

## **'The temptation of Jesus Christ – trial and victory'**

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*Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ*

*"God keeps faith and will not let you be tested beyond your powers. –  
1Cor.10,13*

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Collect:

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ fasted for forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are but did not sin. Give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit; and, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Readings: Gen.2,15-17; 3,1-7 / Ps.32 / Rom.5,12-19

Mt.4,1-11:

**Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."'**

**Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."'** Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do 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 splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."'**

**Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.**

Dear friends

It is on behalf of those Jesus has come to save that he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the tempter. As the writer of the letter to the 'Hebrews' later points out, he was to be

tempted “*in every way just as we are*” so that he could “*have real sympathy with our weaknesses*” and “*help us in our time of need*” (Hebr.4,14-16). The reason, however, that he became able to do that was that in these temptations *he did not sin*. Therein lies our help. Not in the fact that we did not sin and have to make up for it, but in the fact that he did not sin and that grace makes up for our lack.

The tempter did not get his way with Jesus, unlike he did and does with us. What we see in these temptations and Jesus’ response to the tempter is really the weakness and perversion of the human heart revealed by its response to temptation.

In being led into the wilderness to be tempted, Jesus, as it were, steps into the ring with the tempter in order to confront the problem of the perversion and weakness of the human heart, so as to save it. It is a campaign which does not conclude until Jesus on the cross says the words ‘It is finished!’ and his subsequent resurrection from the dead which seals the victory and makes it over to us through a living Saviour.

Now, forty days and forty nights of fasting were more than enough to bring Jesus to the point of being laid bare to temptation to the most intense degree. But what point was that? And what kind was it? It was the same point at which the people of Israel found themselves after their liberation from slavery in Egypt, which God had facilitated for them in great power so that they should worship the true and living God and so be his and be free. But in the wilderness, getting hungry and thirsty as their hearts were tested, they got to the point when they began to grumble against God: “This is not good, it certainly is not right! What is the point of taking us here, of bringing us out of Egypt – to die? What future, what life is there here? Nothing but death! Take us back to Egypt where at least we had proper food and drink and – you know – a proper prospect!” Facing the choice between bread or God they chose bread. Facing whether to trust and obey or to grumble against God, they grumbled against God.

But here we ask: Had they no reason to grumble? Did not God give them justifiable reason to grumble against him? Did not God decide to take them into the wilderness and make things hard for them? Let us ask more generally, with a view to when we reach such a point: Is there ever grumbling against God that does not feel justified? It is difficult, isn’t it, when you have cause to grumble against God not to think that you are utterly in the right? (In fact, I *only* grumble when I know I have a right to. Don’t you?)

And this is the tempter’s suggestion – that you are right in your judgment. So the tempter suggested to Israel in the wilderness, so he had tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and so he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Had he succeeded, he would have triumphed in a final way over us all by thwarting the coming of the Spirit. His suggestion to Christ: “You need bread, like your life depends on it you do! And are you not in a position to get yourself some? Keeping your fast and focussing on God will get you killed here. Surely God would not want that!?”

And does this not sound quite reasonable? Does this sound to us like a Satanic bit of advice, like devilish counsel? Hardly. And so it is only in Jesus’ response that the character of the temptation transpires and that we become aware of the perversion and weakness of the heart.

Holding to Scripture, as he does in all temptations, Jesus responds with the verse Deut.8,3: “*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” Jesus understands and, in his response, reveals the tempter’s true game and aim: it is to cut us from the source of life which is the word of God, the word God speaks for us to hear. And the tempter does it (not by taking the bread away, but offering it as the complete thing!) by suggesting that life is a matter of bread alone, that there is no need to hear God’s word when our judgment points another way, hanging on desires and fears governed by “bread alone”.

Is not the inclination of our own mind and heart one of agreement here? Does that not come to the fore when we grumble against God? When we treat God's word as if it was of little use and little truth and when we subject it to our own judgment? When all we hope for in the face of death is to avoid it at all costs and all we fear is what happens this side of it?

But does it not also show in the fact that despite all the bread available and despite the mind's and heart's focus on it, there is a hunger – a hunger that we might realise is not for bread, a hunger for something we don't receive though we are made for it? Well is it put by Jesus when he says: *"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."* (Lk.12,15)

Dear friends, in withstanding the tempter Jesus has done more than prove himself and reveal the weakness of the human heart – he overcame. There in the wilderness, to have it out with the tempter and his work, was the word which proceeds from the mouth of God on which man shall live. This, the truth of Jesus, is the main thing here. He is *"the Word made flesh"* (Jn.1,14), the Word that *"was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* (Jn.1,1-5)

By turning to Jesus and trusting in him, by believing on his name, acknowledging that *"he died for our sins and was raised to life for our justification"* (Rom.4,25), we hear the saving, life-giving Word of God – the word of grace. Through him the tempter is disempowered, and by grace encountered the heart and mind learn to better distinguish between the two words and not to do the vain thing that is the attempt to live by bread alone. AMEN

1

Jesus, tempted in the desert,  
lonely, hungry, filled with dread;  
'Use your power,' the tempter tells him;  
'turn these barren rocks to bread!'  
'Not alone by bread,' he answers,  
'can the human heart be filled.  
Only by the Word that calls us  
is our deepest hunger stilled!'

2

Jesus, tempted at the temple,  
high above its ancient wall:  
'Throw yourself from lofty turret;  
angels wait to break your fall!'  
Jesus shuns such empty marvels,  
feats that fickle crowds request:  
'God, whose grace protects, preserves us,  
we must never vainly test.'

3

Jesus, tempted on the mountain  
by the lure of vast domain:  
'Fall before me! Be my servant!  
Glory, fame, you're sure to gain!'

Jesus sees the dazzling vision,  
turns his eyes another way:  
'God alone deserves our homage!  
God alone will I obey.'

4

When we face temptation's power,  
lonely, struggling, filled with dread,  
Christ, who knew the tempter's hour,  
come and be our living bread,  
By your grace, protect, preserve us  
lest we fall, your trust betray.  
Yours, above all other voices,  
be the Word we hear, obey.

Herman, G Stuempfle, Jr. (CH4 338)

Lord God, you are the Creator of mankind and know the ways and habits of the heart and of the mind. You test the heart and you search us, you know our weaknesses and how we fail in the temptations that assail us. What we should have mastery over too often has mastery over us. But Christ is strong and you have made his victory over the tempter count for us all in grace and forgiveness. We thank and praise you; and we pray you give us grace to face in the strength of Christ the temptations to deny your word, to prefer our will to yours and to worship and serve empty and vain things in your place. We confess that we don't know how else we shall ever attain to a pure heart. Keep our mind stayed on your word and guard our hearts in Christ.

- time of prayer / intercession –

***'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen***

Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.  
And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among  
you and remain with you.

AMEN