

THE LORD'S PRAYER: A PATTERN FOR LIFE

V. "A TIME OF HARD TESTING"

April 5, 2020

*This sermon would have been preached
on April 5, 2020 – Palm Sunday in Holy Week*

The Sermon:

Perhaps you know this hymn:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And guard us through all ills in this world, till the next!

Martin Rinkart wrote these words. He was a Lutheran pastor who came in 1617 to Eilenburg, Saxony Germany, at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War.

As affirming as the hymn is, it was not written at a happy time. The city of Eilenburg was walled; it became a refuge for fugitives from the war. Overcrowding made the city an incubator for plague and famine. In 1637, during the most severe plague, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in the town. He conducted as many as 50 funerals in a day, more than 4000 funerals in that year, including that of his wife. During the whole epidemic some 8,000 persons died.

You can see why I thought of this hymn. Think of the pictures of Italy that we see today. It leads us to the question: How can we praise God in times of overwhelming despair?

II.

At the start of Lent, we began the Lord's Prayer with pure adoration and the glory of the Kingdom of God. It seems we are now ending in a most nitty-gritty fashion.

We have come to a world which is clearly not the Kingdom we just prayed for. We move into a world where people starve, where it is not easy to steer a clear course through temptations, trials, dangers, minor irritations, and all the overwhelming evils which beset us.

So the part of the prayer which brings us to our feet is: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

III.

At this point, people become uncomfortable with this prayer. David Reed suggest some see this as a picture of God "who knows exactly where our weak points are, and is preparing a compelling series of traps set just for us."

These traps are cleverly arranged for us to fall into our most compelling sin.

- If you loose your temper easily, God is planning to run the most infuriating people across your path.
- If you are terribly overweight, God has prompted someone to offer you a most stupendous banquet.
- If you are inclined to drink to excess, God is going to have the best stuff right under your nose.
- If you tend to gossip, God has prepared some irresistible material.
- If you slip easily into dishonesties, God is waiting with some subtle suggestions on your income tax."

Incredible as it may seem, some people actually think this part of the prayer means: "Please don't do it God! Don't set all those tempting traps for me! Don't lead me into temptation!"

IV.

In very fact, we have here is a classic example of a very poor translation; one that has created a great deal of misunderstanding.

Today's English Version translates this passage:

"Do not bring us to hard testing,
but keep us safe from the Evil One."

The New English Bible suggests:

"Do not bring us to the test."

And the New Revised Standard Version:

"Do not bring us to the time of trial."

What do these translations tell us?

We know there are experiences in our life which will test and try us, which will bend and almost break our Christian character.

I'm not talking about the minor temptations. I am thinking about those crippling blows which strike us down at any time - a sudden death, a deep and stunning disappointment, a disastrous accident.

Here again is the rugged realism of Jesus. He knows what is in us. He knows the stuff you and I are made of.

"He knows that testing and trial are a part of life, woven right into the warp and woof of life's fabric."

And Jesus also knows how fragile we are. Jesus knows that our capacity is limited: there are dangers too much for us at our present level of faith.

So in this great prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray that we might be spared from them. He seems to say,

"If you are to be my disciple, you'll have trials enough to test your faith, so don't go looking for more. There are dangers enough around the corner, so pray that you will be spared from those for which you are not prepared."

This part of the Lord's Prayer speaks to that experience; perhaps more common than we would like to admit.

And so we pray: "Keep me from tests and trials that might be too much for us; but if they do come, then deliver me from the evil of turning my back on the Kingdom."

V.

My friends, we need this kind of prayer in so many situations.

Suppose, for instance, you have a touchy disposition - it doesn't take much for you to snap at people who say the wrong thing or get on your nerves. And after your sharp words are out and can't be called back, you feel miserable. Now a colleague at your office, or your neighbor, has a way of saying things which sparks you into a flame.

I can see you saying:

"Don't let him say it this morning - it would be just too much; but if he does, then, O God, help me to keep my temper."

Do you see...?

Do not bring us to the test, but deliver us from evil."

Or suppose you are an alcoholic, or on your way to becoming an alcoholic, or maybe drugs are your hang-up. One of the first principles of Alcoholics Anonymous and all drug treatment programs, is that you admit your inability to control your desires with your own strength. Every day, you know this temptation will arise and rush over you with overwhelming power, and you have no real assurance you will meet the test.

And so, I can see you praying:

"Lord, don't let me get into this situation of terrible temptation -- but if the test should come, then grant me your rescuing power."

Do you see...?

Do not bring us to the test, but if it should come, then deliver us from evil.

In a world where we are not imprisoned for our beliefs, and where Bibles can be found in every hotel room for the taking, we simply forget how important God is in daily life, and Christ becomes a stranger to us.

That's the casual temptation, as opposed to the formal temptation. Nothing big. Just not making the effort. Not taking it seriously, falling away. The sort of thing that catches us before we know it.

If that is the form of your temptation, remember the words of Jesus:

"Do not bring me to the test, but if it should come, deliver me from the evil of turning my back on the Kingdom while believing all the time that I am a part of it."

VI.

This portion of our Lord's Prayer is an affirmation for me:

- that God is not out to "tempt us," nor does God wish to swamp our little boats;
- that God is not the "bad cop" lying in wait for us on the freeway of life,
- that God is not waiting for us to enter a "speed trap" so God can write a ticket.

This is just not God's way.

Just the same, we know there will be times in life when the winds blow and waves are high, and the boat of our life is in great danger.

It is as the hymn that began this sermon says:

“And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And guard us through all ills in this world, till the next!”

It is then that we pray, as Jesus taught us,
"Do not bring us to the time of trial,
but if it should come, then deliver us from evil."

