

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

With these words Jesus closes this model prayer. The doxology was added later by the church. Easter will tell us why. But it is with these words that we rise from our knees and go out to meet the world: "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil". They are the bridge between the sanctuary and the world, the daily round.

"lead us not into temptation". Some people find this objectionable. As if God would lead us to temptation. The clause leaves the picture of us going out into the world . . . a world made even more perilous than it is by a series of snares and traps of temptation . . . all of them cunningly set so that we are almost sure to fall victim of sin. "Lead us" . . . if you have a temper problem, he's planning to bring the most infuriating people to you today; if you tend to overeat, he has prompted someone to offer you the most stupendous banquet . . . etc. If you are a gossip, he's prepared some of the choicest material you've ever run across. So this clause seems to suggest that we are begging God not to set these traps for us . . . not to lead us into tempting situation.

If that is your picture it is better not to pray this prayer. I don't think for a moment that God is a divine seducer. Probably the words as we have them are misleading. "Leading" here does not suggest enticing or entrapment; and

"temptation" is a word we associate with an almost irresistible impulse. But we can get rid of any lingering notion of God setting traps for us by turning to the explicit statement made by one of Christ's apostles. James says "If a man is tempted by . . . testing, he must not say "This temptation comes from God". For God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one". (James 1:13)

What, then, is meant by these words? Well, the NEB offers us light: "Do not bring us to the test". We all know there are experiences in life which are tests or trials to our Christian character. I am not thinking now of the kind of temptations to indulge in our favorite sins but of the crippling blows that come to us from time to time . . . major disappointment, and accident, bereavement. It was toward such a test that Jesus moved when he road into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He knew that trial lay ahead. But he also knew that, in one way or another, it was a supreme test for those who cheered and shouted; for the religious establishment which wathced ominously from a distance; for the military authorities who were on the alert; for Pilate who would soon be confronted with a prisoner; and, in excruciating ways, for the apostles. I doubt if we can ever fully understand the words: "Lead us not into temptation" until we let the word grow into the dimensions of the passion story, and have realized the immensity of the trial, the fearful testing, that comes when

concentrated evil is let loose upon the soul and spirit.

But some will object perhaps, because they know, and rightfully so that trials are often good for us?. and they suggest that maybe we ought not to pray to be sheltered from everything that tempts our faith. There is a tendency, at least at a surface level, to be ashamed of the element in our religion that implies shelter. Some of us don't really want to be tucked up securely, and rolled away in some religious blanket until the storm has passed.

But there is truth behind the idea of shelter. Otherwise generations of Christian experience have been wrong. As I have said before this is a very realistic prayer. Our Lord knows what is in man. He knows what we are made of. He knows that testing and trial can be good for us. But he also knows there are limits to our capacity to endure, dangers that can be too much for us at our present level of faith. So he teaches us to pray to be spared of them. He seems to say, "If you are going to be my disciple you will have trials to test your faith. Don't go looking for more. There are dangers enough around the corner. Pray that you will be spared the one for which you are ill-prepared".

The truth is, of course, that we are more frail and vulnerable than we realize. You remember what Jesus said to Peter just before his arrest and trial? "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not". And Peter was bold enough to answer:

"Lord, I am ready to go with you, both into prison, and to death". But we know what happened before the dawn had fully broekn. Peter is like us . . he failed to realize the power of evil . . and the proportions of our testing.

Actually, it is not because of weakness and shrinking, that we should ask for shelter and rescue . . it is just common sense. If we fully realize the power of evil, then we know that there is nothing soft or superfluous about this request to be kept from temptation and delivered from evil. There is an old military axiom; "Never underestimate the pwoer of the enemy". And what we are really praying as we cross the bridge from the inner boom of prayer to the traffic of the modern world is: "Keep me from the tests that might be too much for me; but if they come, then deliver me from evil".

We need this prayer in a thousand situation, . ranging from the trivial to the terrible.

Suppose you, at times, have an irritable disposition and are apt to snap at someone who annoys you. Let's say that you work in an office where you have close contact with several others. One of them gets on your nerves by making the same remark at the same time and in the same tone of ~~voice~~ voice each day. Maybe you ought to close your prayers some gloomy morning with: "Don't let him say it this morning; it would be too much for me - but if he does, let me keep my temper"

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Or suppose you have a serious alcohol problem. One of first principles of The AA is to admit your inability to control the craving by your own strength. That's exactly what Christ teaches us about our weaknesses in the face of every kind of evil. Every day you know that situations will arise when temptation will rush you like an overwhelming power. You have no confidence that you can cope with it no matter how severe the test. So there is no more real and heartfelt prayer than this: "Lord, don't let me get into the situation of horrible temptation - but if the test should come, then give me your rescuing power".

We may pretend to be superior to our Christian ancestors who had many risks and dangers surrounding them . . . hunger, deprivation, hostile governments, etc. But we have drawn a curtain of sophistication over the mortal dangers around us still - the accident, the lethal germ, the horror of war. Is there no meaning for us in the prayer when it says; "Lord, shelter us; spare us from disaster, but if it should strike ~~spare us~~ come to our rescue" "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" /

Perhaps our problem is that we don't believe that God can deliver us from the extremities of life. According to the words and action of Christ himself we must set no limits on the rescuing power of God. The intruding powers of the king-

dom are held back only by our lack of faith. His will for health of body and soul is only frustrated by the power of evil. Christ calls for a greater confidence in the healing grace of God. But he also speaks of the preservation of that inward self, that which we call the soul. This is ultimately what matters. Sooner or later the body must perish. It is this true self that he is able to deliver, no matter what catastrophes may befall.

The ultimate catastrophe is the loss of the soul. Here we come to the center of this prayer. . . and it contains a truth so profound that we can only guess at the meaning it contained for him . . . especially on that day when he rode into the city where the powers of evil were massed for his destruction. What he was facing that day for us was the ultimate trial of the soul -- the test that meant the unleashing of the full force of evil.

As the cheering of the crowds echoed in his ears that day he knew that the die was already cast. But the trial of Jesus was as nothing compared to the trial that was on between light and darkness, hate and love, hope and despair. All that happened during holy week was Jesus living out his own prayer. Holy week was the final test when the skies of evil opened and the cosmic storm broke upon him with final fury. But even in this ultimate and final test, he knew that God was there to deliver him.

This is why he said to his disciples in the garden: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation". It was this test he had in mind . . . the ultimate assault of evil on the soul of man. And he knew that neither these disciples, not you and I, are capable of withstanding such a storm. But - and this is the inner meaning of Holy Week - we need never pass in our mortal eakness into the place where God seems absent and where evil is rampant. He rode into the valley of desolation, not as a knight in shining armor, but as a lowly, innocent one . . . borne by a donkey to an ignominious death.

He was in truth enountered by danger, brought to the final test. And when the deed was done and the skies had cleared, he emerged the victor. He was delivered from evil. His disciples then knew, as we have known since, that the awful test was over . . . that no one need again descend into hell. Thus we look back to a lonely figure who rode into Jerusalem and we know that he is indeed King of kings, Lord of lords, the supreme deliverer from evil.

So the prayer, as our Lord have it, comes to an end. We rise from our knees each day to meet the world as it comes, with the words "Deliver us from evil" not as a faint and feeble hope, but as the confident conviction of those who know thw victory is won. We can make our won the words of Martin Luther who wrote in another age of change and danger: Did we in our own strength confide,/ Our striving would be losing,/ Were not the right man on our side,/ The man of God's own choosing:/ Dost ask who that may be?/ Christ Jesus it is he;/ Lord Sabaoth, his name,/ From age to age the same,/ And he must win the battle.