

Luke 11:2-4

This last week I was toying with the idea of skipping the forgiveness petition in the Lord's Prayer and focussing entirely on the temptation one. Because, as Augustine called it, it's 'the terrible petition'. It convicts us. Virtually what it's saying is that if we haven't forgiven someone and pray this prayer, we pray for God not to forgive us. It's as terrible as that. As chilling as that.

But there's a good reason for it. If we let unforgiveness fester in our hearts, it destroys the relationship but it also destroys us. There's a story – I'm not sure whether it's true or not – of a teacher who asked the kindergarten children to bring potatoes to school – one for every person they hate. Some brought one, some two, some up to 5 potatoes. She asked them to carry them with them every day for a week. To start with, it was fun. But after a few days the potatoes started to smell, they were heavy and just a pest to carry with you everywhere. At the end of the week she asked the pupils what they thought. They all started complaining about the smell, the weight and the discomfort. She then said that it's like lack of forgiveness. The more people we cannot forgive, the greater burden it is to carry. It wears us down, it rots and spreads the bad smell all on the inside of us, affecting every bit of our lives. What a powerful little story that is. Craig Koester in his commentary on Matthew's Lord's Prayer says: 'At the level of relationships, people accumulate hurts and grievances, which end up defining the relationship. As long as wrongs from the past define the present, the wrongs also close off the future. The term "forgive" is literally "release." To forgive is not to say that what has transpired does not matter. Rather, it is to say that the wrongs that have occurred no longer define the relationship. Forgiveness or "release" means that there can be a different future, which is not defined by the past. People are to see themselves first of all as the recipients of release.'^[1]

This release works both ways – it releases the one who needs to be forgiven but even more so it releases the one who forgives. It's very hard to attain but life-giving.

The good news about forgiveness is that it is a gift of our generous God who forgives us and restores us before we as children like Thorin today can understand it. His grace comes first. We are reminded of it every time we partake in the Lord's Supper – as we are going to be doing next week. A preacher suggests there's a link between bread and forgiveness.^[2] First of all Jesus himself oftentimes ate with sinners and offered them forgiveness at the same time. We pray the Lord's Prayer in which we ask for bread in one sentence and the very next one asks for forgiveness. Last but not least the Lord's Supper – communion – is a meal of bread and wine which brings us the good news of forgiveness. We are fed forgiveness in order to feed it to others.

Let's sing about a people forgiven and forgiving in our next hymn.

Hymn 522 – The Church is wherever God's people are praising

James 1:2-15

In this last bit of our study on the Lord's Prayer I'd like to focus on the petition: 'lead us not into temptation' or 'save us from the time of trial'. Emerging from the study on Job where the protagonist was sorely tested, we need to ask ourselves a question – does God tempt us? Does God test us? Another example might be Abraham asked to sacrifice Isaac. The request that doesn't bear thinking about.

None of the two failed the cruel test but is that what it's all about? Cruel God pushing us to our limits to see how much we can take?

I recently spoke to a teacher who told me that until she became a teacher herself, she always thought that teachers marked pupils down for what they failed to deliver. But when she became

a teacher herself, she realised that the opposite takes place – she does her utmost best to mark the things the pupils have done right. She wants them to succeed. It's a positive process. Some of the things we might perceive as tests and trials are evil that just happens with no rhyme or reason – like in the case of Job. Some of them happen because we misunderstand the will of God and impose harsh measures on ourselves God never imagined asking of us – as in the case of Abraham. Some will be our own evil desires waging a war inside – like James wrote in his letter. These are awakened for example by TV adverts and clever marketing offering us easy solutions and tricking us into believing we need this or that to make us happy. Through all of them though God can work. He can reveal something about himself and us through each and every one. He doesn't set up traps but he can use various situations in our lives to reveal himself a bit more to us.

Trying situations are a part of life. We can't avoid them. But that's maybe for the better. A butterfly needs to struggle out of a cocoon in order to develop strong wings that enable it to fly. If it doesn't, it remains weak and dies. It never reaches its full potential.

So when we ask God to lead us not into temptation or to save us from the time of trial, we're asking God to help us withstand the trial and avoid doing the wrong thing. Spill the Beans put it neatly: 'We know our human weakness; yet we equally know that where we are weak God is strong, where we are flawed God is dependable, where we are incapable of avoiding temptation on our own with God's help we can.' [3]

I'll close by pointing to the use of plural again. Lead *us* not into temptation. We certainly receive God's help through trials and tribulations but we are given one another to face them together. The Church should be a place where we can be vulnerable and will be then helped and carried by others. Families should be safe havens where support and encouragement awaits. Some are – thankfully. Not all though. This prayer challenges us to recognise that we are in it together. We are a community that looks after each other, rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep. We are a gift to one another. Let us be so. Amen.

[1] https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1703.

[2] <https://neoprimitive.wordpress.com/2016/08/25/feed-us-and-forgive-us-luke-11-3-4-sermon-08-28-2016/>.

[3] Spill the Beans, issue 19, p. 125.