

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 4, 2007

The Rev'd Stephen C. Scarlett

“Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.” With these words, today’s collect makes a statement about human nature. It is a statement with which some would take issue. Do we really have no power of ourselves to help ourselves? Aren’t we able to do various things that aid the human condition? Aren’t we able, by medicine and science, to help people who are sick and afflicted? Doesn’t God help those who help themselves?

Clearly, there are various things we can do to improve our lot and achieve certain goals in this life. But there are at least three things that we have no innate power to conquer. One is sin. No matter how much work we put into self-improvement, we will remain sinners. That is, we will fall short of the ideal for humanity that God revealed in Christ.

Another thing we cannot conquer by ourselves is death. No matter what medical marvels we come up with, they can only extend life or make it less painful for a period of time. But there is nothing we can do to cancel our date with the grave.

The third thing we have no power to conquer is the devil. There is a malevolent spiritual force that has more strength than we have. This was one significance of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness in last week’s gospel. He won the battle that we cannot win.

The collect says that it is God who sees that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. Often we are not sufficiently aware of our powerlessness because we focus on our temporal accomplishments. But God always sees us and the world in the light of their ultimate destiny. We may see our ability to win battles in time, but God sees our inability to win the ultimate battle.

The collect asks that we may be defended from both outward and inward dangers. We often pray for bodily protection, but the real battle takes place inwardly through the evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul.

It is through our inward struggle that we come to be most in touch with our inability to help ourselves. We may put on the outward appearance of goodness and respectability. We may protect ourselves in various ways from bodily harm. But the inner man is harder to control. For we are subject to thoughts that are malicious or disordered; we are subject to feelings of depression, condemnation and despair.

Demonic activity is most evident in our thoughts. The demons plant seeds of doubt and hopelessness. They take what is good and defile it. They take what is faithful and mock it. They take what is pure and make us cynical about it. And, unaided, we are powerless to do much about it.

Many people today deny there is a devil and that there are demons. This is why many people do not understand evil, either in the world or in their selves. They look for some rational basis for the evil they experience. And there is none. For evil is inherently irrational. Evil is the revenge of wounded pride. It wants to destroy out of malice and spite.

In the Resurrection, one of the main differences will be that the tempter and accuser will be gone. He will no longer be able to influence us. I think we will be amazed when we come to see how much of our struggle was demonic in nature.

In the gospel, the Canaanite woman asked Jesus to help her demonized daughter. She understood what it meant, in the face of her adversary, to have no power of herself to help herself. There was nothing she could do to free her daughter from the affliction.

Jesus said she had “great” faith, a designation she shares in the New Testament with the centurion (cf. Matthew 8:5-13). Both came to Jesus acknowledging that they were powerless to conquer a foe. Both came trusting that Jesus had the power to conquer for them. Both experienced a miracle of healing.

Our faith, if it is to be genuine and great, must likewise acknowledge that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. This does not mean that we aren’t able to tie our shoes or that we have no confidence in the abilities God has given us. It means that we are utterly unable to conquer Satan, sin and death. We need Christ. We need the Son of David to have mercy on us.

Here are the key questions that will determine your own self-sufficiency. Can you atone for your own sins and change yourself so that you will sin no more? Can you wrestle with the devil and win? Can you raise yourself from the dead on the Last Day? If you answered, “Yes,” you can go home now.

But if you understand your powerlessness in the face of these enemies, then you understand why you are here. You understand that you need Jesus, who forgives our sins and sanctifies us; who crushes Satan under our feet; who will raise us from the dead; who does for us, and in us, what we have no power of ourselves to do.