

***Save Us in (from) the Time of Trial***  
***Lead us not into Temptation***  
**An Address by Dr Noel C Schultz, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2006**  
**Highfield Road Uniting Church.**

I am sure that you have shared the horror, outrage and profound sadness that I felt as we watched news clips of homes reduced to rubble, ambulances bombed, children maimed, terrified citizens hiding for weeks in underground car parks and hundreds of thousands forced to flee as Israel, with the connivance of the USA retaliates for the capture of two Israeli soldiers. Our own government has remained strangely silent, apart from claiming the greatest number of evacuees in our history. In the midst of the horror, outrage and profound sadness at what nations once again are doing to one another, I came to deeper understanding of what our Lord may have meant when he taught his disciples to pray “Save us from (in) the time of trial”.

When bombs and rockets began to fall on homes and roads on both sides of the Lebanon-Israeli border, many would have prayed in their own way “Save us from this time of trial and destruction”; as devastation and violence intensified and more defenceless women and children became trapped in the war zone, their prayer undoubtedly would have been “Save us in this time of trial and death”.

I cannot be sure what Jesus precisely meant when he taught his disciples to pray this petition. The words he used were clear enough ‘Do not bring us into temptation or trial’. But the meaning was seen as a theological conundrum. For centuries Christians have struggled with the thought of how God could lead people into trials. The recently agreed version of the Lord’s Prayer now in use in most if not all churches has cut the Gordian knot by its interpretation ‘Save us from the time of trial’. Some 30 years ago when churches first used the new version of the Lord’s Prayer instead of the ‘from’ they used ‘in’. “Save us in the time of trial.”

My personal preference is for this version, for the simple reason that I believe times of trial and testing are inevitable, and it would seem to be unreasonable and unnatural to expect that we can go through life safely cocooned away from the trials, temptations and spiritual, physical and emotional struggles that are common to the rest of humanity. So I prefer to pray ‘Save us in, rather than from, the time of trials’.

I readily admit, however, that there are occasions when both prepositions are appropriate as I indicated at the beginning of this address. There are times when we can see ahead horrendous, cataclysmic dangers and disasters and so it would be appropriate then to pray ‘Save us from this coming time of trial’. A good example of this from New Testament days was the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 a.d., about the time that Luke’s gospel was written. In Luke (21:20ff) our Lord gives an earnest warning to his hearers to get away from the city when the Roman armies begin to lay siege; he described with utmost realism what the destructive outcome would be. I have no doubt that people then would have recalled this prayer, ‘Save us from and in this time of trail’ as they fled to the hills to escape Rome’s violent end to their temple, city and thousands of its people.

In praying “Save us in or from this time of trial” we are not disowning our own responsibility to take action to avert disaster or to survive times of trials. To give an obvious example – if warned that an earthquake will cause a tsunami, it would be silly and counter-productive to remain on the beach and pray, ‘Save us from and in this time of trail’, when it is still possible to escape to higher ground. Christ obviously expected his followers to heed his warning and get far away from Jerusalem when the siege began and not foolishly wait around to be slaughtered, while praying ‘Save us in this time of trial’.

If a person drinks excessively and then drives at high speed, one cannot expect the prayer ‘Save us from this time of trial’ to miraculously prevent the drunken driver crashing into a tree or another vehicle. As with all the other petitions of the Lord’s Prayer we have to take responsibility for ourselves. To needlessly place ourselves in unnecessary danger and expect divine intervention is to make a mockery of prayer.

You will appreciate that so far I have been trying to give a reasonable explanation of the prayer “Save us from the time of trial”. Although this modern interpretation of the prayer makes good sense, I don’t believe it has done full justice to the original prayer as Jesus taught it, “Lead us not into temptation”. So in the time remaining let me suggest a couple clues that might help us to understand his actual words.

2

The prayer as Jesus spoke it came out of the life and faith of our Lord and the early church. Jewish Christians were not strangers to temptation. Their literature contains numerous examples of people being tempted and

tempting others, of God being tempted by people and even of God tempting people. It may be helpful to peel away some of these layers in respect to temptation to arrive a possible meaning for us.

The earliest characters in the biblical record, Adam and Eve, are presented with the choice of using their freedom responsibly or irresponsibly. Their story of being led along by temptation is the story we have repeated time and again. Thus James wrote ‘We are tempted by our own desires, being lured and enticed by them’ (1:14).

We heard earlier in the service the story of Abraham being tested to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22). There are various levels of meaning in the story, but this much is obvious – Abraham was challenged to trust God’s promise that he would be the father of a mighty nation even when the basis of his hope, (his son), was seemingly lost to him through death. Here was time of great testing for Abraham, as it was for the character, Job, in that great philosophical drama of the same name.

The intensity of their struggles is highlighted by the way these stories involve God in their choices. There are people today who facing great losses or terrible dilemmas see the situation before them, not as chance happenings, but like Abraham and the writer of Job, as God presenting them with choices and options. In such circumstances, the prayer, “Lead us not into temptation” becomes an earnest plea for strength and wisdom to choose wisely. These are not “Mickey Mouse” trials that people face, but fundamental to who and what we are. The consequences if the wrong decision is made are too frightening to contemplate. So to pray at such time, as I am sure we all have done, “Lead us not into temptation” or “Save us in this time to trial” might be paraphrased like this, “Lead us, Father, in this time of special difficulty that we do not give way to temptation and get caught in the web of temptation’s powerful influence and thus choose a way which is harmful and destructive to ourselves and others.”

There is yet one other example that should be considered. It is the word of Jesus in the Gethsemane “Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation” (Mark 14:38). The verbs, ‘enter’ and ‘lead’, though different, suggest spatially coming into or being brought into the area or sphere of temptation. Thus we might put it this way, “Lead us, Father, that we don’t get caught up in the sphere of temptation”.

Implicit in what I have been saying is that we are responsible for the decisions and choices we make. In many of them there are strong possibilities to sin, to unbelief, to unfaithfulness, to neglect of duty, and failure to show love, kindness and forgiveness. In confronting these difficult choices in life, we need all the strength, wisdom, insight and determination that it is possible for us to have. Thus it is necessary that we pray for insight and discernment that we do not foolishly and thoughtlessly get caught up in the sphere of temptation when it can be avoided. We ask God to lead us in a different direction. What that is, is stated in the final petition, 'but deliver us from evil'.