

# Third Evening Prayer of Lent

Bulletin

*'Do not be idolaters, as some of them were.'*

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It is not easy to break off the worship of the idols. Though we think of ourselves as enlightened, too enlightened to worship images made with hands housed in houses of stone and wood, we only build erect an image of our imagination, and enthrone it in a temple built in the high places of our mind.

Though we believe ourselves Christian, too Christian to break the first commandment, and fear anything apart from the Lord, yet fear is a heavy burden and yoke that breaks the shoulders of us all.

What do we not fear? We fear poverty, and so we love money. We fear disrespect, the derision of others, and so we become angry. We fear being wronged, and so we revenge. We fear being abandoned, and so we are jealous. We fear being alone, and so we manipulate. We fear being lesser, and so we covet. We fear losing what little we have, and so we are greedy. We fear pain, and so we become gluttonous. We fear everything, and in everything, we became harlots, selling ourselves for the illusion of safety. Selling ourselves to what more honest generations would have reverently called the gods.

In our scientific society, or at least as it claims to be, we reckon all these things to be but emotions or experiences. They are tricks of our psychology, to be fixed with therapy, psychology, and medicine, even much strong medicine.

And yet we do not experience wrath, lust, envy, greed, as rational deductions of our minds, or emotional responses to our lived experience. Rather we experience them as passions that seem to come from nowhere, or more simply, from outside us, that enter into us, that take possession of us, and so force us to think what we would not think, *and do that which we would not do.*

It is like we are slaves, thralls to a power we cannot control. Far from being the product of our own mind, we know our thoughts and deeds are too often the product not of our own reason and strength, but of a hand reaching into our soul and throttling it, which our own reason has no strength to subdue.

These our pagan ancestors worshipped as gods, spirits, ghosts, and specters. Our Lord simply calls them demons, and their father simply Satan.

It is unfashionable to talk much about belief in devils, likely because it is too close to home, something we experience much too often, and know far too well. We fallen humans tend to deny that which is most inescapable, as a man with a gun in his head will swear over the phone that everything is just fine.

It was always a belief that the *elemental powers*, the *spirits of the air*, could be controlled, or perhaps appeased by some mixture of potions, meditation, and magic; and from these we have not moved far at all. We merely have renamed them to create the illusion that we are wiser and better educated than our forefathers.

We are not. We are only better liars.

We lie because we do not want to admit to ourselves the truth. The truth is not merely that we are enslaved to the fallen powers cast down into the world. The truth is that we are quite comfortable with it; we even prefer it. The demons, you see, can be negotiated with, even compromised with. They may drive a hard bargain, but they will still meet you somewhere in the middle, as long as you give a little first.

This God person, on the other hand, takes lip from no-one.

Having been delivered from the garden of idols that was Egypt, the Israelites followed the God who had come to deliver them from sin and the fear of death, from the *devil, and all of his works, and all of his ways*, into the wilderness; yet as they wandered, they did not rejoice in their freedom from the gods of their oppressors; rather they chaffed beneath the lighter yoke of a God who loved them, but would not give them their way.

*'Let us turn back to the land of Egypt, for there we had meat and herbs, and their fleshpots were never empty.'*

The Lord would not compromise nor give in, and did not allow them to turn back to the land of Pharaoh, as a *dog to its vomit*. Rather He chastised them with serpents and poison and choked them with the melted gold of their longings. It seems quite harsh, but I am sure it seems harsh to the alcoholic and the addict to withhold from their begging hands their fix. So what if it will kill them? There is at least comfort in the dying.

And yet the Lord keeps us from turning back, for *he desires the death of no man*. What He has bought, even with a price, He will not so easily give back.

Will then, the blood of our Savior be spilled in vain, dear Christian? And will you pierce our King again for naught? Will the tree of salvation drip with His Passion, that none may call Him Lord?

You may betray Him, even as Judas, and return to the idols for thirty pieces of silver, but I tell you, He will not send the Destroyer against you as He once did to Israel, that they might repent. Rather, He shall let the idols strike you down for Him, for even they can act only with God's permission.

What was once said to the children of Abraham remains true each day now to us: *before you lies two ways, the way of death, and the way of life*.

This alone St. Paul beseeches us to do, as a servant of Christ, and His Apostle. '*Do not be idolaters,*' he begs, for he knows that the indulgence of the passions, the service to the idols, slavery to desire, receives no gift, nor even a wage, but only a bribe; a payoff at the gate to ensure that the enemy and his army may enter, and their fire and slaughter with them.

Be not tempted, then, by their sweet whisperings and seductions. Give no eye to their beauty or hand to their offerings. For God *tempts no man beyond their ability*. Cast away the allure of the godless, for in them is only death, and the fear thereof.

*'Choose, therefore, life.'*

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