

“Desert, Trials and Famine”

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With the celebration of Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent. Path of preparation for Easter, the great feast of all Christians. Forty days of encounter with God, with ourselves and with others. Lent evokes in us a time of penance, of desert, of temptations, of trials, of hunger, but also of conversion.

How is it that the path through the desert can lead us to conversion? To begin with, I would like us to consider what Jesus tells us about the Law. Jesus came to fulfill and not abolish the Law, Matthew tells us. What Jesus did was remind us of how important, how urgent and a priority it is to love. In the summary of the law that the evangelist puts into the mouth of Jesus, we are reminded that love for God is a priority and that it must be shown with the totality of being. And that equally important is love for others, which is connected to and depends on self-love.

There are those who say that it is relatively easy to understand what it is about, how it is demonstrated and in what situations it becomes more effective to love your neighbor, but how is it to love God with all your heart, soul and strength? Some may say that there is no greater demonstration of love for God than when one loves the other as they are, and this argument seems plausible to me, but the truth is that there is a certain division when it comes to understanding love.

It is one thing to love God, another to love your neighbor and a very different thing is self-love. Perhaps the most fans of God say that it is about spending more time in prayer; others, that we must meditate on the scriptures or make religious sacrifices that please God. I believe that the story that concerns us in this commentary, that of the temptation of Jesus in the desert, which is one of the most enigmatic stories in the Gospels, serves us precisely to clarify what it means to love God with all our heart, soul and strength.

Indeed, the account of the temptation of Jesus leaves us several elements that we are going to analyze, understand and decipher.

Desert, trials and famine are three situations that the people of Israel went through after their departure from Egypt. Deuteronomy reminds us of God's purpose in making the people of Israel pass through the desert. God wanted to know what was in his heart and test his faithfulness and loyalty. It seems that enduring the desert would be the demonstration that they truly loved God. Precisely this Deuteronomist text was used by Jesus in his defense in the temptations.

So how can and should you love God? As Jesus demonstrated in his days in the desert and in the face of temptation. Jesus did not give up, but, unlike the people of Israel, he demonstrated his love and loyalty in the face of the test of the spirit and the temptations of evil.

Initially, the story shows the human reality of Jesus, since he, like any mortal, suffered from hunger and was moved by the harsh reality of fatigue, hunger and affliction. But in previous days, according to the same story, Jesus had been publicly recognized by the Father as his most beloved and beloved son, that is, the one chosen by God to fulfill a great divine mission.

The spirit, by taking Jesus into the desert, as before the people of Israel had been taken into the desert, wanted to test if Jesus reciprocated the loyalty and love confessed to him.

The forty days of hunger, fatigue and thirst represent a demonstration that Jesus was willing to go to the last consequences to show that his love for God was reciprocated and that he would assume the messianic project that had been entrusted to him, the divine task of converting the people of God into a truly free people. But the devil did not sit idly by. He set out to try to show that Jesus, although he had been recognized as the most beloved son of God, would give in to the temptations of power and could not fulfill the demands of God's mission.

It is evident in the story that each temptation is intended to call into question the messianic project of Jesus and lead him, instead, to assume a position of self-sufficiency, ego, love of power and wealth. Every religious leader, every faith community or every Christian person, when reading this account, must understand that the greatest danger in trying to fulfill the mission of Jesus is the temptation of power. You cannot say that you love God with all your heart, soul and strength if at the same time you want fame, glory, riches and above all power.

Jesus, faced with the attempt to turn stones into loaves, shows the tempter that he does not need to prove his filiation to God, since his main mission is not to prove that he is a son of God. Jesus resisted the temptation to prioritize his own ordinary needs, to abuse the power to perform miracles for selfish ends, and to fulfill his own desires or personal interests. And for this reason, if someone really wants to love God, he must also resist the temptation to prioritize his own desires and act selfishly in order to put personal needs and interests before the mission and service to others.

The tempter returns and takes Jesus to the holy city on the pinnacle of the temple and inviting him to launch himself with total confidence in his condition or position as "son of God," since this condition would not allow him to suffer any injury. Jesus is again challenged by the accuser to give spectacles of his messianic mission and service. If he had yielded to temptation, Jesus would have failed in his mission, because with the demonstration of his filiation to God as his son, he would have given signs of a lack of trust, love and security in God. With his response, Jesus indicates that he is not willing to test whether God truly entrusted him with his mission. On the contrary, Jesus makes it clear that God trusts him and that he trusts his Father for the mission. He shows that he loves God by trusting fully in God and in the mission he has entrusted to him.

Last but not least, Jesus was tempted to exchange worship for wealth and social position. Idolatry is one of the greatest dangers on this path towards fulfilling the mission that God has entrusted to us, since it is about replacing God with another god. Riches can take the place that only belongs to God. Jesus could have taken the option or the path of violence and freed his people from Roman harshness by rebellion, just as many

Jews expected the messiah to do. He could also have given miraculous shows to position himself as an important leader and show that he was a true messiah, a real son of God, or he could have sought political and economic power that would have brought him fame and money. But Jesus never wanted to replace his father's love with the idol of riches and fame. To give in to this idol would have been to fall into the worship of satan himself.

In short, something tells me that there is no greater demonstration of love for God than serving him and that represents serving the needy, as the angels were willing to serve Jesus after his fight against the accuser. Loving with all your heart, soul and strength requires certain difficult sacrifices.

The truth is that the biggest problem in the church has never been satan. Your number one enemy has always been selfishness, the deep yearning for wealth or socioeconomic advantage, and the drive to control everything including God. Loving God perfectly resides in acts of dedication to the mission, full trust in God and service to those in need.