

The fourth temptation

Year A - Lent - 1st Sunday
Matthew 4:1-11

1. From ashes to Easter fire!

With Ash Wednesday we began a special and particularly important time in our lives. It returns every year, it seems to repeat itself, like the seasons repeat themselves, but in reality it is always different because it never finds us the same as the previous year and is the bearer of a new grace for each of us. **This period is called Lent a 40-day period.**

Forty is a biblical number rich in symbolism. We find various events connected to this number, but we particularly remember the forty years of Israel's march in the desert, the forty days of the prophet Elijah's journey to Sinai, the forty days given to Nineveh to convert, and Jesus' forty days in the desert between his baptism and the beginning of his ministry, a decisive period for his messianic mission.

Where does this journey take us? Towards Easter, the centre and driving force of our faith. It is a journey that **starts from the ashes**, symbol of the extinguished dreams of a weary life, **and goes towards the spring fire of the Easter dawn**, promise of rebirth and reawakened hope. Fire broods beneath our ashes, but only the breath of the Spirit of the Risen One can sweep them away.

The forty days are calculated from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. There is a subtle connection between them because the ashes were made from the burnt branches of the previous year's palms. It is actually 39 days according to our way of counting, but forty for the biblical way of calculating, which includes the first and the last in the series. Another way of calculating the forty days of Lent excludes Sundays from the count, which always have an Easter connotation, so it goes from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. It then stacks up with the fifty days of Easter time.

2. The high mountain of temptation

Today with Jesus we are led by the Spirit into the desert, to be tempted by the devil... Of course, we have tasted the experience of temptation many times, but this time it will be different. We will not be alone before the ancestral serpent, *the most cunning*, who has stripped us of our splendour as children of God. This time we will be behind *the strongest One* who will crush its head.

Every day we ask the Father *lead us not into temptation*, but this time he will not grant us. **This period of Lent will be a time of trial.** The Father wants us to be with his Son to learn from him how to flush out the Serpent, how to dribble his deadly moves, and how to defeat him.

This cycle of trials will end on a mountain, the first of the seven in Matthew's gospel. The devil will take us over a high mountain and show us *all the kingdoms of the world and their glory...* This mountain is not unknown to us and neither are these kingdoms of the world and their glory, which have so often dazzled us with their seductive charm. **This mountain is contrasted with the seventh mountain that closes Matthew's gospel, the mountain of the mission**, where Jesus says: *"All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me"*, and his disciples worship him, and then they go down to evangelise the world (Matthew 28:16-20).

3. The three cardinal temptations

Three are the temptations to which Jesus - and we with him - is subjected. They are the compendium or matrix of all the temptations of human life. That is why I would say that **they are the three cardinal temptations**, pivotal to every temptation, and that they are in some way **opposed to the three cardinal virtues**: faith, hope and charity. These three temptations are: Bread, Prestige and Power!

The temptation of BREAD concerns the satisfaction of our basic needs and our **relationship with the goods** of the earth. A bad relationship with goods erodes our **FAITH** in the Father from whom the believer trustingly waits for *our daily bread*. The Church proposes to us the Lenten exercise of **fasting** (of that good which tempts us most!) to heal our relationship with things.

The second is the quest for PRESTIGE, the temptation that swells our Ego, that drives us to make a name for ourselves and prevents us from *sanctifying God's name*. It is a sick **relationship with ourselves** that compromises the virtue of **HOPE**. In fact, people tend to put their trust in themselves, drawing the curse upon themselves: "*Cursed is the man who trusts in man*" (Jeremiah 17:5). The Church proposes the exercise of **prayer** and frequenting the Word of God to correct this unhealthy relationship with ourselves.

The third, **POWER**, is **the most dangerous temptation**, according to me, because it leads us **to put others at our service**. One does not seek *the Kingdom of God and his will*, but seeks to build our own kingdom and subject others to our will. It is opposed to the virtue of **CHARITY**. It is **the temptation of the anti-Christ** who opposes God who is love and service. It may occur to us that this temptation does not concern us. In fact, it is not easy to unveil. **It is a temptation as insidious as it is surreptitious.**

It can present many faces. I enumerate seven types: **political** power, and even the role or service we exercise; the power of **knowledge**; **economic** power; the power of **fascination** over others; **sentimental** power that manipulates affections; **media** power; **religious** power that manipulates consciences... We are all, in one way or another, tempted by this **seven-horned dragon!** Discovering our type is of vital importance. The Church proposes to us the particular exercise of **charity** to combat this temptation.

4. The fourth temptation and its secret

If there are three temptations, **each of us has a particular overriding temptation** where our **vulnerability** manifests itself, a breach in our defences or a secret passage known to the Enemy, from where he can easily infiltrate our hearts. **Knowing this fourth temptation is of paramount importance** to regaining freedom.

But there is more! **Often that weakness hides a secret** that eludes us, but which the Enemy knows well. Behind that weakness hides an **energy**, like an underground spring, unrecognised or unwelcome, and therefore repressed, which is diverted towards another channel, which the Enemy takes it upon himself to pollute. Behind that flow that we try in vain to stem, **there is probably a potentiality, a resource waiting to be identified** and addressed to bring new vitality to our human and spiritual life.

Here is another exercise and a truly stimulating challenge for our Lent!

*Fr. Manuel João, comboni missionary
Castel d'Azzano (Verona) 23 of February 2023*