

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

No power in ourselves to help ourselves...

Each Sunday our worship service includes a prayer called a Collect. That's an old-fashioned term meaning a prayer that collects, gathers up, summarizes the basic theme of everything that follows. The Collect directs our thinking, focuses our minds and hearts on one specific idea, one aspect of the Christian Faith, for our consideration on that particular Sunday. Let's just take a look at today's Collect—the opening prayer that we've already heard, but which certainly bears repeating:

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

I wonder how many of us find it sort of hard to understand this Collect. We who live in a highly developed nation, part of a sophisticated technological world, surely find it odd to be acknowledging that we “have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.” At first hearing, such a statement actually seems blatantly false. I think we have come a long way as human beings toward gaining complete mastery and control over our world. In fact, it's kind of a national mantra that anyone who really applies himself can succeed in life—acquiring all sorts of comfort and conveniences in addition to protecting yourself against anything that might threaten or harm you or your loved ones. It seems that we have a whole lot of power to help ourselves.

So, is the Collect wrong—an outdated prayer that applied only to an earlier day in the history of mankind, a time when we were subject to lack of basic shelter, food, and security? Have we human beings simply through progress and hard work made this prayer quaint and obsolete? Well, though it may superficially seem so, I think the prayer is just as relevant in 2011 as it was when it was written, scholars tell us, somewhere around the 12th Century. Let me tell you why I think that.

Human mastery of those conditions that surround our everyday lives on this planet have certainly progressed enormously over the past 800 years. We have learned how to clothe, feed, and house billions of people, to relieve ourselves from ordinary fears and anxieties about mere survival. Sure, there are lots of places that aren't totally secure and there's a lot of work to be done before every single human being is guaranteed security and safety but our overall record is really pretty impressive. Clearly we have demonstrated that we have a great deal of power to help ourselves.

BUT... what we're talking about here is progress in terms of typical, usual, ordinary circumstances. If the world were a perfectly stable, static environment we know how to cope and even

to thrive. Unfortunately, the world is anything but constant. Every day brings a reminder that we don't have absolute control. Periodically, along come fires, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, or tornadoes to remind us that the extent of our power over the physical, natural world is really rather limited.

The same thing, of course, that characterizes our natural world applies just as dramatically to our personal lives. Periodically, along come things like illness, stock market crashes, sudden unexpected deaths, loss of your job, foreclosure on your mortgage, and automobile accidents. Then, to add to our vulnerability, there are things like stress, anxiety, temptation, fear, and loss of nerve. All in all, life is fairly precarious and, if we're truly honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we need all the help we can get.

The help that we're looking for, I think you'll agree, is not that all our problems and limitations should suddenly disappear. We're not asking for some magic wand to free us from all obstacles and challenges. What we need is help that strengthens us and keeps us going in the midst of our darkest moments. We have resources but we need assurance. Our own power needs to be supplemented and strengthened by something—or someone—completely dependable...or else our courage will falter and our strength will just run out. In short, our Collect for this Third Sunday in Lent summons us to seek the power, the presence, and the pardon of God which, alone, is able to raise us up to new levels of trust and resourcefulness.

Now here's the wonderful Good News: God has shown us in the life and ministry of Jesus that, if we place our faith in his evercaring love, nothing in this world can ultimately threaten us. For, whether we live or whether we die, we are safely within God's hands. Nothing that God has made will ever be lost or wasted. Everything in the whole Creation—including each and every one of us—will be transformed and reunited with our Creator. No matter how bleak or desperate things may seem, even the suffering of perfect innocence in the cruel death of crucifixion, God is able to transform apparent weakness and loss into triumphant victory.

Hurricane Katrina, the Haitian earthquake, and the Japanese Tsunami are terrible reminders that life can be cruel and threatening. In the face of such disasters we may wonder if there is any hope at all. Life may seem precarious and unpredictable. Still, even in the midst of all that death and suffering, individuals somehow rally together and the dark days of sadness and loss somehow turn into days of courage and lifesaving sacrifice pointing us to a far greater level of living through shared compassion—a level of living that is so more than mere survival.

That's the whole message of Lent and Easter. While we may have limited power of our own, we are invited to tap into the greatest store of power that there is or ever shall be. God's power is ours for the asking—today and forevermore.