

Sexagesima 2021 7th February

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Proverbs 8 vv 1-31 p641 Colossians 1 vv 15-20 p1182
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	John 1 vv 1-14 p1063

O LORD God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

If I remember rightly, there were two priests in the film *The Poseidon Adventure*. When the ship turned turtle so that the keel was where the funnel ought to have been, the passengers were trapped at what should have been deck level but was now the deepest part of the ship. The only hope of escape was to climb up the down staircases and to make their way to the bottom of the hull, now the highest part of the ship, and then to find some way to get through the plating out into the open air. It was a daunting prospect, a scant hope, but the only hope.

One priest was a relatively old man. He could see that such a feat was impossible for him and for many of the other older passengers. He doubted that anybody could do it. They would just be risking hurting themselves for no reason if they attempted it. It's a very long time since I saw the film but I have an idea that he thought that there might be some chance of rescue if they stayed put where they were. The younger priest, on the other hand, realised that rescue from outside really was impossible and that their only chance, slight chance that it was, was to climb up to the bottom of the hull, however difficult and dangerous such an attempt would be. I believe that there was a fairly spirited debate. In the end, the passengers and presumably the surviving crew split into two groups. One group would remain where they were. The others would try to reach the bottom of the capsized vessel and escape if at all possible. The older priest elected to remain with the group which stayed where they were and provide pastoral support to them and prayer and the younger priest led the other group's desperate climb to safety.

I'm not sure whether I'm remembering the film correctly, but what I am remembering serves as a useful sermon illustration. There are Christians who are naturally passive. Pray about everything. *Let go and let God.* As the collect says, *we put not our trust in any thing that we do.* They are like the old priest in the film and the people he stayed with. There is a place for Christians like that. Some Christians have a specific vocation to prayer. They may become monks or nuns. The prayers of Christian people are one of the means God uses to bring about His purposes. Even if we do not feel a specific vocation to pray, there may be times in our lives when prayer is our only recourse. We are suffering from a prolonged illness. We've grown frail in old age. We cannot see how we could begin to overcome the problems which confront us. We can always pray. We are supported by the prayers of the Church. We are supported by the prayers of Jesus Himself and of His Holy Spirit. *Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.* (I Peter 5^{6&7}). *Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

But there are other Christians who are more like the young priest in the film. They are always active. They want to get on with doing God's work. They may say, *The Lord helps those who help themselves*, though I don't know where that saying comes from. It certainly isn't in the Bible. They used to talk about a muscular Christianity, faithful Christians who didn't spare themselves in their service to God and humanity. We may think of those Christians who devote themselves to foodbanks and homes for the homeless, to mission at home and abroad, to campaigning for drastic social change in the interests of justice for the poor and oppressed. Some such people seem to be filled with energy, working 25 hours in the day and eight days in the week. There are plenty of people like this in the Bible and in Christian history – faithful servants of God. We might feel exhausted just watching them at work and perhaps feel slightly guilty that we don't do more. If we are the busy type, we might get a bit impatient with the people who spend their time passively in prayer and contemplation. Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr (the C19 American writer) complained, "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good." I've heard people say that monks and nuns who run hospitals and schools are doing something worthwhile with their lives whereas those in contemplative orders who spend their entire time in prayer are wasting the opportunities God has given to them.

You won't be surprised when I say that we need both kinds of people – those who are naturally passive and prayerful, and those who are naturally active. I would say, however, that the naturally active are more at risk of missing the point. As someone who is naturally active himself, I am uncomfortably aware of this truth. In the story of Mary and Martha, it is Mary who sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his word, who is commended for choosing the *one thing needful, the good part*, not Martha, who *was cumbered about much serving* and was cross with Mary for her passivity. In Psalm 46, God says to us through the psalmist, *Be still then, and know that I am God*. Those who achieve great things for God, in the Bible and throughout history, as well as putting enormous effort into doing very many things, also spend time with God in prayer and contemplation. Jesus Himself would retire to lonely places in which He could pray, to talk to His Father (Who is also our Father), as well as walking many miles to preach the Gospel and to perform so many miracles. Even the most active need to take time themselves to be consciously with God and the rest of us support them with our prayers. In fact, we all support one another in our prayers.

Now COVID 19 forces both responses. At one extreme, there are people who are exhausted by all the pressures and tasks that the pandemic has put in their way. At the other extreme, there are many of us who feel impotent. There is nothing or next to nothing we can do. Those in the front line, the key workers, face demands for almost superhuman activity on their part. For many more, there is an enforced passivity. Stay indoors. Keep out of the way. Avoid human contact so far as you can. Don't add to the strain on the NHS. And, of course, there are many of us between these two extremes, doing what we can to help out and live as normally as possible, without spreading the virus. We're all needed – the active and the passive. We all do what we can, but, in the end, *we put not our trust in any thing that we do*. We put our trust in God and He uses what we contribute - from prayer to emptying bedpans, to ringing up a lonely neighbour - in order to accomplish His purposes.