

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 7, 2010
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
“The Lord’s Prayer - Part III
“Temptation vs. Trial, and The Evil One”

This is the third of a four part series of sermons which explore the prayer which, according to Biblical tradition, was given to us by Jesus himself. It is known to us as “The Lord’s Prayer.” Today we will continue to look at the changes suggested in the new version of the prayer as it is printed in our Prayer Book.

First we learned that the Lord’s Prayer is intended as a proper preparation for our worship and for regular prayer in our daily lives. It is a “model” prayer, intended to *get us started* on the right path as we develop our individual prayer lives. It was given in direct response to a question asked by one of the disciples who said, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Jesus replied with a prayer that contains, in general terms, everything that we need to pray to God.

Then we learned that change is natural - it is a part of our lives and our language, including our prayer language. Elizabethan English just won’t do anymore, because the everyday meaning of our words has changed, even though the intent remains the same. Indeed, change affects all of our religious life. Harvey and Lois Seifort underline that fact in their book *A Liberation of Life* when they point out that “No matter how far we have moved in the Christian life, we can still know that every opinion we hold and every act we perform is something less than the best. We never have the Holy Spirit in our pockets, completely domesticated and supporting everything we are doing. Any such sanctifying of present imperfections is an obstacle to further growth. Instead of clutching fiercely to my foibles and fallacies, I had better cultivate the ability to change my mind, my political opinions, and my lifestyle when it becomes clear that this is the will of God.”

Is changing our prayer language the “will of God?” I remember someone who once said, “I can handle the new prayer book OK, but I sure hope they don’t force me to use that new Lord’s Prayer!” Believe it or not these words were uttered some twenty-five years ago not by a lay person but by a priest of the church, who was fresh out of seminary, knew *everything* there was to know about liturgy, and who was even rumored to sleep in clerical pajamas! He now stands before you somewhat older, if not wiser, and readily admits that if our interpretation of the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer is true, then the answer is , “Yes, changing our prayer language *is* the will of God.” It would only make sense, since God in the form of his son gave us the “model” prayer in the first place.

But sometimes the will of God is hard to understand, and the phrase “lead us not into temptation” is one of those times. I mean, we all understand the word “temptation,” don’t we? Surely everyone would admit to having been tempted at one time or another? Even the deaf community, whom we mentioned last time, has a concrete understanding of temptation. Their sign for it is a tugging of the sleeve at your elbow, indicating the devil trying to pull you away, or astray, from your intended path. Temptation is the “a-tempt” to make you do what you know is wrong. Lord, do not lead us into temptation.

But wait a minute! Is it the Lord who leads us into temptation? The next phrase would indicate not: “but deliver us from evil.” In the Greek, tou ponhrou (too ponaroo) means “The Evil One”, or “the presence of evil.” Call it whatever you want, the Lord’s Prayer asks God to deliver us, deliver in the sense of rescue [rusai (hrusai)], from the power of this evil force. In other words, it is too much and we need to be saved from it.

But what is it from which we need to be saved? From temptation? No, that’s too simple. We can easily overcome many temptations by our own power. For example, we can easily push ourselves away from the temptation to overeat and overdrink - well, most of the time, anyway! No, it’s much more than that! It’s almost as if we need to be saved from a place or situation in which we will be tested to the utmost. So let us return to the previous phrase and see what it really means.

“Lead us not into temptation.” The word “lead” comes from a Greek verb eisagw (eisago), and it means “lead” in the sense of “to bring to a place.” The word “temptation” comes from the Greek verb piraw (pirao), originally a legal term which means to tempt in the sense of “to put on trial.” A literal translation would then sound like this: “Do not bring us to any place where we will be on trial, but save us from the presence of evil.” Do not let us be led to any place where this “devil”, this Satan, can challenge our integrity, as if we were “on trial.” Suddenly, what seemed like a wholesale change makes a little bit of sense. In fact, it makes a lot of sense. The phrase “Save us from the time of trial” isn’t so “far out” after all!

But is it the will of God? I can’t answer that. But I can say it is the will of “the church” and it is a far more accurate translation of the original prayer spoken by Jesus, than the one we normally use. Bishop Weinhauer (who preceded Bishop Johnson) was fond of pointing out that “In the Episcopal Church we do some things because we are the church of the whole.” By this he meant that we do things “in community” as opposed to “individually.” Prayer is one of those areas. We do not exclude individual prayer, by any means, but when together we most often pray “in common.” In the Episcopal Church we also interpret the Bible in a similar fashion. This does not exclude individual inspiration, but it assures accurate translation. Thus the understanding of this phrase of the Lord’s Prayer is the work of many rather than the one. “Save us from the time of trial” is an example of the church’s attempt to better understand the will of God in its prayer life.

The decision to use or not to use this new version of the Lord’s Prayer exclusively will probably be made by “the church” at some time in the future. But for now, we have a choice. Personally, I prefer the new one. I use it in my daily prayers. I would urge you to do the same on a trial basis. I would urge you to pray about it!

Meanwhile we will conclude our series next week with a sermon entitled, “The End of it All!”