**Lent I, 2025**

“Lead us not into temptation.” We pray that whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer; I wonder how often we really think about it. They are strange, startling words, so strange and so startling that for some, they must be changed, as though they imply that it is God Himself Who tempts us, as though we are praying to be spared His attentions.

I understand where that desire comes from. But it’s wrong. It’s wrong because that isn’t what the Lord’s Prayer says. If we start changing the words to make it easier to pray, I wonder what we’ll change next to make life easier? What is safe, if we feel free to fiddle with the words of Our lord?

And it’s with our Lord that I want to start off, because this week we see Him, as S. Luke quite clearly says, being “led by the Spirit” into the wilderness, to be “tempted.” Being led into temptation, you might say. So how do we square the circle?

One distinction we need to make is about the Will of God. What do we mean when we say ‘God wills it’? Because in fact we can mean two different things: we could be talking about God’s positive will – what God *wants* to happen – as when we say that God willed The Son to take flesh and become man. Contrariwise we might be talking about God’ permissive will – what God *allows* to happen – as when we say that God, for reasons of His own, allows human beings free will, even to work wickedness.

If then, when we pray “lead us not into temptation,” we’re imagining the first kind of will, God’s positive will, we’re suggesting that it *is* God Who tempts us, because He directly wills – He wants – us to be tempted. That is indeed a strange picture of God, and one we rightly reject.

So we’re left with God’s permissive will, and so we can say that God *permits* us to be tempted. We see this in the Gospel today: Jesus is led into the wilderness “by the Spirit,” but He is tempted “by the devil,” a temptation which we *could* say God permits, rather than directly wills.

I’m not sure that’s much of a comfort, even though it does, I suppose ‘solve’ the theological conundrum of whether God Himself tempts us (No!), or merely permits us to be tempted (Yes!). It still leaves us to ask: why? Why does God permit us to be tempted? I don’t think, by the way, that we’re going to arrive at an answer to that question which will ever truly satisfy us, because part of the answer is about the inscrutable Will of God. “My ways are not your ways,” He tells Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts.” But perhaps we can make a beginning, and perhaps we can receive some consolation on the way.

If we want consolation, let’s turn to Jesus, tempted as we are. Jesus, Who takes our flesh, *becomes* our flesh, to stand in solidarity with us, living as we live, suffering as we suffer, dying as we die, and – yes – knowing temptation, as we do, from the inside, and reassuring us that temptation is a part of life: if He was tempted, we should expect to be.

It’s not just about solidarity, though. A temptation is also a kind of testing, a proving. ‘What are you really like?’ Now, to me the interesting thing to think about here is: to whom does it prove? Not to God: God knows whether we will stand or fall to temptation, just as surely as He knew that His divine Son would resist Satan in the desert. To the devil? Perhaps: He’s clearly caught on the back hoof and out his depth by Jesus. But the real audience of the ‘proof’ of temptation is us.

By being tempted, we learn better what we are really like. Now, God already knows what we are like, so this means we’re beginning to see ourselves as God sees us, stripped of the disguises we wear for others an for ourselves, and that’s a great grace. I often think one of the greatest graces of Confession is that chance for a God’s-eye view of the real us.

Jesus’ temptation also shows us that it is possible to resist, *pace* Oscar Wilde. And before you say ‘but He’s God!’ remember: He is also a human being with a human will, and with that human will He resisted the Devil. And with God’s help,. We can too. That’s another reason: to encourage us.

And in showing us the possibility of resistance, Jesus’ temptations allow us to see our own temptations as opportunities for growth, not by our own force of will, but by an ever greater reliance on God.

So, what *are* we praying for when we pray ‘lead us not into temptation’? Not, surely, to be spared an experience which even Our Lord was content to suffer, and which offers us the hope of seeing right and growing in virtue. But rather to be spared from temptation greater than we can resist; not to be lead into temptation alone, without God’s grace.

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man,” S. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”