

Lord's prayer 3

Matthew 6:9-13

Luke 11:2-4

Lead us not into temptation

Does God test us by trying to lead us astray? Everything was taken away from Job, but he remained faithful, his sufferings justifying mankind, a foretaste of what the crucifixion and resurrection are all about. Is the prayer saying 'I know I need testing so that my nature can be purified, but when you send them, please don't overestimate my capacity to withstand them.' Paul said: 'God is faithful, and will not let you be tempted beyond his strength.' (1 Corinthians 10:13).

So God is a kind of PE master then: running marathons in the rain may hurt, me boy, but it'll make a man of ye.

The words trial/temptation are not ideal, and 'lead us not into temptation' is poor as translation, because temptation for us tends to mean just a kind of impulse to do unworthy or sinful things. But look at this in the context of Jesus' own day. He often talks of the great time of trial or judgment that is coming. At that time we'll find out what we're really capable of, just as we often say you don't know what someone's made of until they're under pressure. The trouble is, Jesus was wrong. But then again, perhaps he wasn't. All Jesus' teaching has or me a deeply authentic inner psychological meaning. And perhaps all we ask in this bit is, when we come to issues that force us to decide just how much God matters to us, we really have to put our (eternal) life on the line. And God says, *don't assume you know how much you're capable of. Pray that when things get really difficult, you will have the resources to meet it.* So we might pray: *please God, don't push us into the time of crisis before you've made us ready for it. Don't push us until you've given us what we need to face it.* And that's good, because for every one of us there are times when we discover what we're made of and sometimes it's not very pleasant, and we realise we're not up to it. We discover what we're made of when we're up against it.

and deliver us from evil

Is there a kind of force in the universe drawing us towards evil? Is evil:

- simply an absence of God?
- the devil?
- the evil part of us?
- inhumanity?
- separation from God?

God created the cosmos and thought it very good, so did he create evil as well. And if the devil was part of creation, and then fell, what does that say about God? That he's not in control after all, or that he wants to test us (PE master again)?

There is a Jewish tradition that says this part of the equivalent prayer in Judaism is 'deliver us from the evil part of us.' I like that, because it is authentically me. St Paul: the evil that I don't want to do, I do; and the good that I wish to do, I don't. And this brings home the point that every act of evil I do begins as a thought in my head. If I could stop it there, it would be grand. And we can train ourselves to examine all our thoughts before putting them into action. It stifles spontaneity a bit. It dampens the unthinking, automatic response. But maybe this is a good thing. Taking substances dulls our ability to stop automatic responses – legal substances like alcohol and illegal ones like dope, but then perhaps tea does too: I wouldn't know, I drink so much of it.

It probably originally meant save us from the Evil One. Because the time of crisis is when the Devil, the enemy of humanity, is enjoying himself. He's having a wonderful time, because at a time when we are fearful and uncertain, when we are raw inside, and vulnerable to manipulation, that's when all that's most inhuman in us tends to take over, making the most of our weaknesses, irrational fears, unthinking reactions, automatic responses. The devil, then, need not be an external force, but just the forces that result when we panic. The great God Pan, pandemonium.

And we can still quite rightly hope to be delivered from all that. Deliver us from evil: set us free. *Set us free from all those things, the fears, the sins, the selfish habits that keep us prisoner and that make us unable to face crisis.*

Pray that we may be set free from acting unwisely. Pray that we may love those bits of us that lead us astray. Pray that we may love our enemies, our internal enemies, those parts of us that are fearful. Pray that we may love the hell out of ourselves.

And now some reflections on the prayer as a whole

Our father, our bread, forgive us, lead us, deliver us. Not my and me. Community is implied. A fairness of distribution seems to be called for. How do we respond to this today, when even those who consider themselves poor in the west are incomparably rich in comparison to so many? How do we respond to this when some commentators, alarmed by the rise of consumerism in India and China, seem to think it appropriate to stop them having what we have had for over a century? This is another sermon, and possibly not by me since my views are politically incorrect and will offend the trendy middle-classes who go on Climate change walks.

The second word: Father – this is where the prayer is most definitely not Muslim or Jewish: they would never dream of being so familiar with the Divine Spirit. But consider that most wonderful of all the parables, the one that sums up all Christianity: the parable of the gracious father, or the prodigal father, or, if you must, the prodigal son. Is the parable a reflection of God? *You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: so I did sit and eat.* Is the parable a vision of heaven where the returning son decides to accept what is offered and so is in heaven, and the other son, the one who has stayed behind and is the dog-in-the-manger rejects what is offered, so is in hell. *You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: so I did sit and eat.* Perhaps that's what hell is – not a place, but an attitude of mind. Heaven where there is no pride, no stand-offishness; a poetic way of saying that God wants the world to be without pride – the sin that leads to all others. We can all be in heaven, all we have to do is accept what is offered. *You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: so I did sit and eat.*

It's a radical prayer. Every single bit of the Lord's Prayer challenges our assumptions about who we are and who God is and what the world is like. We pray for revolutionary changes in the world we live in. A change to a situation where what God wants will happen, there will be no pride, no arrogance, the hungry will be fed, and forgiveness is the first imperative in all our relationships. That is not the world we inhabit now. What are we going to do about it? In this morning's gospel we heard Jesus say that he comes to shatter complacency.

And finally, how have these three sermons changed me?

I've found them quite difficult, because there's so much to say, and when I sit down to type, I find the motor activity of fingers on keys stimulates my thought processes the more, so I think of more to say. I am, after all, trained as an academic. I've said repeatedly that Jesus' teaching is superbly and supremely psychologically authentic: whatever it means on the surface and in the story, every one of his messages means something striking about the inner personal battle that goes on in our souls. I think the thing that has hit me most, and changed me most is this.

Story about Dublin funeral.

I've said each week whether this is simply an incantation, the mere rehearsal of which will result in magical change in the world, or whether it is a call to private devotion and public action. Surely the latter. We need to do what the prayer says, not just say it. It demands action. If it changes me and you, it is capable of changing the world.

Another Lord's Prayer

Father, we know our dependence on you and the created world.
May your Spirit heal us so we can align our wills with yours us.
Help us through each day with the resources we need, and stop us from over-reaching ourselves.
Help us to forgive those who have wronged us so that we may ourselves be forgiven.
Set us free from the pride, the fears, the selfish habits that keep us prisoner and that make us unable to face crisis and work for your kingdom.

Amen