

LENT I – March 9th, 2014

JESUS FASTS FORTY DAYS INTO THE WILDERNESS AND IS TEMPTED – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 4.1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, 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 comes 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 command his angels concerning 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 put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, 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 were ministering to him.

The first Sunday of Lent opens with Matthew's Gospel that presents the temptation of Christ. There are three temptations. The number three means something complete, that is definite. What we read now is not an episode in the existence of Jesus, but the evangelist wants to make us understand that during His life Jesus was subject to these temptations, or seductions.

But let's see what the evangelist says. "*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*" With the word "then", the evangelist links this episode to the one before, the baptism of Jesus, when Jesus had received the Spirit from the Father, the Father knew Him as his son because Jesus showed his will, his commitment to present it as love for humanity. For this commitment of Jesus, the Spirit guided Jesus into the desert. The term "desert" brings to mind at least three things:

-**The Exodus**, the liberation of the people from the Egyptian slavery.

-During this Exodus there was a **period of temptation and trails** that God put through his people

- The desert was also **the place where all those that wanted to conquest power met**, with rebellions, and revolts.

"..to be tempted by the devil" The verb "to tempt" in the gospel is attached to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the doctors of law in the controversy with Jesus, and Jesus, at each of these temptations, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the doctors of law, responds with quotations from the scripture, exactly like the evangelist anticipates here. The term "temptation" has a negative undercurrent; actually the devil – as we will see – does not tempt Jesus to do something negative or sinful. Nothing of this. The devil does not present himself as an enemy, as a rival of Jesus, but as his ally that wants to help him in the realization of His program. Therefore, more than temptation, we should speak of seduction of the devil. In the whole of Matthew's Gospel, the devil appears only in this episode.

"And after fasting forty days and forty nights," the evangelist wants to underline that this of Jesus is not a religious fast that serves to be pardoned or favoured on the part of the Lord. The religious fast began at dawn and finished at sunset; the fact that the evangelist underlines that he had been fasting for forty days and forty nights, means that is not a religious fast.

It is a trail of strength like that which Moses had before receiving the tablets of the covenant. *"And the tempter came and said to him, « If you are the Son of God»"*. The tempter does not put in doubt the divine offspring of Jesus, that in the baptism was confirmed by the Father's voice that said: "You are my son", this expression by the tempter "If you are the Son of God", therefore there is no doubt, but it means "since you are the Son of God", since you are the Son of God use your capacity to your advantage.

In fact *".. command these stones to become loaves of bread."* The first temptation is to use His own power for His own advantage. But Jesus does not use this power for His own advantage, but for the advantage of others. It will be Jesus that will make bread for the others. And Jesus replies: *"«It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God»"*.

These three temptations repeat themselves in three known episodes in the book of the Exodus, three trails that God had put to his people in the desert and this is the trail of the manna. What does Jesus want to say quoting this passage from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 8,3? Like the fathers in the desert, listening to the word, were fed with the manna, more so the new population, the new liberation of Jesus, listening to His words, will be 'fed.'

Jesus does not do a wondrous gesture to feed His own hunger, but His words will help those that accept them and those that follow them, to share the bread with the hungry.

"Then the devil took him to the holy city.." that is Jerusalem *"..and set him on the pinnacle of the temple"* Why this particular? Because in a apocrypha, the IV Book of Ezra, the Messiah was thought of someone that no one had ever known, he would have shown himself, appearing suddenly on the highest point of the temple, the pinnacle. Therefore it is what the population expected. So the devil, showing

himself as Jesus' helper says "Do as the people expect, do as the people wish, give them something more"

And he says to him for the second time: "*If you are the Son of God*", that is, "since you are the Son of God", "*«..throw yourself down, »*", that is, show yourself how the people expect to see you, on the highest point of the temple, but give a touch of something stronger to make them understand that you are really the Son of God. "*«..throw yourself down, »*", and then the devil quotes the psalm. In this conflation between answer and reply through the use of scriptural quotations, the evangelist wants us to understand that this is not an episode that he is telling, but in all of Jesus' life there will be contrasts with the Pharisees, with the scribes, with the elders, who think to have the scriptures on their side to block or to forbid Jesus' actions.

And in fact in psalm 91 verses 11-12, "*For he will command his angels concerning you...*", that is challenge the Lord and then trust in him.

This temptation we find in the mouths of the high priests, the scribes and the elders, at the moment of Jesus' crucifixion "*If you are the Son of God,*" since you are the Son of God, "get down from the cross", that is shown a God of power, Jesus replies: "*«Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. »*"

This also is a passage from the scriptures, the book of Deuteronomy chapter 6, 16, and it is the episode of Massa, one of the temptations of the people in the desert, when the people ask themselves, "but Jahvè is here with us, yes or no?" Therefore the people doubt the presence of the Lord, Jesus has complete faith in the Father and has no need to invoke extraordinary external interventions that confirm this faith.

"*Again...*", here the translation is not exact, because it says here "*Again the devil took him to a very high mountain*", he never took him there, therefore it cannot be translated as "again". The Greek term should be translated with "this time". This temptation is different from the others, the two before began with the affirmation "since you are the Son of God", if you are the Son of God, therefore the consequence of the capacity and of the power for being the Son of God, for this the devil does not state the point of the divine offspring, because it is a temptation adapted to every man.

So, "*..the devil took him to a very high mountain*". *Why a high mountain?* In the past the mountain was the place where the gods lived and indicated a divine place. Therefore the devil offers to Jesus to possess a divine condition. Remember that, in those times, all those that held power, had the divine condition. The pharaoh was a god, the emperor was the son of God. Therefore all those that held the power had the divine condition and the devil offers to Jesus the divine condition. How ?

"*...showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory*", that is all the richness, "*And he said to him, «All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me»*". The devil proposes to Jesus the divine condition, all the power to dominate the world. "*Then Jesus said to him, «Be gone, Satan! »* He calls him Satan, the Jewish name. The evangelist wants us to understand that these temptations come to Jesus from His people. "*«For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you*

serve. »” Also this time it is a quotation from the scriptures, from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, 13, where the Lord warns his people of the danger of idolatry entering the land of Cana.

For Jesus the power is idolatry. Jesus is the Son of a God who is love that expresses itself through service, while the devil's image of power is that of dominating the people. “*Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.*”

Jesus obtains the protection of the angels refusing the temptation. These temptations of Jesus, as we said in the beginning, are not isolated episodes in His life, but the evangelist anticipates all that will happen through all of the life of Jesus, continually seduced with gaining power, because this was what the people expected of Him.

And, when the people realize that Jesus is not the Messiah of power, they will refuse Him and will kill Him.