

LECTIO DIVINA
Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be put to the test
First Sunday of Lent
Mt. 4, 1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be put to the test by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which he was hungry, and the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves.' But he replied, 'Scripture says: Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

The devil then took him to the holy city and set him on the parapet of the Temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down; for scripture says: He has given his angels orders about you, and they will carry you in their arms in case you trip over a stone.' Jesus said to him, 'Scripture also says: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' Next, taking him to a very high mountain, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. And he said to him, 'I will give you all these, if you fall at my feet and do me homage.' Then Jesus replied, 'Away with you, Satan! For scripture says: The Lord your God is the one to whom you must do homage, him alone you must serve.' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels appeared and looked after him.

Meditation

In order to meditate on this passage we will first examine its *context* and then underline *two* meaningful expressions.

Here is the *context*. Matthew (like Mark) starts the account of Jesus' public life by telling us of the Master's preparation for his ministry. This narration comprises the preaching of the Baptist, the Baptism of Jesus, and the temptations in the desert.

After the Baptist is arrested, Jesus starts his ministry in words and deeds. He announces the Kingdom of God and calls the first disciples to follow him.

We shall focus our meditation more on this second aspect, viz. on being a disciple, and limit ourselves to underlining *two aspects* of the path of discipleship.

a) The first aspect concerns the *40 days in the desert*.

Before starting his public life, Jesus feels the need to spend some time in fasting and prayer. Forty, as we know, is a number that alludes to a period of purification and a path of

self-denial that marks the climb up God's mountain and the mysterious encounter with Him. Jerusalem lies on the horizon: the time of temptation in the garden and the events of the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

The disciple too, like the Master, feels the need to fast and pray to reach Jerusalem.

b) The second aspect – which we will dwell upon later – concerns *temptation*. Jesus is tempted; so too is the disciple.

We have to keep in mind that temptation, in the biblical sense of the word (*peirasmos*) is not simply an immediate urging to do something wrong. It is much more than that. It is the temptation to hold back; it is not to respond to the project God has for each of us; it is to withdraw from our commitment to the Church, society and the world. It is the temptation to act like an ostrich, viz. to bury one's head in the sand.

There is a very close connection between the path undertaken by the disciple and the desert where he is tried. God's mysterious face, his light and his fire have always been an attraction and a desire for the believer. Just think of the Old Testament episode of the burning bush and of Moses who wants to know the God who sends him; think of those times in the Church when St. Augustine confesses in agonizing words the anxiety of his heart and his desire to know God: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (*Confessions*, 1, 1).

It is that same faith that produces an unquenchable thirst for God in the disciple. However, this very passion for God needs to be purified continuously. God bade Elijah, who expressed his "ardent passion" for Him, to come forth, leaving his hiding place in the cave, and he repeats his request for a discernment: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (1 Kings 19,9).

Let me say it once again. There is a very strong connection between a growing faith, and the desert and temptation which make for a maturing and strengthening of the faith: by "desert" I mean, according to biblical and patristic tradition, the place where a man is *absolutely alone*, without any illusory props or adjuncts; it is the place of struggle against the devil and temptations, but also the place of encounter with God.

In the book of Deuteronomy, in particular, the desert is the place of God's educative activity towards his people. In the desert Israel grows and matures in faith to the point of learning, in the words of Deuteronomy 8,3 that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord".

In this light, the desert, the disciple's temptations – his doubts about faith; the temptations of egoism, pride and pleasure; and the instinct to possess persons and things – in whatever way they are interpreted, Jesus' three temptations are nothing else but a limited typology of all possible temptations – must not be listed as consequences of fate but as expressions of providence.

There is a mysterious interaction between the disciple's path and temptation, to which he is continually exposed. That is why the desert of temptation is a peak moment in God's pedagogy. The one who walks in faith must know that a trial is a school of God and his Spirit; and that without this school, faith runs the risk of faith of becoming a claim to take possession of God and force him into the narrow confines of human expectations.

For our prayer and for our life

When we recite the prayer of Jesus, the Our Father, we should pray with faith like this: "Do not allow me to fall into temptation." We do not ask to be *exempted* from temptations and doubts (neither Jesus, nor Mary, nor the saints were exempted), but we ask to be sustained by God's grace in the hour of trial.

Lastly, let us take courage and ask ourselves: do I foster within myself a spirit of discernment so as to respond more generously to the Lord or do I leave room for paralyzing doubts that are oftentimes just an alibi for spiritual laxity? "Is it really you, Lord?": does my question concerning God express a longing to meet him or is it an act of distrust in him? "What shall I do?": is this question about myself a realistic examination of my situation and my behaviour or is it a lack of confidence in myself and in God? "And what about the others?": is my question about the others a practical consideration about those who are the object of our mission or is it a guilty judgment about their capacity for conversion?

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