

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

BCP Communion Second Sunday in Lent 4th March 2007

We tend to quarrel with the premise of today's collect:

‘thou seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves...’

Why! We're helping ourselves all the time – we look after our relationships, our health, our diets, our property, our finances; we improve our minds; we work hard to improve our behaviour. We even try to help ourselves to be better Christians. And Lent could seem to be about that.

Whilst we may not make the mistake of thinking that the proverb, ‘God helps those who help themselves’ is in the Bible, (as Sir Keith Joseph apparently did, when he cited it to a group of schoolchildren as his favourite Biblical quotation), nevertheless, we may, in practical terms, afford the proverb a certain authority. Like St Paul, we don't believe that Christian faith is an excuse for sitting around doing nothing, and failing to earn your own living.

So – how can we piously pray that we recognise that we have no power to help ourselves?

Of course, it's the way the collect goes on which provides the context –

‘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.’

We're acknowledging, of course, that despite all our best efforts, we're vulnerable – and life is uncertain. Even the best healthy-living regime can't preserve us from sickness or accident. And even our most pious exercises cannot preserve us from evil thoughts.

Let's stop for a moment and think about evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul.

We may talk about these things less than about the sins of word and deed. Evil thoughts belong to the inner sanctum. We can keep them hidden from other people's eyes. And, of course, so long as they remain just thoughts, they harm no one – or no one but ourselves. (And many people would challenge even that idea.). But the collect is uncompromising – evil thoughts assault and hurt our souls. And yet, the terrible thing about thought, is that it seems so much

harder to control than words or deeds – and God knows, they're hard enough to get a grip on, sometimes!!

Yet, despite their hiddenness, despite their apparent harmlessness to others, evil thoughts may, in a sense, be more of a matter of shame than even our evil actions. This may be because we feel so helpless about them – if we recognise them for what they are.

Yet, on the other they may not be a matter of shame. We may not recognise them for what they are. They may seem utterly rational and reasonable to us.

Because evil thoughts aren't just about matters such as concupiscence, or cruelty. They're not just temptations to do the wrong thing. They're not even just intrusive speculation about other people – a kind of interior gossip. Nor are they just about evaluating other people in a bad or resentful or unforgiving spirit. I think we can spot all these things for what they are, and bring them to God in our prayer.

But sometimes the evil thoughts which assault and hurt our souls *most* are a matter of how we evaluate ourselves. And the worst thing about it is that we are so convinced of the way we evaluate ourselves. It seems to us, rational. And if our self-evaluation is false – it's harmful.

Inordinate pride might be one form of false self-evaluation – delusions of self importance. But probably much more common is the way in which people disesteem themselves – put themselves down. The way they fail to acknowledge their own value as beloved and unique children of God.

This lack of self-esteem is often taught by the way someone else has treated a person in the past. But when it lodges in the soul, and becomes a foundation of how that person lives and thinks about themselves, we may truly say he or she is under assault from something which does serious harm.

We need defence from such things; we need healing and reassurance of the absolute love and forgiveness of God which is for us. We need the Holy Spirit to lead us into all the truth, when lies and untruths are infecting our minds.

So, it is only right to acknowledge our vulnerability in the inner sanctum. And to accept that evil thoughts of all kinds truly assault and hurt our souls. And it is right and appropriate to bring our thoughts as part of our whole selves to God when we seek his grace, strength, healing and love – as we do here, in this Holy Communion