

## LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL

R. H. J. STEUART, S.J.

**T**HE next clause in the 'Our Father' that presents itself is 'Lead us not into temptation'. The beginning of the 'Our Father' is a prayer, not so much that his will might be done directly as that we may really and truly wish it to be done. I ask to be enlightened, that my will may be strengthened, that I may always want to do 'Your will'; I want it as perfectly as I know I shall want it in heaven.

From 'Give us this day our daily bread' onwards, we pray for protection from sin, from the danger of falling away from God. We are so liable to be drawn away by the fascination of trivialities. I ought to want even to deprive myself of perfectly innocent pleasures in this world if thereby God's Will be better done. And I want, too, to be protected from falling into sin. Why is it that we ask, 'Forgive us our trespasses'? Why is it that we make that petition? Because we are aware that since sin came into the world it has spread itself all over the world. As God saw the world he saw that it was good; it is an utterance of himself, and any man not seeing this is absolutely inexcusable. The world was good and was meant to be good, but through that thing which you would think was impossible, sin, the goodness of the world has been perverted, distorted; just as a razor or knife may be perfect, and may yet on account of its keenness be misused, so all the beauties, marvels of the world may be lethal weapons if misused. Sin is, in a way, the misuse of what is good.

St John says: 'If any man thinks he is without sin the same deceiveth himself and the truth is not in him'. The sense of sin is one of the greatest forces of sanctification. Why are we sceptical about saints who said they were sinners when they had attained a heroic degree of sanctity? Was it a pose, a mistake, that made them say: 'If only the world knew what I am *really* it would stamp me in the mud?'

The saints knew that even the highest human perfection is tainted with sin, just because we are in a world filled with sin.

What is sin? Sin is idolatry—the substitution as the object of my will of something which is not God. ‘Why did you do that?—Because it appealed to me. Did you know that doing it meant thrusting the will of God aside—at least for the time being?’ That is the main difference between mortal sin and venial sin. In mortal sin I deliberately turn aside from God altogether for the sake of the gratification of the thing I want to do. In venial sin it is not so much that I substitute something for God as that I want it with him. The average man will say: ‘I will not do anything that will make me lose God, but I do want a lot of things besides God so long as I don’t lose him’. But the saint says: ‘I don’t want anything at all besides God’. ‘What have I in heaven and besides thee what do I desire upon earth?’ Every time I sin, to the extent to which it was a deliberate sin, the whole world is the worse for it; moreover, it is a matter which has been proved over and over again, that constant giving way to sin produces a general deterioration in one’s will towards God. That is why reasonably frequent confession is such a healthy thing, because it is a sort of divine check on that deterioration.

Our Lord’s dealing with the Syrophenician woman teaches us that we are to go to him with our petitions, as a child to a father. Ask what you like, but always ask with submission to God’s Will. Let it be a childlike appeal to a Father: ‘Don’t let me do things that displease and hurt You—don’t let me get into bad ways—don’t let me be led into temptation’. The time comes in the life of a sinner when self-indulgence is so great that he cannot stop; ‘Don’t let me get like that, Father’.

This last part of the *Our Father* ought to come very close home to us. We are prone to choose sin; we are prone to choose evil; silly, nasty things even, instead of God. But I don’t want to do anything which is evil before God. I am sorry for all those things that have been done; that even in a small detail I have preferred something to God: ‘Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall’. And I pray

(as he wants me to pray) that God in his mercy will not allow too great a strain to come upon my will, and that he will protect me from evil and the Evil One. *Ne permittas me separare a te.*

So I implore God not to put too great a strain on me: not to let me get into too difficult a situation. I know that God is merciful and loving; he won't let the situation be too much for me. That is why I say: 'Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil', or, as some translations have it, 'from the Evil One'.

However modern we are, it won't do to forget there is an Evil One. It is not as if two gods, a good and an evil, were contesting for me. No, the devil is a creature as I am, but one entirely perverted to evil, and moreover with powers of expressing himself and various activities in comparison with which ours are like the physical strength of a baby as against a boxer. What chance has a man got against a tiger?

Yet I don't want you to think of the devil as a gigantic monster prowling round, but as a personal force directed to my harm and nothing else. On the other hand, don't let us attribute omnipotence to the devil. The devil cannot read our minds; but still he is an extremely dangerous adversary, more dangerous than our own concupiscence. A subtle, entirely spiritual enemy, almost, it seems to us, unlimited in power, a force directed to my destruction. Well, now, is not that 'deliver us from evil' absolutely necessary? What can I do about it? O God, protect me from this army directed against me. From this thing that 'walketh in darkness, and the horror of the night and the arrow that flieth by day'. And the answer? 'He has given his angels charge over thee lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.'