



THE VOICE OF SAINT MARK

Podcast of the Coptic Orthodox Tradition

Parish of Saint John the Theologian – Dijon

Episode:

The Temptations

Gospel of Matthew 4:1–11 | 2nd Sunday of Great Lent

Coptic Orthodox Tradition

Episode Presentation

On this second Sunday of Great Lent — a time of fasting, prayer and penance that the Coptic Orthodox Church observes according to the immemorial tradition received from the Desert Fathers — the preaching focuses on the Gospel account of the Temptations of Christ in the desert, as related by the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus — the New Adam — enters the desert for forty days after receiving the baptism of John. He experiences hunger, isolation and the assaults of Satan, before emerging victorious through the Word of God, cited three times against the three temptations. This victory of Christ opens and founds the path of our salvation.

Let us now hear the Holy Gospel:

Gospel of Matthew 4:1–11

- 1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
- 2** And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.
- 3** And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”
- 4** But he answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”
- 5** Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple,
- 6** 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.’”
- 7** Jesus said to him, “Again it is written: ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”
- 8** Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory,
- 9** and said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”
- 10** 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.’”
- 11** Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Homily

✠ *In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God,
Amen.* ✠

When Lent was instituted, it was a preparation for baptism, and the catechumens were to die to the old self to be reborn in Christ during the Paschal night. Let us not forget this character of Lent: forty days of preparation for baptism, in fasting and penance, or for most of us, of course, in its renewal through penance, so that we may be purified and able to participate in that great Paschal solemnity.

But let us return to this Gospel of the Temptations. Note first that Christ's approach is like a mirror of ours, of humanity's. He receives baptism from John and immediately is led by the Spirit into the desert to fast forty days and forty nights, to experience hunger, weakness, and to be tempted.

Man, conversely, fasts forty days and then receives baptism or its renewal through penance. What, then, is the significance of this number, forty? Forty is a symbol of gestation. Forty hours — traditionally — of bodily death for Christ in the tomb; forty days in the desert; and for us, forty days of Lent. But also in another domain, in biology: forty weeks of pregnancy and forty years in the desert for the Hebrew people before entering the Promised Land. And all the other biblical forties I shall not enumerate.

The temptations of Christ are of the same type as those proposed to Adam by Satan. Adam drew us into the consequences of his fall, but through his responses and conduct, Christ, the New Adam, leads us toward our salvation.

These three temptations are of three types. They are the same ones proposed to Adam and to Christ. And Christ rejects each one by citing Holy Scripture three times. Three renunciations of Christ — and these three renunciations found, in the sacrament of baptism, our own triple renunciation of Satan.

These three temptations are, of course, not merely moral — they are essentially spiritual.

First Temptation: *“Turn these stones into bread.”* — Live by and for yourself and make your need an absolute priority. The corresponding passion is gratification.

Here, Satan especially seeks to test Jesus where he perceives a weakness — where Jesus has voluntarily weakened his body. Jesus' reply is drawn from Deuteronomy: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ Jesus' answer exposes the devil's lie, which claims that man can only be nourished by what is material and that he can find eternal life somewhere other than in God himself. Jesus reveals a profound truth: man is a eucharistic being. He lives not only on matter — he lives on relationship. He lives on the Word; he lives on God. And the true hunger of man is a hunger for communion. It is the same lie the tempter spoke to Adam: ‘You will not die; God knows that on the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know good and evil.’ This is the temptation of power, of might, and of pride.

Thus Christ, the New Adam, by repelling the lie of the evil one, atones for Adam's fault and restores humanity.

Second Temptation: *“Throw yourself down!”* — This is the spiritual temptation par excellence: to instrumentalise God, to use the sacred to exalt oneself. But Christ refuses a

magical relationship with God. He opposes every vain tendency, every tendency toward vainglory.

Third Temptation: *“I will give you all the kingdoms.”* — The temptation of domination, of power — to possess, to reign, to impose oneself. But Christ will reveal that true kingship passes through obedience and through the Cross.

The circumstances of Jesus’ fast also help us understand the spiritual meaning of our fasting, of our Lent.

Jesus’ fast took place in a desert — that is, in an arid and solitary place, far from cities and people, where there is little vegetation and no water. And there is no distraction — nothing to distract us from God. And such must be the place of our fasting: far from distractions, allowing us to enter our own desert, which is on one hand a physical desert — even if only our room, the one Saint Matthew speaks of in chapter six — and on the other hand, the spiritual desert. This spiritual desert is that of our heart, our arid and dried-up heart, so that we may prepare for the encounter with God. The desert has a twofold aspect: it is the place where I am alone with God, but it is also the place of combat — the place of temptations, where demons are active. For the moment most propitious for our encounter with God is also the moment when Satan seeks to make us fall in every possible way.

Hence the famous exhortation of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Mark: “This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.” Jesus teaches us here to unite prayer with fasting, if we wish to drive out the impure spirits that seek to settle within us. Fasting without prayer quickly becomes merely a diet, and prayer without fasting often remains superficial.

So Lent is a unity: the fast of the body, the fast of thoughts, the fast of judgments, the fast of pride — and I could name so many others. And as the Apostle Paul reminded us in the Letter to the Romans: ‘let us pursue what makes for peace.’ Have the same sentiments toward one another according to Christ Jesus. And Saint James also told us: do not show partiality. True fasting is known by justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit — otherwise it remains outward. (Rom. 14:19–15:7 and Jas. 2:1–13)

The purpose of fasting, the purpose of Lent, is not deprivation. The purpose is repentance. May this Lent allow us to be incorporated into Christ — to be sons in the Son: the Son who did not turn stones into bread, but who would later turn bread into his Body; the Son who refused to throw himself from the Temple to prove he was the Son, but who in his humility and ineffable self-emptying accepted to be lifted up on the Cross; the Son who refused the kingdoms of this world, but who, crowned with thorns, will receive from the Father the Name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

✠ *To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.* ✠