

Parish Eucharist, 22nd March 2015, 5th Sunday in Lent

'Lead us not into temptation'

The sins I am most interested in are the sins we commit together. Oh my. What is the curate going to say this time? Well in what will be a disappointment to some of you and a relief to a great many more this sermon is not really about sex. The church has, I think, for far too long fixated on what it perceives to be sexual sin and said far too little about the pervasive nature of sin more generally. So in my contribution to this sermon series on the Lord's Prayer I hope to somewhat redress this imbalance.

What do we mean when we pray 'Lead us not into temptation'? The first thing to recognise is the nature of the 'us'. The entire Lord's Prayer is a communal prayer. Whilst we sometime pray it alone we still recognise that this is the common family prayer that links us to Christians throughout the world and down the ages. We don't pray the Lord's Prayer as atomised individuals who just happen to be sharing the same form of prayer as a number of others. The entire prayer is a recognition that we have been bound into one collective body, the church, which is the body of Christ.

Lead us not into temptation. What might we be tempted to do? Well any number of things but the basic temptation, the basic sin, is following our own will instead of the will of God. And what does God will for us and for creation? God wills life. Life in abundance. Life in abundance together. Our collective sins are a sadness, both to us and to God, because they hold us back from life in abundance together that God intends for us.

Individualism is a root cause of sin; following my will, doing what good for me with little or no regard for other people or God. The technical theological term for this (don't think that because it's not the Vicar preaching you will avoid Latin this morning) is *Incarvatus in se*; being turned in upon oneself. Individualism has in our society become so normal and acceptable that it is now held up as a virtue. Responsibility to family and neighbours and community come second to personal advancement and 'self-help'. And individualism is incompatible with the Christian faith because at its heart it is a denial that God created us to be communal creatures in relationships with each other and with Him.

Some people, some of the time, undoubtedly go out and do wicked things for their own benefit in the full knowledge of how their actions will harm others. But many many sins, most sins, are not like this. Most sins are boring. Little things that are so small that they seem almost inconsequential. Little things that everyone around us also do and which are seen as perfectly normal and acceptable. Little things that we could do but don't and little things that we shouldn't do but do. But these normal little things that we all do combine into rather bigger things. These shape the context of our families and communities and country where we do our living together. And our lives are the poorer because of them.

As we look upon the world around us and see its needs and its poverty it is easy to imagine it's not our fault. And as individuals it's not really. The things we personally have done to contribute to the world's ills are in the scheme of things tiny. But collectively we are responsible. Things we have collectively done, the aggregation of all humanity's tiny sins cause this context. The misery we observe is a result of human sin. And deep down we know it's not just other people's sin but that our own little contributions have in part caused this.

The complex nature of our collective complicity through sin in the ills of the world make it very easy for us to be tempted to absolve ourselves from responsibility to put these ills right. We are tempted to think of them as sad but fundamental someone else's problem. It's easy to close our eyes and our ears and our hearts to the ill we see.

But it's not all doom and gloom. For the good that we do also aggregates in the same way. The little acts of kindness and compassion and community spiritedness that we do as individuals build with similar good acts of those around us. Good acts normalise being good both for us and for those we encounter. Virtue is built not only as individuals but, more importantly as community. Just as we cannot imagine the outcomes of our combined little sins so too can we not imagine the outcomes of our little acts of good. Our little offering of ourselves in this way should not be discounted, for God promises to bless them and multiply them in ways we will probably never know. Lead us not into the temptation of thinking what we do, both for good and ill, does not matter.

As we enter the season of Passiontide we remember again Christ setting his face towards Jerusalem and the Cross. Christ is sinless in that he is perfectly obedient to the will of the Father, who wills that through the Cross the powers of evil and sin be defeated. We through our baptism are bound to Christ to share in his death and resurrection, to share in his battle against and his victory over sin.

We are tempted, just as Christ was, to shy away from this collective struggle. We are tempted to turn in on ourselves and follow our own will. We are tempted to think of ourselves either as powerless individuals who have no ability to battle against sin, or worse as powerful individuals who will avoid the effects of the world's ills through our own strength but will leave others to fend for themselves. We are not mere individuals. We are part of the body of Christ. For good or ill our small actions make a difference to the health and life of this body and the world.

When we pray 'lead us not into temptation' it is not a prayer that God might ensure that we are never put into a situation where we might have the possibility of committing sin. It is instead a prayer that when faced with a world that needs us to act to oppose sin and evil that we may be strengthened to do what our Christian calling demands of us. It is a prayer asking for God's strength and comfort through the Spirit to allow us to be brave when we are tempted to be fearful little individuals, run away from our calling and turn in on ourselves. It is a prayer that God may help us to remember that we are not isolated individuals but persons in community.

The sins I am most interested in are the sins we commit together. The good I am most interested in is the good we do together. May we not be tempted to forget or ignore that we are all bound together with a purpose into the body of Christ.

Amen