

But Deliver Us from Evil

An Address by the Rev Dr Noel C. Schultz

The Lord's Prayer, like every other prayer, is a statement of faith. As we say the familiar words of this prayer, we are stating important things that we believe about God, about the world, and about ourselves.

We begin by saying that we believe God to be approachable, loving and willing to help, and thus, with confidence, we address God as 'Our Father'. The three petitions 'Hallowed be thy name, your kingdom come, and your will be done' are saying more about this transcendent God, God's involvement in our world and our commitment to be partners with God in hallowing God's name, helping his kingdom to come and in the doing of his will.

From the lofty grandeur of those three petitions (which I suspect are often said like a formula that has been learned by heart, without being sure what it means), we come to the central petition which is for daily bread. Here we state our dependence on God for the things necessary for life and well-being. In the fifth petition we confess our faith in the God who forgives sins, and implore his grace so that we might also forgive; in the sixth petition we acknowledge the limitations we have in being able to choose the right way. Finally, we come to the petition which is also a faith statement: 'Deliver us from evil'.

It doesn't need much faith to speak of the reality of evil in our world, but this prayer also expresses a strong Christian hope, in the face of evil. And that does call for great faith.

Whether we say 'Deliver us from evil' or 'from the evil one' doesn't make much difference. In both instances the prayer is affirming the reality of evil in God's world and from that evil we are asking God for deliverance.

I am well aware that to speak about the reality of evil in the world causes some people to switch off, because it is regarded as being unduly negative and pessimistic about life. Many of us have lived through decades where, in spite of widespread disarray in society, massacres, racial riots, wars and acts of terrorism, and other man-made tragedies and disasters, there has been a continuing naive optimism about life

and the world. The church, in its many branches, has been under intense pressure to conform to this unrealistic positivism which has been a fundamental credo of some powerful voices in theology, psychology, socialism and literature.

To suggest some caution when human nature and the world are viewed with such optimism has meant being rubbished as being too negative or defeatist or lacking faith. A few years ago Reinhold Niebuhr in his book Children of Light and Children of Darkness pointed out that unrealistic optimism so often leads to tragic disillusionment, as yesterday's revolutionaries becomes tomorrow's tyrants.

In the Lord's Prayer the theology is not one of naive optimism, but rather that of truthful realism. It would have us recognise that there is nothing surprising about the violence, greed, injustice and abuse of power that we constantly observe in human society.

Of course, and thank God for this, there is also compassion, striving for justice, honesty, integrity, fidelity and a host of other good and positive things happening around us. But whatever progress we make in our personal lives or that is made collectively by the church and the community at large, we'll never reach the stage where there is no need to pray, 'Deliver us from evil'; we never reach the stage where evil is mastered, that it is a problem which we have solved.

The evil that we pray we might be delivered from can be as broad or as specific as we wish. There are the obvious evils which many find most oppressive - like poverty, intense anxiety and fear, injustice and tyranny; there is a whole world of other experiences and circumstances which can be a source of great temptation to us; events and experiences that push our life-off centre, that destabilise us and that distort our perspective on life. Things that are good in themselves can become harmful and evil to us.

Leonardo Boff, the liberation theologian from Mexico that I have quoted previously, makes the point that evil has never been experienced in a vague, abstract way, nor have grace and goodness. We are always dealing with concrete situations, whether favorable or unfavourable, with constructive or destructive forces in human relationships. He goes on to say that what prevents people from entering the kingdom and experiencing the transcendent meaning of life is not so much the obvious things identified in much of Jesus' teaching as wealth, lusting for power and

glory, self-centredness, an exaggerated, sterile piety and such like. No, he claims, the principal cause of the world's ills is to be found in our insensitivity, our lack of solidarity with the oppressed and afflicted, in a word, our lack of love.

In praying 'Deliver us from evil' we are committing ourselves to resist the wrong that arises within our own hearts, and at the same time we are committing ourselves to continue the struggle against evil in the myriad forms by which it enslaves, degrades, and oppresses people.

We participate in this struggle with strong hope, not because human nature is always sweetness and light. but because of the one who taught us to pray 'Deliver us from evil'.

There is a strong tradition in the church from its very beginnings that deliverance from evil was achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In one of the most stirring of Easter hymns we sing *Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.* We pray this prayer in the power of that victory, on the basis of our Lord's triumph over death and all the powers of evil.

In the Greek word for 'deliver' there is the picture of a person being snatched away from the brink of an abyss, or of being protected from the traps that lie along the path that is being taken. The old picture of life as a pilgrimage where dangers of every kind are experienced - ambushes, yawning abysses, traps laid by enemies, dead-end streets and such like- is both picturesque and apt.

Note too that it is not an individual journey: 'Deliver us from evil' is the cry; not just me, but us. The hope which we have in our God is not just for me alone but for us, for all humanity, even for the whole creation (Rom. 8). There is partnership in prayer with all who are troubled and in danger along the way. The cries of the sick, the homeless, the victims of war, and the dying in Angola, Lebanon, Iraq and Canterbury are joined with our prayers on their behalf.

We dare never give up our hope in God for deliverance from evil. In spite of the evidence of eyes, we believe that this is still God's world and God is working mightily through humankind to bring deliverance to people facing evil in its many forms. Thus we struggle on in hope. Instead of becoming pessimistic and despair of the world and the church, we might follow the advice of Luther, who had a none too

optimistic view of human nature. Don't despair, he said, go out and plant an apple tree! Well, some time back, I planted two!

On this note of confident hope I want to conclude these addresses on Our Father. Fittingly, the early church added a doxology, a sentence of praise, to conclude the prayer. "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen." This too is a statement of faith. The doxology highlights both our need and our certainty that these prayers will be heard and answered by our God. Why do we have such faith? The doxology, added by the early church, fittingly declares "For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen". Yes indeed, Amen - it shall be so.