

*What I want to do is to use the line in the Lord's Prayer about temptation and evil to draw back the focus on our current political crisis and name the biggest threat to the future health of our nation which lies in becoming two divided groups who have nothing to do with each other and who do not relate at all.*

During Dwelling in the Word this week my attention was drawn to the line: "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good" in the reading from Romans 12. I had just been listening to Nick Robinson interviewing Alistair Burt, one of the 21 Conservative MPs who lost the party whip because he voted with the Opposition against a no-deal Brexit.

This is not the place to speak on the rights or wrongs of Brexit- that is a matter for conversation not preaching- but Burt's attitude made a strong impression on me. He had been a member of the party since he was 15 and an MP for over 30 years. He was clearly in shock, in a place he had never imagined he would be. He had every reason to be vindictive, complaining, angry- and he was angry over a Cabinet minister describing what happened as a purge: but what came over most clearly was his continuing love for the party.

We will each have our own thoughts on the unprecedented events in Westminster over the last fortnight, our own sense of what is going on and what is at stake. Whether you agree with Alistair Burt and the other 20 MPs is not the point I'm making. The point I'm making is that, wherever you stand, our political life and our national life need more magnanimity, more forgiveness, more empathy, more grace. When we see those things we need to stop and value them and celebrate them. And when we see people standing up for what they believe to be in the national interest even when it means resigning from office, whether that is Michael Gove in 2016 or Amber Rudd in 2019, we need to honour that as well.

I generally see at the moment two sides who are genuinely motivated by what they believe to be best for the country. There are very few rogues here- and more integrity than the headlines admit. The Government is trying to pull every lever it has to get the best possible arrangement for the country while being determined to honour the Referendum. Those on the other side of the argument are genuinely fearful of what a no-deal Brexit might mean for the future of the nation and so are pulling every lever they have to prevent it. There is honour in either position.

I am going to talk about the current political crisis because it matters hugely and because, as far as I can tell, I am not going to be partisan. If you think that I have been, or am, then I don't doubt you'll tell me later: but please, I beg you, listen to the whole of what I am saying rather than taking offence at a single isolated phrase or sentence. Good listening is the very skill which will allow us to rediscover our unity.

Perhaps by now you're preparing a chant of "We want the Lord's Prayer." Let me come to that by saying that the national context, and the Dwelling in the Word passage, really matter in explaining the sentence I want to focus on. So far all of our sermons have looked at the whole prayer. I want to focus on a line Matthew has in full: "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil." It seems to me that the current national crisis opens a window into what temptation is and what evil is, with profound implications for the way we each of us live every day. Politicians do not, as a class, have specific weaknesses or temptations - they show our own human weaknesses played out on a bigger stage. And the temptation to give in to evil is no stronger for them, but the stakes are higher because their power is greater.

I want to suggest that the greatest current risk, the greatest evil we are called to resist, is the temptation to demonise those who disagree with us. Quality debate happens when minds meet. Quality conversation happens when we genuinely listen to each other. Love of nation is not to be found on only one side of the debate, nor is commitment to the international community., nor is concern for the poor. We cannot dismiss those on the other side of this great divide as being stupid or unworthy of our attention and time. At some point in the future we will be living in a world beyond all of these discussions, and we will still be a nation. However, the task of building afresh and relating to each other will be that much harder if we set fire to every relationship we have with people on the other side of the discussion. To demonise 'them' is an evil 'we' need to be delivered from. Across America there is already a pattern of Republican voting communities and Democrat voting communities, Red states and Blue States. No one benefits from a world like that.

The temptation to demonise the other in order to tune them out is an evil we need to be delivered from. When we make people who didn't vote like us, or don't shop like us, or don't look like us, or don't have a lifestyle like ours different and other we dismiss them as less than us.

Their opinion matters less than ours, their future matters less than ours and their rights matter less than ours. We end up living in a world where those who are like us matter and those we can separate off are less than us. If you don't believe me then let me ask you this: when was the last time you had a proper, honest, reasonable conversation with someone who voted the other way at the Referendum? And when was the last time you avoided a conversation because you know it wouldn't end well even though you can normally talk about anything with them? Only a few weeks ago I stopped in the middle of a sentence when I was talking to a friend I have known for 23 years because, even though we voted the same way, I am not sufficiently outraged by some of the things happening at the moment. On the other hand, one of my best friends and a very close family member voted the other way to me in the Referendum and our conversations over the last three years have helped me to see things with a broader and better perspective.

While it might be a basic human instinct to define as other and dismiss, we must be better. We must make the effort to talk to people who are not like us and finding in that discussion and that journey everything which unites. Because, otherwise, once we have succeeded in separating and defining people, we can tune them out, stop talking to

them, stop noticing them, stop caring. It's what happens when a system sees numbers and not lives. It's what happens when we stop listening. It's how we end up with the Windrush scandal. It's how refugees fleeing for their lives across the Mediterranean find ports closed to them and boats refusing to rescue them as their inflatables sink beneath them. It's how racism and sexism and homophobia take root: *they* are not like us. We are the norm. We matter most- only us. It is a failure of humanity, a failure of the heart, a failure of the imagination. It is an evil we need to be delivered from, a temptation we must be led from.

Which is to say that evil in this day and age is not usually a conscious decision but a failure of empathy and a slippery slope made up of lots of small events and decisions. It would be so much easier if evil wore a scary mask and advertised itself. It doesn't. Evil is seductive and daily and normal.

And the way our prayer to deliver us can be answered is for us as individual and as a community and as a nation to be honest in knowing where this temptation draws us and how it contrasts with the Kingdom and the community we are called by Christ to build and to inhabit.

He did not divide and define and ignore. He spoke with those who disagreed with him, he came to those who were on the edge of society, he refused to accept the casual divisions of the day. He came to heal and rescue everyone- from the woman with a haemorrhage who stretches to touch his cloak and the man possessed by a legion of demons through to the Samaritan woman who asks for the crumbs from the table and the Roman Centurion who petitioned for his slave. Jesus does not do in and out, those who belong and those who do not, those who are worthy and those who are less. He comes to heal and restore and bless and save: his love and compassion have no boundary, no limit, no end. Infinite love. Boundless compassion. And we are his.

This temptation to divide is something we can learn from and become stronger through and rediscover who we are- because that is what temptation in the Bible is all about.

*“Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.”*

*Henry 4 part 2*

Through the temptation to curse God and die Job discovers who God is. Through obedience, Jacob learns who God is as he prepares to sacrifice Isaac. Through temptation in the wilderness Jesus discovers his mission and purpose, what is his to employ and what he must lay aside. Through his

agony in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus accepts the cup which must be his if we are to be saved. Temptation is a place of learning and reflection and clarity. It must be so for us now, nationally. In asking to be delivered from temptation and evil we are asking to be reminded who we are. Help us, we pray, to see the wrong path, to resist and overcome it- replace it with the vision of the kingdom.

We might want to pray deliver us from the evil of Brexit or the evil of the EU. But a better prayer might be to ask God to deliver us from our worst, most divisive instincts by reminding us who we are. Deliver us by calling us back to the example of the life of Christ. Deliver us by reminding us that we must continue to live in the world we create by the way we disagree. Deliver us by renewing in us a love of unity, understanding, empathy and the sense that we are enriched by what is different and other.

In praying that we be delivered from evil we are praying that God will give us the wisdom and insight to spot what is evil in and around us and the courage to choose a better path. Dehumanising the other so we do not need to attend to them, allowing ourselves to enter an echo chamber in which the only people we meet are those who look like us and the only voices we hear are ones which agree with ours, accepting division-

this is one of the greatest evils we need to guard against, socially as well as politically, personally as well as corporately, in the Church as well as in the community. And facing up to that temptation, that seductive option, allows us to choose a better path, to know where truth and flourishing lie and to pursue them.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, Jesus teaches us to say. May we make these words ours, and in doing so may we come through the temptation of this current age and achieve a more perfect union, plucking the flower of safety from a most alluring and satisfying nettle. Amen.