

Commentary on the Gospel: Temptations in the Desert

Gospel for the 1st Sunday of Lent (Cycle A), and commentary.

Gospel: (*Mt* 4: 1-11)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him,

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

But he answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him,

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him,

“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Commentary

In the first Sunday of Lent, we see Jesus led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. The setting of the desert, an inhospitable place that stands in complete contrast to Eden, is very eloquent. A passage in the Old Testament seems to point to a Jewish belief in a malevolent spirit called Azazel who dwelled in the desert (cf. *Lev* 16:10 and *Tob* 8:3). Jesus thus was led into the dwelling place of the tempter. Moreover, the desert was the place where the chosen people underwent

their trial. Our Lord comes to defeat the devil where the people of Israel fell.

There Jesus fasted “fasted forty days and forty nights.” This is what Lent commemorates. Our Lord’s penitential effort is charged with symbolism: forty days and forty nights was the time the punishment of the deluge lasted (cf. *Gen* 7:4); Moses spent forty days and forty nights in the cloud on Mount Sinai fasting and beseeching God for the people (cf. *Deut* 9:25), before the Law was revealed to him (cf. *Ex* 24:18); Elijah spent forty days and forty nights walking to Mount Horeb to encounter the Lord, fasting the whole time (cf. *1 Kgs* 19:8); and in particular, the people of Israel wandered for forty years in the desert amid trials and temptations, as a punishment for the forty days spent exploring the land on their

own, without taking God into consideration (cf. *Num* 14:34).

After fasting Jesus is hungry, apparently deprived of divine help and physical strength. The tempter tries to make Jesus fall into some form of intemperance, avarice or idolatry, into which he often leads men, who use or even reject God in order to exalt themselves. The devil quotes in a distorted way Scripture, by which Jesus always seeks to fulfill his Father's will. If you are the Son of God, he says, use your divine power to overcome the human needs you have accepted. This same suggestion will come to its climax on the Cross.

Pope Francis comments on this scene: "Satan wants to divert Jesus from the way of obedience and humiliation—because he knows that in this way, on this path, evil will be conquered—and to lead Him down the false shortcut to success and

glory. But the devil's poisonous arrows are 'blocked' by Jesus with the shield of God's Word (vv. 4, 7, 10), which expresses the will of the Father. Jesus does not speak a word of his own: He responds only with the Word of God. Thus the Son, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, comes out of the desert victorious.”[1]

All of us in one way or another confront every day these trials of the desert. Benedict XVI wrote: “at the heart of all temptations, as we see here, is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying.”[2] Being in a hurry, the eagerness for human effectiveness, and daily difficulties can all lead us to neglect and even to reject our relationship with God; or to expect from Him a striking intervention that causes us to react. But when we put God's will first in

our life, He sooner or later raises us up.

Matthew says that, after Jesus conquered every temptation “angels came and ministered to him.” Saint Josemaria remarked: “the Church reminds us that during Lent, when we recognize our sins, our wretchedness and our need for purification, there is also room for joy. Lent is a time for both bravery and joy; we have to fill ourselves with courage, for the grace of God will not fail us. God will be at our side and will send his angels to be our travelling companions, our prudent advisers along the way, our cooperators in all that we take on.”[3]

[1] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 5 March 2017.

[2] Joseph Ratzinger–Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, Doubleday 2007, p. 28.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 63.

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