

Commentary to the 1st Sunday of Lent – Year A –

The temptation of an illusory happiness



Introduction

In common parlance, to be tempted means to feel attracted to what is forbidden. It is little wonder that the great characters of the Bible, the patriarchs, Job have been tempted. A certain embarrassment is felt in front of the temptation stories of Jesus. One remains baffled by the claims of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews who, speaking of Christ, says: “Having been tested through suffering, he is able to help those who are tested” (Heb 2:18). “Our high priest is not indifferent to our weaknesses, for he was tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sinning” (Heb 4:15).

The Bible invites us to consider the temptation in an original way: as an opportunity to assess the soundness of a person’s choices, an opportunity for growth. In temptation, the risk of making mistakes is also inherent. This danger is inevitable if one wants to mature, to become “experts,” “adepts”. These terms, in fact, do not mean other than “being tempted,” subjected to a test, an “exam.”

The choice is either accepting or rejecting the Father’s plan.

Two men are compared: one—Adam—decides to follow his own misleading judgments; the other—Christ—makes a constant reference to the word of God. The first stretches out his hand towards a fruit of death; the second becomes the author of life.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Create in me, O God, a pure heart, give me a steadfast spirit.”

First Reading: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

At first glance, this story seems very simple and can be understood even by children. On this basis, conclusions on the “original sin” were deduced. These conclusions appear problematic, fragile and unfounded to many.

It is not serious thinking that a snake spoke, that the garden of Eden existed somewhere in the world, that God walked in this garden and that He has given so ridiculous prohibitions, such as not eating a fruit.

It is difficult to accept that we should carry the consequences of an error committed by the first human couple. Why and by whom was it determined that this fault is transmitted as hereditary? Who can still believe that all sufferings depend on the sin of Adam and Eve?

This is about serious objections that require a revision of a certain interpretation of ‘original sin.’ It asks if this is based on the biblical story or derived from the understanding of the literary genre used by the sacred author.

Are Adam and Eve two historical individuals? Are we their poor descendants or are we, Adam and Eve? In other words, is the story of the ‘original sin’ the chronicle of a single fact or is it the story of every man and every woman who today are tempted and seduced by proposals of illusory happiness?

In the difficulties that we have alluded to, one encounters those who do not keep in mind that the passage is not the report of an incident that happened at the beginning of our history, but a myth that explains what we are today. It is not a record, but a wise reflection on the present condition of people. It is a tentative to respond to our riddles and inner torments.

The time is over in which the myth was considered a childhood moment of human thought, a rite of passage before the maturity that would have been achieved with rational thought, with abstract reasoning, with scientific positivism that everyone wants to define and quantify. Today it is undisputed that the myth is an irreplaceable literary genre. It serves to transmit the truth that no rational analysis is able to express.

Reasoning is cold and static. Myth instead may continuously be updated. It provokes more profound insights and arouses more and new forms of thinking.

Reducing chapters 2–3 of Genesis to a simplistic story of the apple means not taking the myth seriously. It is equivalent to ignoring the fact that, in these chapters, something very serious about man and his relationship with God is taught. The desire to attribute at all cost a historical content to the myth, stating that nothing is impossible to God (even making snakes speak) is a risk to be avoided.

The problem is not 'knowing what had happened' but to capture in the myth that truth that fills our lives with meaning. So let us listen to the myth, to understand the images, leaving us to be asked and be involved in the story.

The passage begins by presenting man in a garden where God has made all kinds of pleasant looking trees grow and good fruits to eat. At the center of the garden, there are two untouchable plants: that of life and that of the knowledge of good and evil. They belong to God, not to man. They indicate two limits that cannot be crossed without causing disasters.

The first tree is simply the symbol of God, the giver of all life. Immortality is a fruit to which man cannot lay hands on: this gesture would be equivalent to the rejection of the human condition.

The individual "must" pass through this world, marked by numerous forms of death. It is extremely dangerous for him to dismiss this thought, to elude himself, to regard himself as immortal and to build his own life as if this were his permanent city (Heb 13:14). The psalmist prays to the Lord: "So make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart" (Ps 90:12).

However, this condition is not the last, the definitive one. One day, man will have access to immortality because God will offer it to him. "To the victor, I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in God's paradise" (Rev 2:7). It is an invitation to accept the death and pain of the present, looking towards the world where "there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the world that was has passed away" (Rev 21:4).

The second tree whose fruits cannot be touched is that of knowledge of good and evil. If we give a quick look at the Old Testament, we find that the "science of good and evil" means "to be masters of their own decisions and actions." It indicates the will to be completely autonomous in deciding what is good and what is bad. It is a bold claim to want to establish one's own—defying God or ignoring his fatherly words, which are the correct moral choices! This tree belongs to God. When man forgets that he is a creature and makes himself, like God, knower of good and evil, he self-destructs. He indulges the worst instincts, is guided by pride, wrath, envy and lust. He easily "calls evil good and good evil; changes darkness for light and light for darkness, give bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter" (Is 5:20).

The serpent enters the scene and invites them to take possession of the forbidden fruit.

For many centuries in Israel, no one remembered this "character." The Bible ignores it completely. Only in the century preceding the coming of Christ, the author of the Book of Wisdom identified it with the devil (Wis 2:23-24). It makes one wonder who is this devil who seduces and deceives.

The answer is given by the sacred text: the serpent is the most cunning creature of all animals created by the Lord. It is the highest point of the work he has done: it cannot be but man.

Yes, the serpent is none other but man himself who, reaching the maximum of his pride, becomes aware of his own abilities. He builds up his own moral, claiming to decide in a fully autonomous way.

The serpent represents the will to rise up against God, coming to regard oneself, God. It is the image of man convinced of achieving happiness following his own craftiness. In short: it is that part of man,

which leads him to do without God. One notes the characteristic of the serpent: it is the most cunning but not the wisest.

How to explain this rebellion?

Everything starts from a false image of God, which penetrates the mind like a sneaky and sly serpent. It creeps into the fissure of a rock. It does not make noise, is not noticed, but it is a bringer of death. It leads us to imagine God as a rival of man, as someone preventing him from achieving happiness.

The speech of the serpent is not anything else but the thought from which each sin originates. God does not want the good of man and is jealous of his own power and is detestable because all he does is to prohibit. As long as he exists, man will remain always small and immature. Only when God will be eliminated, man will become an adult, to assert himself, to grow and to progress.

The next step is sin.

The distrust towards God leads us to make choices contrary to his directions. Sin is not born of a search of evil but of good and happiness. The trouble is that, distrusting God, man points at the wrong target, misses the goal and self-destructs. It is a mistake, a lack of wisdom, a senseless cunning.

The reading concludes revealing the awareness of both man and woman of being naked.

At the end of the second chapter, the sacred author has already mentioned the theme of nudity. “Both the man and his wife were naked, but not ashamed” (Gen 2:25). After the sin, however, they do not serenely accept this reality. They try to hide it and feel the need to weave together fig leaves to cover themselves (Gen 3:7).

In the context of this story, nudity has nothing to do—as someone perhaps still believes—with sexuality and the perversion of instincts. It is simply the symbol of the human condition. “Naked I came from my mother’s womb”—is the expression used by Job to describe the reality of man (Job 1:21). Ecclesiastes refers to this same image: “Naked he came from his mother’s womb, he returns as he came” (Ecl 5:14). Stripped of everything that man can put on himself, man remains what he is, with all his limitations, weaknesses and fragility.

The inability to solve all the problems, the moments of dejection and depression, the physical and psychological weaknesses, disability, ignorance, disease... are not cause for shame. They are not losses but the nakedness of man, his natural condition.

A healthy man is not ashamed of this nakedness. He recognizes and accepts it calmly. He loves and manages it according to the plan of God. It is the serpent that lurks inside each person that drives him to refuse it, to consider it a disaster, which instigates to advance the claim to be perfect and without limits, as God.

Second Reading: Romans 5:12-19

The long and intricate argument that Paul makes in this passage from the Letter to the Romans seems to contradict the explanation that we have given to the story of Genesis. Here the Apostle seems to assume that Adam is a clearly identified individual and responsible for all evil. In reality, he is merely taking up (without canonizing it) the rabbinic interpretation of his time. He uses the contrast between Adam and Christ to explain the work of salvation accomplished by Jesus.

Adam wanted to be lord of good and evil and obtained death as a result. Christ, on the contrary, recognized his dependence on God. He was always faithful and obedient to the Father and became the Lord of life. All those who follow him and imitate his obedience will be made righteous.

Between these two ways of being people are invited to make their own choice.

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

During a Bible study held in Africa, a catechist asked me, “When Jesus was led up to the pinnacle of the temple to be tempted, who was walking in front, he or the devil?” This question may be followed by a series of other questions: where is the high mountain from which somebody could see the kingdoms of the world? How could Jesus go so long without eating? What appearance had the devil assumed? Who told Matthew how the events took place? How can one consider Jesus a brother “like us in every respect” (Heb 2:17), even in temptations, if he undergoes tests so different from ours?

The list of difficulties could continue, but these are enough to understand that we are not faced with a track record, but with a theological text.

Mark, the first evangelist, only remembers that, “the Spirit drove him into the desert. Jesus stayed in the desert forty days and was tempted by Satan” (Mk 1:12-13). Using the biblical language and imagery, he meant to say that the whole life of Jesus, represented by the number forty, was a dramatic confrontation between him and the tempter.

In the following years, the reflection of the Christian community had continued. The disciples remembered especially the most dramatic of his temptations, that on the cross when he cried out to the Father: “My God, my God, why have you deserted me?” (Mk 15:34). These words might sound blasphemous to those who do not understand that, at that time, Jesus was praying. He was reciting Psalm 22. As he had done throughout his life, even during the agony he hearkened back to the Scriptures.

How to summarize in a page of catechism this experience of temptation, lasting a lifetime and ending, gradually increasing, on the cross?

The Christian community knew well the Old Testament. They soon noted the parallelism between Israel—the son that God had called out of Egypt and in the desert responded with unfaithfulness to the tenderness of the Father (Hos 11:1-4)—and Jesus, the beloved son who, instead, had always been obedient. Using a literary genre often used by the rabbis—the midrashic haggadah—Matthew exhibited their reflections in the three frameworks that, guided by the Spirit, he took and kept in his gospel.

Jesus’ answers to the tempter refer to three events of the Exodus: the murmurings of the people for the

lack of food and the gift of the manna (Ex 16), the protests for the lack of water (Ex 17), the idolatry represented by the golden calf (Ex 32). Jesus, therefore, relives the history of his people. He is subject to the same temptations and overcomes them.

Let us examine each of these three “parables” that represent, in a schematic way, the wrong ways of dealing with three realities: with things, with God, with people. The first: “Order these stones to turn into bread” (vv. 1-4).

You cannot live without bread. “Eating” is one of the most used verbs in the Bible. It occurs nine hundred and ten times in the Old Testament. This shows how important it is to God that every person has something to eat.

In the desert, the Lord said to Moses: “Now I am going to rain down bread from heaven for you. Each day the people are to gather what is needed for that day. In this way, I will test them. Moses said to the Israelites: ‘Each one gathers as much as he could eat. Let no one leave any of it till morning.’ But they did not listen and some of them left it till morning. It bred worms and became foul” (Ex 16:4,19-20).

It is a typical case of pedagogical temptation: God has placed Israel in front of the manna to educate it in the use of earthly goods and to trust in His providence. Teaching his people to control the greed, God wanted to rescue them from the frenzy of possession and the desire to accumulate food. He did not succeed: the seduction of the goods of this world is almost unstoppable. It is difficult to settle for the “daily bread,” to allow everyone to have enough to live on.

Jesus was tempted to use his ability to produce “bread” for himself. He reacted by referring to Scripture: “One does not live on bread alone, but also from everything that comes from the mouth of God” (Dt 8:3).

The only one who considers his life in the light of the word of God, only he who, like Jeremiah, “devours it with greed” and makes it “the joy and gladness of his heart” (Jer 15:16) is capable of giving the right value to the reality of this world. They are not to be despised, destroyed, rejected, but not considered idols. They are fleeting and transient creatures, not absolute reality.

In this first scene, the wrong way with which one interacts with the material reality is identified. The selfish use of accumulated wealth for oneself, living by the work of others, squandering in luxury and superfluity, while others lack the necessary things, are behaviors dictated by the evil one.

For Christians, Lent is a time of life’s revision and conversion. Faith in the Risen Christ cannot be reduced to a solicitation of alms, to drop a few substantial crumbs from our laden dinner tables. It is rather a provocation to radically revise the way of handling the goods of this world. We can ask, for example, if we have a clear idea of the line of demarcation between the sighted and the greedy: if certain expenses, leisure travels, bank accounts, investments, fabulous sums left as legacy to the children, are compatible with the evangelical choice and the Christian perspective. It is in this world that we live in, the wealth that we have at hand is “dishonest” (Lk 16:9), but this should be managed, taking into account the recommendations of the Master: “I tell you not to be worried about food and drink... The pagans busy themselves with such things. Do not worry about tomorrow” (Mt 6:25-34).

The second temptation: “Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple” (vv. 5-7). The diabolical proposal is even based on the Bible: “It is written ...” says the tempter.

The most insidious wiles of evil is that of presenting itself with an attractive face, assuming a prayerful stance, making use of the same word of God—maybe crippled and so foolishly interpreted—to lead astray.

The ultimate goal of evil is not to cause some moral subsidence, fragility, weakness, but to undermine the relationship with God. This is achieved when, in people’s mind, doubt that the Lord does not keep his promises, misses on his word, ensures his protection but, at crucial moments, abandons who trusted him, creeps in.

The need “to demand proofs” arises from this doubt. In the desert, the people of Israel, exhausted by thirst, succumbed to this temptation, and exclaimed: “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Ex 17:7). It provoked God saying: if he is on our side, if he really accompanies us with his love, manifest himself by giving us a sign, perform a miracle! Israel challenged God to see if He really loved her.

Every person happens to experience similar doubts. Every man has to face this temptation. Not even the prophet Jeremiah was spared. One day he had the feeling of having been betrayed by the Lord. At the height of anguish, he cried to him: “Why do you deceive me, and why does my spring suddenly dries up?” (Jer 15:18).

Even Jesus was subjected to this test but did not budge. Unlike Israel, even in the most dramatic moments of his life, he refused to ask the Father proof of his love. He did not ever doubt his loyalty, even on the cross, confronting the absurdity of what was happening to him, he could have been misled into thinking that the Lord had forsaken him.

We give in to this temptation every time we demand from God the signs of his love when we ask him to be freed by grace and miracles of difficulties, contrarities, and disasters that affect other people.

In every happy or painful situation, we pray to him, not to be granted privileges or change his plans and adapt them to our own, but that they may give us light and strength to come out more mature from each test.

We should not expect that God deals with us in a different way from his beloved Son.

The third temptation: “All this I will give you if you kneel down and worship me” (vv. 8-11). It is the temptation of power, of domination over others.

The choice is between to master and to serve, to compete and to become supportive, to overwhelm and to consider themselves servants. This choice is manifested in every attitude and in every condition of life. One who has attained some learning or has reached a position of prestige can help to grow those who are less lucky than oneself. However, one can also use it to humiliate those who are less gifted. Those who have power and are rich can serve the poorest and most disadvantaged but can lord it over them.

The greed for power is so overwhelming that even those who are poor are tempted to overpower those weaker than them.

Authority is a charisma and is God's gift to the community so that everyone can be in one's place and feel accomplished. Power instead is evil, even if it is exercised in the name of God.

Where dominion is exercised over persons, where people struggle to prevail over others, where someone is forced to kneel or bow down in front of another person, the logic of evil is at work there.

Jesus did not lack the talent to emerge, to climb all the steps of the religious and political power. He was intelligent, lucid, courageous, and charmed the crowds. He certainly would have been successful... but on one condition, that he "worshiped Satan"—to comply with the principles of this world, to compete, to resort to the use of force and oppression, to ally with the powerful and to use their methods. He made the opposite choice: he made himself a servant.

The people of Israel in the desert got tired of their God and worshiped a golden calf: the material idol, the work of human hands. Jesus never bowed down before any idol. He was not seduced by political power, money, the use of weapons, friendship with the great of this world and proposals of success and glory. He always listened only to the word of the Father.

The voice that excites in us the thirst for power that invites to promote the cult of personality is insistent and insidious.

The latter part of the Gospel is an invitation to reconsider our lives and make us aware that privileges, titles, honors, the kissing of hands are not offered by God, but by the tempter. To his children, the Father of Jesus presents only... services humbly rendered to the sisters and brothers.

- See more at: <http://www.bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.JaJBI7yE.dpuf>

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