

Lead us not...but deliver...29/3/23

I am a dog trainer, and I lead dogs into temptation all the time. Temptation is the implied promise of something desirable.

I offer a reinforcement or treat to obtain the behaviour I desire. We have all done it - perhaps not with dogs, but with our children. "If you do this, or don't do that, I will give you a candy, soda, ice cream - dog biscuit - whatever.

There are also temptations to avoid unpleasant consequences; Having trashed the house by having a forbidden party in it, you go off to stay with a friend overnight, so that your parents will have had time to cool down before you return home tomorrow.

There are also neutral temptations which, of themselves, are neither good nor bad, until you make a choice between them. Like fiddling your tax return. I am pretty safe from this one, as I wouldn't know what tax return looked like if it hit me in the face; I am fortunate to have Sheila do our finances, and since she hasn't been arrested yet, I am assuming that she is honest in that regard.

But when we get to temptation and God, it seems another thing altogether. James tells us that although we cannot be tempted by God to sin, (James 1:13), he does allow or send trials when necessary and in the right measure for strengthening faith.

You will note that I have used the word 'trials' here, and not 'temptations'; this is because I don't think that the distinction is important. Many theologians and biblical scholars spend hours debating the issue and wasting reams of paper writing about it, but πειρασμόν (peirasmon) - the word used in the Lord's prayer may be translated in either way. And indeed, we see both translations used on a daily basis, which suggests that we shouldn't be overly concerned with the distinction.

The apostle James suggests that 'trials' are to be welcomed so that we can show strength in overcoming them, and that trials produce patience. Strong - he of the Concordance - suggests that 'trials' are from without, are

produced by extraneous circumstances, but that temptations are from within, and are manifestations of our own desires.

It matters little, but what does matter is that in either case - temptation or trial - we are faced with making a choice. This is the burden of 'free will'. The problem is that once you make the wrong choice once, it tends to start a snowball or domino effect.

Imagine you are in a room with two doors; one leads to a healthy meal, the other to - let's say - ice cream. In themselves, no big deal - what's one ice cream in the scheme of things, right? But once you open the door to the ice cream option, you find that it opens another

door to an even greater temptation - perhaps waffles, maple syrup, and more ice cream. Before you know it, you have spent so long exploring and sampling all the delights that you are such a size you can no longer get back through the door to take the other option.

I think the same thing happens when people go to casinos or gamble in any other way, or choose to waste their time on less than edifying websites. We get sucked into a vortex of self-destruction.

Turning to the second phrase - 'but deliver us from evil', - is not so much about taking us away from witnessing child sacrifice or becoming embroiled in Ouija board games, but

rather asking God to help us realize our wrong paths before we get too far along them. Let's face it, we all make wrong decisions from time to time, and then wonder how on earth we are going to get out of the mess we got ourselves into.

True deliverance from evil is giving up our own selfish wills and giving them over to the power of the one who loves us more than we can ever love ourselves.

The devil wants us to put ourselves first - which essentially means to give in to all temptation - as Oscar Wilde wrote in his play, 'Lady Windermere's Fan', 'I can resist

everything except temptation'. That allows the devil a foot in the door...

However, so far I haven't told you anything you really don't know; so let's go deeper - which means, 'darker'.

In Dostoyevsky's novel, 'The Brothers Karamazov', there is a frightening discourse between Ivan and his younger brother Alyosha, in which Ivan postulates that Jesus returned to earth - to Seville in Spain, to be precise - in the fifteenth century, and is captured and questioned by the Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition.

This is not a joke, nor is it supposed to be necessarily true; Ivan says it is his 'poem' - but

that he can't do rhyme very well, so it ends up as prose argument.

Jesus, silent throughout, undergoes intensive criticism of his own temptation in the wilderness, with each separate temptation minutely dissected. The Grand Inquisitor, now a cadaverous old man of ninety, says to Jesus, '...we are not working with Thee, but with him - that is our mystery. It's long - eight centuries - since we have been on his side and not on Thine. Just eight centuries ago, we took from him what Thou didst reject with scorn, that last gift he offered Thee, showing Thee all the kingdoms of the earth. We took from him Rome and the sword of Caesar, and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth, though

hitherto we have not been able to complete our work. But whose fault is that? Oh, the work is only beginning, but it has begun.'

The discourse goes on over many pages and if you have the fortitude you should read it. In it, the Grand Inquisitor, in the service of the Devil, sneers at Jesus' rejection of his temptations, because he knows that if Jesus had succumbed to just one of them, mankind would have been enslaved forever.

The logic is carefully explained; turn stones into bread, and you have a captive population who will follow the miraculous for ever. To throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple would be to tempt God himself, and

demonstrate thereby a complete lack of faith, which would have ended in his death from the fall. To accept the kingship of the earth - well, that is what the Inquisition acquired, it is postulated, and with it, the subservience of mankind.

The Grand Inquisitor suggests that human beings cannot cope with free will, and it is Jesus' insistence upon leaving humans to have free will that was achieved by resisting the temptations.

I find it hard to do Dostoevsky any sort of justice in a few short sentences; let me just encourage you to challenge yourselves by reading this book.

Suffice it to say that succumbing to temptation is to say, 'Yes', to slavery - and not to your will, but to the will of him who would enslave you forever, and keep you away from God. That is the evil that we need to be delivered from. These are not two distinct phrases that have no connection, but one and the same desperate plea; that we be saved from a lifetime - indeed, an eternity - of slavery to the hideously attractive powers of darkness.

We cannot afford any form of Mephistophelian deal - the outcome is a private hell from which you will never escape, no matter how hard you try. The only recourse

you have is to abandon yourself entirely to the mercy and grace of God.

That was the tragedy and triumph of Jesus on the Cross - but now I would be expounding on the Creed, and that is not my remit - but it is something worth thinking about as we approach Passion week.