

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus, a man of His time and space, shows us our true and full humanity

Lectio n° 4 Humanity

Introduction

Man is a being that is “put to the test”. It is indeed on his path towards true humanity, on which he becomes more and more truly a man, that he will experience being under trial, as he is a being endowed with liberty. In order to become a true man, he has to renounce his dreams of omnipotence and his presumptions to be better than any other man. He will be put to the test exactly on that path, when he becomes aware that ‘temptation’ is a basic experience that his freedom has to undergo.

Jesus Himself underwent temptation: in spite of being fully and truly a man, He experienced in freedom the possibility to resist temptation and not fall into it. The desert temptations that the evangelists relate are not just an episode, an event out of many in Jesus’ life, but rather a vital experience, a permanent condition in His life, up to His death.

In this passage of the Gospel we can find out how Jesus is fully human, up to the point of leading the same life that we lead and that is put to the test in our everyday conditions, which at times may even be extreme...

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit:

For ever, Lord, Your word
is planted firm in heaven.
Your constancy endures from age to age;
You established the earth and it stands firm.
How pleasant Your promise to my palate,
sweeter than honey in my mouth!
From Your precepts I learn wisdom,
so I hate all deceptive ways.
Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path.
I have sworn - and shall maintain it -
to keep Your upright judgements.

As Your word unfolds it gives light,
and even the simple understand.
Keep my steps firm in Your promise;
that no evil may triumph over me.
Your promise is well tested,
Your servant holds it dear.
Your saving justice is for ever just,
and Your Law is trustworthy.
Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now and always shall be,
and in the Eternal Age of Ages.
Amen.

1. Lectio (to read the Word / to listen to it)

Matthew 4:1-11

1. Introduction. Mt 4:1-2

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be put to the test by the devil. 2 He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which He was hungry.

2. Report / Dialogue

a) First Temptation. Mt 4:3-4

3 And the tester came and said to Him, 'If You are Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves'. 4 But He replied, 'Scripture says: Human beings live not on bread alone, / but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'.

b) Second Temptation. Mt 4:5-7

5 The devil then took Him to the holy city and set Him on the parapet of the Temple. 6 'If You are 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.'

7 Jesus said to him, 'Scripture also says: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

c) Third Temptation. Mt 4:8-10

8 Again, taking Him to a very high mountain, the devil showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 9 And he said to Him, 'I will give You all these, if You fall at my feet and do me homage.' 10 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.'

3. Conclusion. Mt 4:11

11 Then the devil left Him, and suddenly angels appeared and looked after Him.

- Let us read the text more than once, slowly and making a pause each time...
- Let us go into the text's depths.

The episode of Jesus' temptations is set within the frame of the 'synoptic trilogy', including the preaching of the Baptist, Jesus' Baptism and temptations in the desert. It is aimed at introducing the reader to better understand Jesus' ministry, as well as the mission entrusted to Him by the Father. Here the evangelist expounds the theme of the exodus, already used in the episodes set by the river Jordan, that is, St John the Baptist's preaching and Jesus' Baptism; and he evokes Israel's journey through the desert in the three elements of the three temptations: the desert, the forty days, manna. The overall message is that Jesus is re-living the whole history of His people and that is why He has to undergo the same temptations, overcoming them.

Then we have to highlight that the temptations are three in number. Three denotes what is complete, definitive. Therefore, the evangelist wants us to understand that Jesus was not subjected to temptation just once, but during His whole life. However, the basic idea that links one temptation to the other, is Jesus' obedience to God's Word.

1. Introduction. Mt 4:1-2

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be put to the test by the devil.

- By the term 'Then', the evangelist links this episode to the previous one, Jesus' Baptism, when He received the Spirit of the Father. The consequence is that the same Spirit now leads Jesus into the desert.

- 'into the desert': Obviously, in the narrative sequence this should be the desert of Judaea. However, more important than the geographical reference is the biblical theme of the desert, the place where Israel was put to the test (cf Dt 8:2).

- 'to be put to the test': In the Old Testament 'to put to the test' referred to the proceeding by which faithfulness and commitment to a covenant was examined. In the context of the relationship between Israel and God, this proceeding would reveal whether Israel was faithful or not to God. God could put Israel to the test, but Israel could not put God to the test. Here, the temptations will reveal the Son of God's faithfulness.

However, we must keep in mind that in the Gospel the verb 'to tempt' is applied to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Doctors of the Law, and that Jesus responds to those temptations by the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Doctors of the Law by quoting the Scriptures, exactly as here. The term 'temptation' bears a negative connotation. In fact, the devil does not tempt Jesus to perform sinful actions.

- 'by the devil': The 'devil' is the literal translation of the Greek term 'diabolos', which is a synonym of satan ('the tempter'). While in the pre-exilic period it was God who put Israel to the test, in the post-exilic period this function was delegated to Satan, the 'tempter' appearing as a person (c Job 1-2; Zc 3:1-2; 1 Ch 21:1). This involves that the devil was under God's control. In Jesus' case, it is the Spirit who leads Jesus into the desert and who lets Satan put Him to the test. We can point out that the devil does not present himself as an enemy or as a rival, but rather as an ally who wants to help Jesus fulfil His mission. Therefore, we should not use the term 'temptations' but rather 'seductions'. It is also interesting to point out that in St Matthew's Gospel the devil appears in this episode only.

2 He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which He was hungry.

- 'forty days and forty nights': Once in the desert, Jesus abstains from taking food. His fast could echo a phrase that we find in Dt 8:2 ("to humble you, to test you") in which the verb 'to humble' may contain the idea of fasting. Jesus' fast, however, is not the religious fasting necessary to obtain God's forgiveness or benevolence. The religious fasting used to start at dawn and ended at sunset. The fact that the evangelist underlines that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights implies that His was not a religious fasting. The number 'forty' may be a reference to the forty years in the desert, during which Israel was put to the test by God (cf Dt 8:2). In fact, Jesus' forty days of fasting refer more directly to Moses' (cf Dt 9:18); and the forty nights to Elijah fleeing for his life (cf 1 K 19:8) after being threatened by Queen Jezebel (cf 1 K 19:1-8). Thus Jesus is re-living the experiences of Israel's greatest prophets: Moses and Elijah.

2. Report / Dialogue

a) First Temptation. Mt 4:3-4

3 And the tester came and said to Him, 'If You are Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves'. 4 But He replied, 'Scripture says: Human beings live not on bread alone, / but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'.

- 'the tester': Here St Matthew makes use of a Greek term ('peirazòn') different from 'diabolos', thus linking the devil's activity to the aim Jesus was led into the desert for ("to be put to the test").

St Luke, on the contrary, keeps the term 'diabolos'.

- 'If You are Son of God': This sentence will be repeated in the second temptation too (Mt 4:6). It expresses the essence of the three trials, that are aimed at finding out which kind of Son of God Jesus is. The title 'Son of God' relates Jesus' experience to Israel's (cf Hos 11:1; Mt 2:15). The tempter does not doubt that Jesus is truly Son of God (which was confirmed at Jesus' Baptism by the voice of the Father: "You are my Son"). 'If You are Son of God' means then: 'Given that You are Son of God... use Your qualities, abilities and so on, to Your advantage.'

- 'tell these stones to turn into loaves': The challenge is not to perform a 'spectacular miracle', given that there is no audience in the desert. There is a reference instead to the food that God provided Israel with during their wandering in the desert (cf Dt 2:7). God-given manna was often the cause of much grumbling and regret for the earthly food (cf Ps 78:18-20).

The first temptation is to use one's powers to one's advantage. But Jesus would never do that. On the contrary, He will use His powers to the benefit of others. Jesus will become 'bread' for others. And here Jesus answers: *'Scripture says: Human beings live not on bread alone, / but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'.*

- 'not on bread alone': The Son of God's response to the first test is a quote of Dt 8:3, offering an explanation of the gift of manna, so that Israel may know that their source of life is all that is God-given ("every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord"), not only bread. The Son of God is already aware of that, and is therefore able to resist and overcome the first temptation. The quote is from the Septuagint.

b) Second Temptation. Mt 4:5-7

5 The devil then took Him to the holy city and set Him on the parapet of the Temple. 6 'If You are 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.'

7 Jesus said to him, 'Scripture also says: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

As far as the second temptation is concerned, we must point out that there is a change of location. It is set in the Holy City, a term by which the biblical tradition refers to 'Jerusalem'.

- 'to the Holy City and set Him on the parapet of the Temple': The city was deemed to be holy especially because of its Temple, where God was believed to dwell in a very special way. An apocryphal text known as The Fourth Book of Ezra said that the Messiah would manifest Himself all of a sudden on the highest point of the Temple. That, therefore, was the people's expectancy. In fact, the devil is saying to Jesus: "Do what the people expects from You, do what the people wishes, put up a show..."

In addition to that, the Greek diminutive 'pterygion' comes from a term which means 'wing'. It refers to some point of the Temple or of its complex which is high and protruding. It is commonly rendered with 'pinnacle'. There may be a reference to God's protective wing, an idea which can be found in Ps 91: "He covers you with His pinions, / you find shelter under His wings" (Ps 91:4).

It could be a pun referring to the name given by the people to a particular point of the Temple and also to Ps 91, which in the following line (Mt 4:6) will be the 'biblical foundation' of the dangerous action the devil proposes to Jesus.

The devil says: "If You are Son of God", "given that You are Son of God", "throw Yourself down", that is, show Yourself standing in the highest point of the Temple, but add a spectacular action so that everybody can understand that You are truly the Son of God. "Throw Yourself down", and then he quotes the psalm.

- 'His angels': The 'biblical foundation' is provided by expressions coming from Ps 91, which links the theme of God's protection with the theme of the Temple as the dwelling of God's presence. The quotes come from Ps 90:11-12 of the Septuagint, and the second part of line 11 is omitted ("to guard you wherever you go"). The tempter would like Jesus to assess the validity of those promises concerning divine protection.

- 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test': Jesus' answer comes from Dt 6:16. The text follows the Septuagint version. The second part of the verse ("as you tested Him at Massah") is omitted, given that a reference to that episode (cf Ex 17:1-7) would be weird. However, that episode is a perfect example of how Israel put the Lord to the test. The name 'Massah' comes from the Hebrew root 'rish', 'test'. Jesus refuses to follow in the old Israel's footsteps.

By this opposition made up of biblical quotes, the evangelist wants us to understand that he is not relating just an episode out of many in Jesus' life, but that in all His life He will be put to the test by the Pharisees, the scribes, the elders and so on, all of them convinced that the Scripture makes them the winners against Him. The same temptation will be uttered by the high priests, the scribes and the elders when Jesus is on the cross: "If You are Son of God", "given that

You are Son of God”, “come down from the cross, that is, show Yourself as a powerful God.

c) Third Temptation. Mt 4:8-10

8 Again, taking Him to a very high mountain, the devil showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 9 And he said to Him, ‘I will give You all these, if You fall at my feet and do me homage.’ 10 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.’

The location of the third temptation is an unspecified ‘very high mountain’. Any attempt to localize the mountain from which all the kingdoms of the world can be seen would be pointless. The image may refer to Moses looking at the Holy Land from Mt Pisgah (Dt 3:27) and Mt Nebo (Dt 34:1-4). In fact, this could be a symbol, referring in St Matthew’s Gospel to the typology of the ‘mount’, as a literary as well as theological ‘topos’ (cf Mt 5:1, 14; 8:1; 24:3; 28:16).

- ‘Again’: Here the translation is wrong: given that the devil never took Jesus to a high mountain before, ‘again’ is unjustified. The Greek term should be rendered with ‘Next’. This temptation is different from the other two, preceded by the statement ‘If You are Son of God’. Here the devil does not involve divine sonship, given that this temptation is common to each and every man.

In ancient times the mountain was believed to be the dwelling of the gods and denoted a divine status. Here the devil is therefore offering Jesus a supposed divine status. It must be pointed out that at the time all those who were in power were attributed a divine status: the Egyptian pharaoh was a god, the emperor was son of god. The devil is therefore offering Jesus a divine status.

- ‘the devil showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour [that is, their wealth]. And he said to Him, ‘I will give You all these, if You fall at my feet and do me homage.’ Here the devil is offering Jesus the divine status, but He should worship the power to dominate the world. ‘Then Jesus replied, “Away with you, Satan!”’ He calls the devil ‘Satan’, using his Hebrew name. The evangelist wants us to realize that these temptations come to Jesus from His people. ‘For Scripture says: The Lord your God is the One to whom You must do homage, / Him alone you must serve.’ This is a quote from Scripture too, from the Book of Deuteronomy 6:13, where the Lord warns His people not to become idolatrous while entering the land of Canaan.

The devil makes use of the term ‘to worship’ which was so important in the episode of the Magi (Mt 2:2, 8, 11), and which will occur again in relation to the Risen Jesus (Mt 28:17). To pay homage to the devil would be equal to overturning the respective roles: Jesus is the one everybody must pay homage to. This is in fact the price He should pay to become the ruler of all the earthly kingdoms: to pay homage to Satan. This would be a perversion of the faith-relationship binding man to his Lord... And Jesus resolutely turns down the offer. Satan is neutralized by Jesus’ obedience; where Israel fell into temptation, He has triumphed over temptation.

3. Conclusion. Mt 4:11

11 Then the devil left Him, and suddenly angels appeared and looked after Him.

Jesus is the Son of a God-Love, expressing Himself through service, while the devil is an image of power ruling over people. Jesus gets the angels' protection after overcoming temptation.

If we keep our hearts pure by the light and strength of the Word, we can overcome temptations. And given that Jesus is that same Word made flesh, let us invoke His Most Holy Name in all trust. We will be able then to perceive the innumerable angelic presences supporting us in the service of good, in fulfilling God's will.

2. Meditatio

(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

- After reading the text, let the Word resound in our hearts... We will find out that our own humanity, weak and put to the test, is the place where Jesus, through the three temptations, is progressively walking on the path to humanity, thus becoming the model of a new man transformed by obedience to God's will...

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

The Lord Jesus Christ
was put to the test by the devil in the desert:
Christ was indeed tempted by the devil,
but in Christ you were tempted too.
Yours was in fact the flesh
that Christ had assumed
so that you could receive from Him salvation.
He bore upon Himself death
which was yours,
in order to give you life;
from you He bore upon Himself
all the humiliations,
so that you could receive from Him glory....
If in Him we are tempted,
in Him we can overcome the devil.
Are you worried that Christ was tempted?
Why don't you consider
that He has already won?
In Him you were tempted,
in Him you will be led to victory.
All the time, three times,
the temptation is the same:
to separate
Jesus from the Word of God.
(St Augustine - Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

4. Contemplatio **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

- In silence... we turn our inner sight to the One who spoke to us in the Beloved Son. May we be filled with gratitude, as we have been reached there, in the depth, in the Sheol of our humanity which may be at times wounded, hit and humiliated...

5. Collatio **(to share the Word)**

- In order for the Word to be like yeast and become incarnate in our very lives, let us share it with the Sisters...