

“. . . *But deliver us from evil.*”

SPEAKING OF EVIL

--Do you believe in the devil?

I realize that it may be too early in the morning to get so personal, but, as we continue meticulously to work our way through the Lord's Prayer, line by line, it's an unavoidable question. "*And lead us not into temptation,*" we say, "*but deliver us from evil.*"

In turning yet again to the Greek, the language in which that line is originally written, one finds actually that a more accurate rendering of it is this: "Save us or rescue us (quite literally, drag us out of danger!) from the evil one" ("*tou ponarou*"; Mat 6.13b). What is being referenced here is not evil as some vague abstraction, but evil as personified, evil with a form and a face. "*Deliver us from the evil one.*"

While, as you may recall, we have two versions of the Lord's Prayer in our gospels (in Matthew 6 and Luke 11), interestingly, only Matthew adds this short petition concerning deliverance from "the evil one." Luke does not. Check for yourself. The best manuscripts of Luke's version evidence the evangelist's winding up the prayer with the words about not being led into temptation and saying nothing at all at that point about evil. (Be sure to check out as well those ever-fascinating little footnotes on the page, showing the variant readings of Luke, which include, as expected, the sentence from Matthew, word for word--no doubt an attempt to bring the two gospels back into sync with one another.)

--In any case, judging from this morning's reading, it seems that, at least as Matthew portrays him, Jesus believes in the devil, as he is caught up in the accusations that he is "out of his mind" and that he accomplishes his wonders through the power of Beelzebul, that "by the ruler of demons," they charge, "[Jesus] casts out demons" (3.22).

Hardly a household word, Beelzebul, or Beelzebub, is a name derived from a god of the Philistines, an enemy of ancient Israel. He is associated with Baal, the god of the Canaanites, also regarded by Israel as being an enemy--a god of fertility, weather, rain, lightning, and wind, who frankly doesn't sound too terribly evil. At base, it is an instance of the old gods becoming the new demons, and so by the time of Christianity Beelzebub is identified as one of the seven princes of hell, synonymous with Satan. Accordingly, reflecting this equivalency of Beelzebul with Satan, Jesus reacts to the charges hurled at him by cleverly retorting, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand . . ." (3.23,26).

--In speaking of the devil, then, who and what exactly is this sinister principality who figures into this morning's gospel story and into the Lord's Prayer?

In the gospels, "the evil one" ("*ho ponaros*") is given various names, all associated with baseness, wickedness, and maliciousness. He is a vicious degenerate and an inveterate liar. As the agent in charge of Jesus' trials in the wilderness, he is referred to as the "tempting one" ("*ho peirax'on*"--Mat 4.3), the one who puts Jesus to the test. As "satan" ("*ho satana*,"--see Mk 1.13a; Mat 4.10; etc.--the word derived directly from the Hebrew verb meaning "to show enmity, to oppose, or obstruct"), he is literally "one who plots against another," utterly adversarial to anything or anyone related to God. As "the devil" ("*ho diabolos*"--see Mat 4.1,5,8,11; Lk 4.2,3,6,13; etc.), he is a supremely abusive and disparaging slanderer, a libelous accuser whose testimony, no matter how convincing it may sound, cannot be trusted.

If these are variously the characteristics of this dark principality, the picture in our minds, forged over the past several centuries and amplified by the likes of Hollywood's special effects, is of a being resembling a cunning, intimidating serpent or dragon--scaly, winged, horned, armed with bow and arrows or pitch fork, courting fire and brimstone. As creepy or unnerving as we might still find these images, they are far-fetched enough to be regarded by us--educated, sophisticated, empirically-based citizens of the 21st Century, as we are--as something that can be rightly dismissed with impunity, thinking of them as pointing to something which we, well, have outgrown.

However, tossing out the reality along with these images would be a grave mistake, and perhaps helps to explain why the modern world--despite all that education and sophistication and empiricism--remains such a terrible, demon-driven mess. You see, nothing so advantageously strengthens the position of "the evil one" as people who are dismissive and ignorant towards it, for then it has a freer hand to carry out its ignoble deeds, and we become its unwitting agents.

--Understand, I am not trying to convince anyone to embrace the fanciful and fantastic imagery of the Middle Ages, and I am not urging anyone to believe in concrete terms what no one, save perhaps the most fundamentalist of Fundamentalists, believes any more. However, I am trying to impress upon us all the ongoing and inevitable necessity of being delivered from evil, whose reality is very, very real.

This is particularly the case during times of personal temptation or trial or testing, when--weakened by self-doubt and undermined by despair--we are the most vulnerable to its insidious influence. No wonder, then, the two thoughts are stitched together so intimately in the Lord's Prayer: "*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*" Where there is a testing going on, where we find ourselves--as individuals, as families, as nations--at a time of trial, the deceiving whispers of the evil one cannot be far away.

In speaking of the devil, whether looked at from the angle of spirituality or from that of modern psychology, the simple and startling fact is that, if God is within us, wanting to make us sons and daughters, then so, too, is "the evil one," desiring to accomplish the same for its own purposes. The field on which this unavoidable contest occurs is the human psyche, populated with all its many inner voices, counseling us to give outward expression to one thing or another. When we are most susceptible to giving the wrong voices an ear, it is an easy thing to get tripped up by the lying, seducing adversary, and to stumble into behaviors that before we would never have considered.

In other words, at this point in our evolution, being human means constantly having to choose between darkness and light, unconsciousness and awareness, selfishness and compassion, regression and advancement--which is to say, between "the evil one" and God. So, we may rightly chuckle at the vivid Medieval imagination, but the reality and character of what is depicted as being "the devil" is certainly no laughing matter.

--Do you believe in the devil?

It doesn't really matter, I suppose. The important thing to realize is that, in contradistinction to God, the devil, opportunistic antagonist that it is, does not at all believe in you. And it will do all in its considerable power to convince you not to believe in you, either, and to have you acting out that misguided opinion in the world.

That, I suppose, is reason enough, at every turn, to push back against and choose against this "evil one" moving about in our inner worlds, always afflicting and turning up the heat (fire and brimstone!) on our lives. The sad fact is that none of us is far enough along yet to be very good at that pushing back and choosing--meaning that we need all the Divine help that we can get!

The Lord's Prayer would seem to have right:

Deliver us, indeed! All too often we are not able to do that for ourselves.
Drag us out of danger, indeed! All too often we never see it coming.