



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

The Lord's Prayer

Readings: Genesis 18: 20-32, Ps 137, Colossians 2: 12-14, Luke 11: 1-13

Few things are more precious to the believer than the Lord's Prayer. Prayer is our lifeline to God. It is both the avenue and the context of our being and our destiny. It is the central clearing house of our communication with our origin and our end. It is the primary conduit of God's mercy to His people.

If this is true of our ordinary prayer, it is even more so of our liturgical prayer which encompasses the revelation of the Word. Paramount in all this is the Paternoster because it is given to us by Christ Himself, the ultimate communication between and reconciliation of God and Man. In its astonishing brevity and amazing comprehensiveness it establishes the pattern of prayer for Man in all eternity. 'Lord teach us how to pray.....Our Father.'

It follows then that when attempts are made to tinker with the eternal template, even for the most noble of reasons, there is both anxiety and alarm. Given all that is going on in the world and the Church it was no surprise to me to find extraordinary numbers of ordinary faithful people exercised about the rumours of changes to the Lord's Prayer.

A couple of facts: The changes, signed off by Pope Francis, apply to the Italian church who have retranslated parts of their liturgy in the vernacular. They do not apply to England.

The line that has been changed is 'Lead us not into temptation'. It now reads 'Do not abandon us to temptation'.

A few reflections.....

First, as a former Anglican, I have been down this path before. In the eighties there was an attempt to re-translate the Lord's Prayer. Key elements were to say 'Forgive us our sins...' and 'Do not bring us to the time of trial'.

There were problems with this. Apart from interfering with the historic cadences, it made no better a translation than the eccentric use of the English term 'trespass'. Pastorally, of course, it was a disaster. The phrases that were on the lips of the living and, more importantly, the dying – whose final participation in earthly prayer is this prayer – were suddenly unhoused and re-ordered. It did not catch on and most of Anglicanism reverted to the original English translation. In short it did not work.

There is a case for the re-translation of 'Forgive us our trespasses' because, as the Latin Paternoster rightly translates the original Greek it is about being forgiven the 'debts' we owe one another. Hence Christ's most terrifying parable about the forgiven but unforgiving debtor. The word trespass reminds us of the English obsession with property rights but, in using it, we know perfectly well what we mean. Trespassing is

crossing boundaries, invading territory, misbehaving in other people's backyard. We understand.

The business of leading into temptation is another matter. The Anglican rewrite said, 'Do not bring us to the time of trial.' Italian Catholics are now being asked to pray, 'Do not abandon us to temptation'.

The reasoning behind it is that God would not lead us into temptation. It is, according to the Italian bishops, the human being who falls and the loving father helps him get up again. Why it should seem more attractive to imagine that God would abandon us is a mystery. Besides, it seems to me to miss the point of the original.

Temptation is not sin. There is no argument that the word Jesus uses is 'temptation'. The word used for 'Lead us not' is literally, 'Do not import us'.

In the original Lord's Prayer God is seen as an active player rather than a passive nurse who sweeps up after the nursery food fight.

Are there then Scriptural instances of God actively putting us in temptation's way?

Well you might say that the Garden of Eden was a starter. 'You can eat the fruit of any tree but that one.' Imagine saying that to a child.

Tempting or what? A test of obedience man tragically failed.

The Garden of Gethsemane: 'Let this cup pass from me.... But not my will but thine.' Temptation overcome and an obedience with massive consequence.

Abraham called to sacrifice Isaac? A terrifying story of extreme loyalty.

Peter challenged in the courtyard of the High Priest denying Christ?

Peter on the Galilee shoreline restored and committing himself to the Risen Lord?

Elijah depressed and lonely, tempted to give up after all his struggles?

Job wasted by Satan to prove that he was faithful? 'Curse God and die', was the advice. He didn't.

God leads His people, inevitably, into places where temptation threatens. The Scripture is full of places where the patriarchs, prophets, disciples and leaders of the people are put in the way of temptation. It is where the spiritual battle rages. It is where the victory is won.

Of course we are right (Jesus said so) to pray that God will not lead us into temptation BUT when He does, for the sake of the Kingdom, we are also right (Jesus affirms) to pray to be delivered from evil.

Deliverance is another word for victory and freedom.

We are the front line troops of the Kingdom.

We would be astonished if God never put us in the hottest spots.

We would equally astonished if Satan did not try to outflank us. So we pray.

Do not lead us to the place where the fighting is fiercest BUT, if You do, Lord, grant us the victory.

With the greatest respect to my Italian brethren, I shall be sticking to the original and I trust the priest that watches over my departure from this life will pay me (and Jesus) the courtesy of doing the same.