

## Studies on the Lord's Prayer

### 6. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one...



There are two different wordings of this part of the Lord's Prayer in circulation in Anglican liturgies that we use, or have used, in Saint Andrew's Church. There is the traditional 'Lead us not into temptation', and the more recent 'Bring us not to the time of trial' (which is also how the NRSV, the Bible in our pews, translates it).

Neither of these renderings is entirely satisfactory. Neither captures the full and richer sense of the words that Jesus taught his disciples (and us) to

pray. 'Bring us not to the time of trial' has more than one problem. For a start, the word 'trial' is ambiguous, and I have met people who supposed that this was a plea for God not to 'bring us to trial' – i.e. not to judge us, or bring us to the final judgment of which Scripture speaks elsewhere. Whatever it means, this verse has nothing to do with that. Judgment by God is always a good thing in Scripture, as it entails God

singling out that which is evil and dealing appropriately with it, and affirming and establishing that which is good and can be taken up into his kingdom. So, a prayer that we should avoid being judged by God is

in effect a prayer that we should be left as we are, and avoid the uncomfortable but ultimately joyful consequences of being 'made good' in God's hands.



So what is it, then, that Jesus tells us to pray that we might not be 'led into'? The word behind our English translations is the Greek word *peirasmos*, and while that can certainly be translated as 'trial', it is perhaps more helpfully rendered as 'testing' or 'temptation'. It's another of those biblical words that really means more than one thing at once. And here it suggests both the inward 'temptations' which threaten to draw us away from faithfulness to God, and to seduce us into putting other (temporarily more attractive and alluring) things in that place in our considerations that properly belongs to God alone, and the outward tribulations (and 'trials') of life that test our faith and commitment to God, challenging it, and making it costly and difficult to sustain.

Of course the two things are parts of the same pattern, since temptation generally relates to things outside ourselves, and painful or difficult situations in

life that serve to test our faith do so precisely by ‘tempting’ us to let go of it, or to despair and let go of God. That’s more or less the circumstance that the character Job experiences in the opening chapter or so of the story that bears his name. A



string of almost unthinkable painful events reduce him to a pitiful condition, and he is tempted to curse God and die. His faith is tested to the limits by the things that happen, and by the unhelpful bits of faux-theology offered by his wife and his friends. Inwardly, we need not doubt that letting go of God must present itself as a reasonable response to all

that happens to him. And outwardly, the character of Satan (‘the adversary’) uses cruel and painful events to ‘tempt’ Job in this direction. So, the distinction between tempting and testing isn’t always an easy one to draw, and can never be drawn absolutely. There’s significant crossover between the two.

When we use the word ‘temptation’, we tend mostly to have in mind the seductive allure of some identifiably sinful course of action. Often we have in mind relatively trivial instances, such as when the Rector is tempted to have just one more piece of chocolate cake at the Wednesday fellowship lunch, or to purchase just one more book from Toppings. Doubtless these are indeed temptations, but they’re

probably not the sort or scale of thing that Jesus has in mind. Of course, we can probably all come up with plenty of examples of much more lurid temptations, involving much more colourful and interesting vices that are ever more readily accessible to those with a mind to seek them out and flirt with them. But we need to bear in mind that temptation comes in many different guises, most of which, perhaps, involve what appear outwardly as perfectly good and wholesome things.



This is clear from the incident in the gospels when, immediately after his baptism and his anointing with the Holy Spirit, Jesus finds himself in the wilderness where he is ‘tempted’ or ‘tested’ by the devil. The temptations that beset him and with which he has to struggle are not ones related to a lifestyle of ‘sex and drugs and rock and roll’ (let alone any of the more deviant extremes of these). They are temptations to do things that, in and of themselves, are good enough, and may even seem to be directly and positively related to his calling as the Messiah: to

turn stones into bread (and so feed a world hungry to receive the bread from heaven), to trust God's providence to the point of risking certain death (was he not to do this anyway, in due course?), and to assume Lordship over the



kingdoms of earth (was this not his ultimate calling, for which he had just been baptized?). And notice that the devil provides careful Scriptural warrant for each of these mission-shaped strategies! So, seemingly good and biblically-based things (church activities and projects) can become and be the source of temptation, if we deal with them in the wrong way. And the wrong way is any way that means that God is not first and foremost in our consideration. Whenever our priorities are lodged elsewhere than in God himself ("All these I

will give you, if you fall down and worship me." Matt. 4:10) anything and everything can be the cause of our stumbling and our falling away from our heavenly Father. That's why Jesus' temptation ends with his reminding Satan that 'it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him!"' (Matt. 4.12).

Not everyone is tempted by the same things of course. And what may be a relatively minor temptation for one person may be a huge test of resolve and a serious threat to spiritual well-being for another. The allure of a glass of wine with dinner is one thing

to the person who has given up alcohol for Lent, and something much more sinister and formidable to the recovering alcoholic. And while many of us are likely to live our lives relatively unscathed by the temptations which great power and influence



bring in their wake, others will have to wrestle with them daily in order to avoid the abuses which always begin with small things, but which escalate and gradually corrupt and twist until the web of abuse and deception is all but impossible to escape from. But, whether they are small things or large, personal or public, religious or secular, the things that tempt us succeed only when we succumb to them and they manage to get themselves in between us and God. That's what temptation does. It offers us things which, by our grasping and giving way to them, move us further away from our heavenly Father. And sooner or later, if we don't tackle these things and bring them to him for his judgment



and remedy, the gap grows and grows and we find ourselves in the grip of things decidedly ungodly, and God himself seems remote from us and even threatening to the ways in which we are choosing to live our lives.

Temptation, of course, is the price of freedom, and freedom is part of the package of our humanity. It is something God factored in when he created us, and without it we should not be able to love him and serve him. Love and service that are merely mechanical, 'programmed in' rather than freely chosen are not, after all, *real* love and service at all. So, being tempted is part and parcel of what it means to live humanly in the world as the sorts of creatures God has made us to be.

But, doesn't the wording of the prayer we are considering suggest something else, something more worrying? Doesn't 'Lead us not into temptation' suggest



that *God himself* tempts us, that he himself is the source of the things which threaten (and sometimes manage) to derail us and cause us to fall? Taken at face value, that's what the words seem to say. And wasn't Jesus led out into the desert *by God's Spirit* so that he would be tempted?

Here, I think, it's important to be absolutely clear. The God of whom the Bible speaks is from first to last a God

whose character is wholly good and whose disposition towards the world he has made is wholly good. So, although he is the one who created all things, evil is something that he did *not* create, and to which he is wholly and implacably opposed. The fourth century African theologian Augustine of Hippo therefore famously described evil as a twisted distortion or an absence of the quality of goodness with which God

originally endowed his creation. Whether we take that line, or think of it in some other way, the key thing is to acknowledge that evil is God's opposite, and the antithesis to his good purposes for creation, and not something God himself would or could ever seek to seduce us into in order to secure his purposes. Of course, as

the one who created the world with all its possibilities, and who rules over it, God *permits* evil to exist, and *permits* us to be tempted. But that is a very different matter.

Evil is a privation or corruption that exists in something that was originally good and perfect.  
- Augustine



So, against any suggestion that God might be the source of temptation, the apostle James writes quite emphatically: 'No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one' (Jas. 1.13). It is even possible that James wrote this precisely to refute misunderstandings of "Lead us not into temptation...". We don't know. Going back to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness for a moment, it is, of course, true that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted; but he was tempted not by God, but by the devil. In other words, whatever else we may wish to say about the figure of the devil here and elsewhere, his role in this story is precisely to make it clear that where temptation to evil is concerned there are forces at work that are wholly opposed to God and God's kingdom. God himself tempts no one. (More about the devil anon.)

God does, though, test us. Scripture is equally clear about this. So, for example, 1 Peter 1.6-7 speaks of believers having to suffer 'various trials' in order that the genuineness of their faith might be tested. And, of course, while God does not



himself tempt us, his permitting us to *be* tempted may also serve as an occasion for him to test our faith and commitment.

Again, if we think back to the story of Job, this is precisely what happens. It is Satan who tempts; but God allows it in order that Job's faithfulness may be proven.

It's a story, and marked by the lack of theological sophistication and fine-tuning that stories often demand. If anything, God comes across looking a bit cavalier, and the enormities of suffering that he allows to be perpetrated on Job hardly seem worth the bag. Nonetheless, the main point comes across. It is not God himself who tempts anyone; but in the midst of our temptation (precisely by *permitting* it) he may in effect be testing us, and anxious to see how we will respond. And how we come through the test may be vital to our spiritual growth and development. Of course, we shouldn't think of God simply stepping back and letting the deluge of tempting and testing loose, to see whether we will survive! On the contrary, the apostle Paul insists that, while God may test us, he 'is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it' (1 Cor. 10.13).

So, what are we to make, then, of the phrase 'Lead us not into...'? If 'temptation' is involved, then it seems needless, since God would never *tempt* anyone. But if 'testing' is the relevant word, then *should* we actually pray *not* to be tested, if we are told that God often works by testing us, and thereby strengthens and develops our faith and our devotion to him? It seems that we stuck either way!

Once again, the answer may lie in the way that the Jewish language (lying behind both the New Testament's Greek and our subsequent English translation)

typically puts things. An evening prayer used by Jews in Jesus' day (which he may well have known) runs as follows:

*Lead me not into the power of transgression,  
And bring me not into the power of sin,  
And not into the power of iniquity,  
And not into the power of temptation,  
And not into the power of anything shameful.*

The parallels with our petition from the Lord's Prayer here are obvious. And two things are worth noting in particular: First, in this prayer (and we should almost certainly read Jesus' words in the same way) it is not just 'temptation' as a notional or potential threat to our faithfulness to God, but the *power* of temptation—that is to say, actually *succumbing* or giving in to temptation—that is in view. And secondly (and most importantly!) the verbs translated as 'lead me' and 'bring me' are what grammarians call 'causitive' forms, which means that in good English they should actually be translated 'do not permit me to be led', 'do not permit me to be brought', and so on. So, what this prayer (and Jesus' abbreviated version of it) actually does is ask God to *preserve us* from being sucked in by the power of temptation, of sin, of anything shameful. When times of testing come, precisely what we want is God's aid in standing firm, and not giving way to evil courses of action. So, in Mark 14.38 and the extreme test of the

Garden of Gethsemane (when the temptation to abandon him would finally win them all over), Jesus urges his disciples in similar vein:



A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is.... A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in.

(C. S. Lewis)

'Keep awake, and pray that you may not come into temptation'—i.e., into its seductive grip, because, he continues, 'your spirit is willing, but your flesh is weak'. Again, it is for victory over the power of temptation. that God will not permit them to be overcome by it, that Jesus teaches them to pray.

The Bible more widely envisages God's promised kingdom and new creation as being presaged by a season of prolonged struggle and suffering and testing, a battle with the forces of evil which, although the fatal blow has already been struck against them by Jesus' life, death and resurrection, continue to wreak havoc for now, wounded and dying, but in their impressive death throes still capable of spoiling and desecrating and corrupting the good things that God has made.

This theme of the struggle with and against evil is very evident in the gospels, which is precisely why, of course, Jesus, in the very moment that he has been anointed with the Holy Spirit for his task, is driven out to do battle with the devil.

The game is now on, and the stakes are high ones. His initial victory in the wilderness is only the beginning, and his whole ministry is one in which he encounters and has to deal with the forces of evil and death and darkness and the mess they make of human lives. The pitch builds and builds, until finally the battle comes to a head in his 'triumphal' entry to Jerusalem where the forces of injustice and bigotry and violence and betrayal and cruelty (not evil spirits now,



but human beings securely held in the grip of evil) drive him to the cross—the sign of the accursed—and place him in the hands of the power of death in a bid to be rid of him once and for all. But by dying to sin, and being raised to life by his Father, Jesus defeated evil and broke its hold over us. That's the good news of the gospel, rooted in the death

and resurrection of Christ. So, Paul says, 'you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6.11).

But, until the end, when God will roll human history up and bring it to a fitting close, transforming the cosmos into an environment fit for our dwelling together with him, evil still mars and damages us and the world in which we live. And, for whatever reason, for the time being God permits it to do so. The victory is assured, the kingdom is coming, but the battles and skirmishes continue. And those who identify themselves with the coming kingdom, those who pray 'hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth' are natural and inevitable targets for its continuing attacks. Don't be surprised, Jesus tells them, when suffering comes, when testing comes, when temptation comes. These are the things by which evil still seeks to derail God's kingdom. They cannot succeed in doing so; but they can succeed in disabling the *agents* of the coming kingdom, injuring and putting out of commission those who are devoted to its coming and seek to make it real in the world's midst. God has promised to sustain you through all that—so pray, 'let us not be drawn into temptation's power, but deliver us from the schemes and the seductive draw of evil in our lives. So, we can see that the two parts of today's petition interpret one another: they say the same thing from different vantage points.

But that's not quite all. Because although it's not a healthy subject to dwell on, we need to say a bit more about evil. The force of what Jesus actually says in this second part of the petition, and the way in which the Bible depicts evil more widely, is too easily softened and domesticated, especially by the well-educated, reasonably intelligent citizens of the modern world. And that means you and me.

'Deliver us from evil' sounds fairly innocuous, as though evil were some sort of abstraction, conveniently summed up under a concept. But evil is not like that at all. Not if we take the Bible's account of it seriously. Evil is something obnoxious, pernicious, malevolent, and extremely dangerous. It seeks to ensnare us, draws us in and corrupts us. It is a force rather than an idea, something powerful, and



something wholly opposed to God's goodness and the goodness of his creation; and it is determined to spoil that creation, to see it ruined, to do all within its power to turn the best of what God has made into something made instead in its own image, and so damn it.

It's hard to talk about evil seriously (rather than dismissing it as something relatively trivial, easily explained in human terms, and finally soluble by us all trying a bit harder, or handing it over to the scientists for genetic modification) without doing so as though it were personal, something with an agency, something that acts upon us and schemes against us and against God. Because that's how evil does behave; and if we prefer to suppose it to be an impersonal force, we should at least concede that its behavior is at times rather like a personal one. That's why the Bible often personifies it, and encourages us to do the same. And what Jesus actually says in Matthew 6.13 is not 'deliver us from evil', but 'rescue us from the evil one'.

We've already met the figure of Satan ('the adversary') and the devil in the story of Job, and in the gospel account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Does this mean that, as intelligent people who know all about evolution and DNA and



Freud, we are asked to believe in the existence such a figure?

Well, let's clear some silliness out of the way first. In dismissing the idea that the devil is real rather than 'make-believe' (to be put in the same category as fairies and Santa Claus), people generally appeal to the more colourful excesses of the medieval imagination in its visual

depiction of the devil—'old Nick', complete with horns, cloven hooves, a trident, and a strong whiff of sulphur aftershave. All that, it is maintained, is just so much superstitious nonsense, and belief in it unworthy of enlightened individuals nowadays. But to dismiss the possibility that evil may exist in something like a personal form on those grounds is just as childish as continuing to hold to such pictures and to allow them to populate our nightmares. In principle, I can see no reason whatever why a God who created intelligences like our own may not have created personal intelligences of another, higher order altogether; and no reason why, if intelligences like our own are capable of falling not just into error, but into the mire of morally and spiritually depraved behaviours that we know ourselves to be capable of, something analogous may not have happened to other creatures too. I'm not for a moment suggesting that this is necessarily so. All I'm saying is that to dismiss such a claim as evidence of an intellectually deficient



outlook, or as naïve, or superstitious, is in fact to be in danger of being hoist on one's own petard.

What we can say with certainty is that the Bible, and Jesus himself, encourage us to suppose that picturing the force of Evil *as if* it were a personal adversary to be feared and resisted is not a bad or an unhelpful way of picturing and dealing with it. Perhaps 'evil' is in reality an impersonal force or vortex of forces; forces of destruction and malevolence that cause chaos and suck us into their force fields, generating desires and behaviours that we are forced to label not just immoral or unjust or 'bad', but 'evil'—something bigger, darker, more sinister than the sum of our own negative



impulses. Something that does not arise within us (though it finds purchase easily enough within us), but assails us from beyond ourselves, and in the face of which, left to ourselves, we are finally helpless and find ourselves quickly enslaved. Scripture is full of such imagery; and while its typical account of human beings is far from sanguine (as we find them, they are basically inclined to do bad rather than good), it nowhere demonizes them or makes them the source of evil. So, approaching the problem of evil with psychoanalysis or psychotherapy, while certainly not irrelevant, is nonetheless like meeting the Atlantic with a mop. Evil is a potent force, wholly opposed to God's good creation, constantly attacking it, and attacking us, and only God can enable us to withstand its assaults.



So, is 'Satan' (simply Hebrew for 'the adversary' or 'the tempter') 'real'? I don't know, and frankly it doesn't seem to me to make an iota of difference to anything! In many ways it's the wrong question. Evil is real, and evil behaves in ways that are often most helpfully pictured and responded to *as if it were* a malicious adversary, forever looking for (and finding) opportunities to draw us into its sphere of influence, wanting us to serve it rather than God, and capable

of disguising itself in all sorts of seemingly innocuous, attractive and intellectually respectable forms. If you tell me that *in reality* it is a force, or a system of forces, or an impersonal organic thing eating away like rust or decay at the moral and spiritual order of God's world, I'm happy enough. But if you tell me evil is just the sum of our individual misguided human intentions, misdeeds and

fallings short, then I am bound to suggest that, measured by the way Jesus speaks and acts, you may be failing to take its reality sufficiently seriously and, ironically, by virtue of such naivety probably already well within the circle of its encroachment and its sphere of influence. Because perhaps that is evil's surest triumph, when people cease any longer to recognize its reality and its potency, and so leave themselves unguarded, wholly vulnerable to its advances.

Jesus calls his disciples (and us) not to slip into any such complacency, and not to be under any illusions about the danger and the potency of evil. And yet he also tells us that we need not take evil *too* seriously, allowing its presence to dictate the day to day living of our lives, let alone slipping into the sort of unhealthy paranoia that sees evil lurking behind every bush. Don't underestimate it, he suggests. But don't forget, either, that I have defeated it, and that if you are in me and I in you, you need have no final fear of it. It has no legitimate hold over you any more, and my Father will preserve you from its attacks. So, pray like this, he tells them: 'Our Father in heaven ... let us not succumb to the power of temptation, but rescue us from the wiles of the evil one'.

Questions for reflection and/or discussion:

What is the difference between being tempted and being tested?

How has your faith been challenged and either grown or suffered setbacks as a result of temptation or testing?

What things do you typically think of as 'evil', as distinct from just 'bad' or 'sinful'? Why?

How should we respond if we feel 'out of our depth' or tested beyond our means?