

11th Sunday after Pentecost – **August 16, 2009**

Luke 11: 1-4; James 1: 12-18; 2 Thessalonians 3: 1-5; Jude 1: 24-25

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

*Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged: take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness: take it to the Lord in prayer.*

This is what has been running through my head all week – *have we trials and temptations*. The answer of course is that we do – each one of us – have trials and temptations. Some of them seem minor and frivolous – I can be tempted to sleep an extra half an hour when I know I should get up and start my day. I can find it a trial to deal with the extended health care insurance people when they get picky and petty about their rules. But these are not true trials or temptations are they? When we pray, *lead us not into temptation or do not bring us to the time of trial*, I think something more significant is being addressed.

This petition brings us near the end of the Lord's Prayer. It is the third of a triad of petitions which encompass our basic needs as human beings: physical (daily bread), spiritual (forgiveness) and moral (resisting evil). The petition has two parts – *lead us not into temptation – deliver us from evil*. Some of the difficulties with this can be observed when we look at various translations: "Save us from the time of trial," "Deliver us from the evil one," "Don't let us yield to temptation," and so on.

In the first part of the petition we need to deal with the Greek word variously translated as *temptation, trial, ordeal, and test*. We also need to see that sometimes the translation asks that we not be *led to* temptation, sometimes it is that we *not yield to or be subjected to* temptation, and sometimes it is that we be *saved from* temptation. The word in question has three main ideas: proving or testing the quality of a person or thing; putting a person in a situation which is a test and involves the possibility of failure; and the deliberate invitation or seduction to sin. According to William Barclay, the word which comes nearest to containing all these ideas is the word *trial* and this is the word more commonly used in several translations including our pew Bibles – the New Revised Standard Version – which translates the phrase as, *do no bring us to the time of trial*.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? In response we can say three things about the Christian understanding of *temptation*: it is universal and inescapable – a reality of the human condition; it is not outside the plan and purpose of God – God can use it to make life as God intends; there is always an element of probation in it – it is a seduction to sin and a test of our resistance. The very fact that we pray this petition acknowledges our awareness that we cannot deal with the trials and temptations of life by ourselves but that divine intervention is needed.

This petition of the Lord's Prayer brings us face to face with the problem of evil in the world. Are we praying for God to not bring us to the test? Our world is full of tests and examinations. Are we asking here for an easy way out? Or is this a prayer for God to not tempt us to do evil things?

Surely God would never tempt us to do evil. It just doesn't fit with what we know of God or what the scripture tells us. The thought that God might deliberately lead us into temptation is perverse. God's plans and purposes for us are that we should be holy as God is holy. However the pathway to holiness does not involve immunity from trials and temptations – in fact it is often through exposure to such things that we grow in faith. The passage from James is clear: *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.* I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation, The Message: *Don't let anyone under pressure to give in to evil say, "God is trying to trip me up." God is impervious to evil, and puts evil in no one's way. The temptation to give in to evil comes from us and only us. We have no one to blame but the leering, seducing flare-up of our own lust.*

Perhaps we need first to understand Jesus' teaching within his own context – one which often turns back to this idea that a great time of trial is coming. A time when we shall 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. We're coming towards a time when you really have to decide how much God matters to you; you really have to put your life on the line.

And Jesus says to us; don't assume you know the answer to that sort of question. Don't assume you know how much you're capable of. Pray that when the time of trial comes, when things get really difficult, you will have the resource to meet it.

Now the words "lead us not into temptation" don't quite capture all of that because temptation for us tends to mean just a sort of impulse to do unworthy or sinful things.

But as we have already discussed the word means so much more in this context – we know that temptation must come, that trials will come, but when that happens we pray not to be abandoned; not to be delivered helpless into its power. We pray not to be exempt from trials and temptations but that God's sacred presence will stand by us and give us help when the time comes.

What we are praying for here is that we will not collapse in the trials and travails of life. That we will not drown in an ocean of obscure existence. That we will not crumble under the weight of our daily burdens of family and work – that we will not be destroyed in the fiery crucible of living, but will be purified and strengthened. *Do not bring us to the time of trial. Lead us not into temptation.*

But deliver us from evil. Again, there is some ambiguity – the phrase is not even included in the version of the prayer as told in the gospel of Luke. In Matthew our translation says: *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.* The phrase can mean either, deliver us from the evil one or deliver us from the power of evil.

This is our great human need – to be delivered from the brokenness and disappointments of life, and to make it successfully to the other side of the abyss. Our catechism tells us that as we pray this petition *we confess our weakness and inability to withstand the*

onslaughts of "the world, the flesh and the devil", and we ask that God will protect us in times of great trial and strengthen us so that we may be able to stand firm. We also ask that God will deliver us from the power and tyranny of evil.

Generally speaking in our post-modern thinking we tend to dismiss the notion of a personified evil as superstitious – as a remnant of an ancient worldview we no longer share. We should not restrict our understanding of the evil one to just a personal threat. Consider what Paul calls the "powers and principalities" – those organized, pervasive cultural forces – including "the economy", "nationhood" and "race" – that rage against God's desire. Most of us probably don't believe in the devil as an embodied force but view evil as a terrible energy to be reckoned with. Certainly we would dispute images of a guy in a red suit with horns and a pointed tail!

But no matter how you slice it, the Lord's Prayer acknowledges our human predicament: evil is present in our world. Whether or not we believe in a personal devil, the idea that the principle or the power of evil comes in to make the most of our weakness and our fear is very real. And we can still quite rightly pray to be delivered from that. Evil is with us in this age of the risen Christ. Evil is here. There is no escaping it. There is no removing it. There is no overcoming it. Our only hope is for God to deliver us from it – for God to save us – for God to set us free. For God to free us from all those things – the fears, the sins, the selfish habits – that keep us prisoner and that make us unable to face the trials of life.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?

Yes, we have trials and temptations – sometimes it seems that trouble is not just anywhere but everywhere – in all times and places.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encourages the believers to pray that they might be rescued from wicked and evil people. He reminds them that the Lord is faithful and will protect them from the evil one.

Have we trials and temptations?

Sure, we have trials and temptations – lots of them and they come in every conceivable form. However we need never be discouraged because we can take our concerns to God in prayer. **Amen.**