

A Sermon for The Second Sunday In Lent, February 28, 2010

The Rev'd Stephen C. Scarlett

Today's collect begins with the statement: "O God who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves" (BCP 127). Not all would agree with this. Many would protest that they have, in fact, helped themselves a great deal—and this is obviously true on one level. We can work, handle situations and deal with various issues. There are ways that we do have power to help ourselves.

The statement, "We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves" is theological. It means, primarily, that we cannot save ourselves from the influence and consequences of sin. If we take Jesus and all he has done for us out of the picture, we cannot be saved. We cannot be set free from captivity to Satan, sin and death.

Our circumstances in life do not always reflect this spiritual truth. This is why the idea that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves can rub some people the wrong way. When life is going well; when we've got the good job and closed the big deal; when we are in good health and feeling strong, when the portfolio is performing well and the retirement is secure, we may feel that we have plenty of power of ourselves to help ourselves.

But our feelings of self-sufficiency can change quickly with our circumstances. Lately, we have witnessed a few sudden changes in circumstance that highlight the truth that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. When the very ground people walk on starts shaking and buildings begin to crumble, our lack of power is more evident. When the economy hits a recession and money we counted on is gone; when we lose a job and can't find another; when we get sick and cannot find a cure, we come to understand the truth that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.

Consider the follow story told by Jesus:

The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, "What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?" So he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, *and* be merry.'" "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So *is* he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:16-21).

Death reveals to us, all too clearly, that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. Death reminds us that our self-sufficiency—the power we thought we had to help ourselves—was always an illusion.

Today's gospel (Matthew 15:21f.) provides an example of one who understood that she had no power of herself to help herself. For the woman of Canaan, the revelation of her own helplessness came through her child. It is often the case that we learn about our need for God through our children. We may be able to handle our own afflictions with a kind of resignation or resolve, but the afflictions of our children are more difficult, especially for a mother.

The gospel tells us that the woman's daughter was badly "demonized." This means that she was continually harassed by a demon. The woman was powerless in this circumstance. There was nothing she could do to make the demon go away. She knew she needed help and she knew that Jesus could help. She did not merely ask for Jesus to lend a hand. She asked Jesus to save her daughter.

The woman's prayer is one source for the wording of our prayer before communion that we call "The Prayer of Humble Access." Our prayer actually raises the woman's expression of humility a notch. She said that even dogs eat the crumbs, but we say that we are not worthy so much as to even gather these. It's enough to make us downright proud of just how humble we are!

One objection to traditional liturgy is precisely that it is penitential. Modern liturgy tends to be less penitential. As someone recently commented to one of our clergy, "Oh, you are the people who still say that you are "miserable offenders." Perhaps "happy" or "joyful" offenders would be a preferred modern substitute.

We should always bear in mind that liturgy is meant to express the truth about God and us. The prayers of the liturgy do not always express how we actually feel. They express how we ought to feel and how we would feel if we understood the truth. The liturgy trains us to feel the right way by teaching us to pray in accordance with the truth.

The collect says that God sees that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. We may or may not feel powerless, but God's knows and sees that we cannot save ourselves from sin and death—and from the various consequences of living in a fallen world. The truth is that, because of sin, we really aren't worthy even of the crumbs.

Of course, God, in his love and mercy, has prepared much more for us than crumbs. He has prepared for us, as Isaiah says, "A feast of fat things; a feast of wine on the lees" (Isaiah 25:6). But we can only get to that feast by acknowledging our condition. We can only be saved if we will ask God to save us.

Jesus answered the prayer of the woman of Canaan and saved her daughter. He gave this foreigner, not mere crumbs, but the full portion that belongs to the children of God. When the words of the liturgy become the prayer of our heart, God takes us miserable offenders and gives us the medicine of immortality and the bread of life. He takes unworthy sinners and makes us his children and the heirs of his kingdom.

We began Lent on Ash Wednesday with the words, "Remember O Man that dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return." In other words, remember that you have no power of yourself to help yourself because this truth will lead you to Jesus and to Easter. As Jesus said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25).