

Deliver us from Evil

Series: Teach us to Pray

Date: 7 June 2020, Trinity

Location: St George's Online

Texts: Ephesians 6:10-20; Matthew 4:1-11

When I was in my final year of school we studied the poet T.S. Eliot. One of his poems is called *The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. It's a poem about an old man reflecting on his life. One of the lines has always stuck in my mind:

*There will be time, there will be time
to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.*

This is true to our experience of life. The face we present to others is not all of who we are. Even people who are an open book have hidden pages. How much do we really know of others? How much do you really know of yourself?

This is the last in our series on the Lord's Prayer. We've seen that in prayer we're invited to come into the very presence of God because through Jesus we are adopted as God's children. Jesus teaches us first to lift our eyes to God: to seek his glory, his kingdom, and his will. These prayers reorient our hearts and place God on the throne. Only then do we come to ourselves and ask for our physical and spiritual needs - our daily bread and the forgiveness of sins.

Today we come to the final petition - *lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*. This prayer points us to two truths: that life is fragile and under threat; and that we must pay attention to our inner world.

Before we come to those let me address the elephant in the room. Why, in contemporary Anglican services, has *Lead us not into temptation* been changed to *Save us from the time of trial*? Which is it? Of all the petitions in the Lord's prayer *save us from the time of trial* seems the most relevant in a time of global pandemic! The word for *trial* and the word for *temptation* are the same in the Greek. Trial suggests an external threat, whereas temptation suggests a more subtle psychological challenge. Translating the phrase as "save us from the time of trial" highlights our need for God's protection in all circumstances against whatever threats come our way.

In his commentary on the Lord's Prayer the 16th century theologian John Calvin puts things helpfully. Temptations come to us from the right and from the left. From the right are, "riches, power, and honours" which blind us by their seeming goodness and tempt us to forget God. From the left come "poverty, disgrace, contempt, and afflictions".¹ These tempt us to despair, to lose hope and become estranged from God

¹ *Institutes* III.xx.46

in anger. The external circumstances of both prosperity and adversity bring with them their own temptations.

Calvin points to our “inordinate desires”. This is what the apostle John calls “the lusts of the flesh and the eyes, and the pride of life”.² What is meant by these is when our natural and good human desires go into overdrive. We don’t want the gifts of God’s creation in their right place. We want them too much. We want them more than God. And we’re not prepared to listen when God tells us how to enjoy them. External trials of circumstances become temptations because they pull on those deep desires of our hearts.

That is why this prayer is an invitation for us to examine our inner life, our desires and motivations, our hearts. We do so from the safety of being loved children of God. We’re accepted by God because of the forgiveness Jesus’ death brings, not because we’ve got everything sorted on the outside let alone on the inside. So in prayer we can examine our hearts before God, and ask him by the power of the Holy Spirit to reorder our desires so they may align with his will.

On the other hand “Lead us not into temptation” raises the question – is this normally what God is in the business of doing – leading people into temptation? But James 1.13 says that God doesn’t tempt anyone. Taken with the second half of the petition, *deliver us from evil*, this brings us to another spiritual reality: we face danger not only within, but out there. In Ephesians 6:12 we read,

our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Jesus himself spoke of the devil as a murderer, the father of lies, who wants to kill and destroy,³ the Satan or Accuser, the strong man whom he had come to bind up to free those held in his power.⁴ We tend to ignore the spiritual world in Western culture. Other cultures are much more familiar with it. The danger is that we ignore it or we think it’s safe to play around with. The truth, at least according to Jesus, is that the spiritual world is real. There is a great enemy, the Evil One and his forces, who are opposed to God and would entice and deceive and enslave and ultimately destroy us.

But Christ has come to destroy the devil’s work and free us from his power. In Hebrews we read,

since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is,

² 1 John 2.16

³ John 8.44, 10.10

⁴ Mark 3.23-27

the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.⁵

The cross is Jesus' great victory over Satan and the powers of darkness. And yet, while we wait for that day, we face the trials of suffering and difficulty. The devil still prowls like a lion looking for someone to devour, to use the apostle Peter's phrase. This is a normal part of life.

No temptation has seized you except that which is common to man. [Paul writes] And God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. He will always provide a way out.⁶

Jesus shows us how we can face trials of life and the temptations they bring. Hebrews 4.15 says,

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet he did not sin.

In the wilderness, Jesus answered each temptation of the devil by quoting Scripture. The Word of God is the sword we wield to strike back at our accuser. The first temptation, "turn these stones into bread" is a temptation to use his power for his own good, to satisfy his own desires, rather than in the service of God. But Jesus instead trusts that God will provide for his deepest needs, and so all his needs. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

In the second temptation, as Matthew records it, Satan seeks to beat Jesus at his own game. He asks Jesus to make a great leap of faith.

"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:
 " 'He will command his angels concerning you,
 and they will lift you up in their hands,
 so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' "

This is the temptation of religion: to make God serve you through your own piety, to make him subject to the greatness of your own faith. But Jesus instead responds with humility and obedience. "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

The third temptation is a challenge to Jesus' identity and calling. He is the Messiah, God's chosen king, whose calling is to rule over all kingdoms of the earth. But his crown is a crown of thorns. It is only through obedience and suffering that he will be exalted in glory. Satan offers him the easy path - "All this I will give, if you will bow down and worship me." Again Jesus answers with Scripture: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.' "

⁵ Hebrews 2.14

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:13

In both prosperity and especially trials we too are tempted not to trust God and to manipulate him and put him to the test. We too are tempted to choose the easy path and avoid the road of suffering. But Jesus has gone before us. He intercedes on our behalf at the Father's right hand. We pray *lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil* to ask for his help and the power of the Holy Spirit to follow his example and walk the way of the cross. As we do that, we will shine like stars in the night sky. And we remember Jesus' words, surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Morning Collect for Grace

Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God,
we thank you for bringing us safely to this day:
keep us by your mighty power,
and grant that we fall into no sin,
neither run into any kind of danger;
but lead and govern us in all things,
that we may always do what is righteous in your sight;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**