has now turned to money and the repayment of debt. That is easier to understand, because there are laws to govern how these things are done. Simon the Pharisee has no difficulty in getting the point: release from a large debt is likely to encourage much more gratitude than release from something more modest. But Jesus has not quite finished with him. If he is astute enough to understand the relationship between forgiveness of material debts and grateful love, then he must be assumed to be able to see the analogy that follows. His hospitality appears to have been on the thrifty side – no water to wash the dusty feet of someone who has walked to dinner in sandals, no formal gesture of welcome. The woman, on the other hand, has thrown everything she has into one extravagant act, risking even further local persecution because she has gate-crashed a respectable party to do this.

And it is on these signs that Jesus has based his judgement. Reputation is not taken into account. The woman's gesture states clearly enough how much she longs for Jesus's approval and how much she is prepared to risk to get near to the person whose magnetic teaching has already begun to suggest that second chances are available to those who know they are living outside the pale of the Law. She doesn't have to tell him how sorry she is about the sort of life she has led, because her actions are enough. Simon, whose excellent conduct and fidelity to the Law are unquestionable, finds himself in possession of currency which is of no interest at all to Jesus, who is not prepared to be an auditor of virtue. Instead, he stands convicted of little sins of petty economy and perhaps a want of emotional generosity. The embarrassment itself might have stopped him from seeking Jesus's forgiveness.

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Not so long ago, I had a minor surgical procedure. Just beforehand, I was asked by the nurse if there was anything I wanted to say before going into the theatre. I said, "Don't hurt me." Afterwards, the nurse pinned a bravery award to my chest. This is still stuck to my fridge. I was forty-five at the time. This award is normally reserved for boys under the age of ten. It was a wonderful statement of ironic affection. The Prayer Book is often criticised for being fixated on sin, and for making its users wallow in their inadequacy and inability to rise above their disappointing performance by their own efforts. As one collect puts it, 'we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves'. Yet there is another way to see it, and that is as a document overwhelmingly concerned to make its users open to the love of God by casting themselves trustingly on his forgiveness. It is not only the reassuring biblical quotations that precede the distribution of communion that qualify – in the delightful terminology of the 16th century – as 'Comfortable Words'. There is so much else in this book that is designed to bring comfort, maybe not by easy means, but once grasped, able to enrich our picture of a gracious, saving, listening God, who is so much less interested in awarding us points for virtue than in working with us as we are. AMEN.

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