

The Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent

Matthew 4: 1-11

1. This story must be read with its immediate predecessor, the story of **Jesus' Baptism**. In that story Jesus is identified
 - as God's Son ("*This is my Son*")
 - and as God's Servant ("*my Chosen One*"; compare Ps 2:7 "*You are my Son, today I have fathered you,*" and Is 42: "*Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights*");
 - and as the inaugurator of a new exodus and a new creation: "*he at once came up from the water*"- and will then go out to wander in the desert and suffer temptation. "*He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him*": compare Gen 1: 2 , the Creation story: "*The Spirit of God hovered over the waters*"- a "hovering" often compared to that of a dove by Rabbinic writers)
 - and as the one who fulfil all righteousness ("*It is fitting that we should in this way do what righteousness demands*"- as Jesus' followers must seek to do, see Mt 5: 6 and 6: 33)

2. The Israelites in the wilderness were subjected to *peirasmos*, "testing"; they also sinned at the waters of Meribah, where they reversed the order and "put God to the test" (Ps 94). This "testing" has a long and venerable ancestry: God *tested* Abraham on mount Moriah; uncharacteristically he passed the test and proved his fidelity. Jesus is therefore in the tradition of his ancestors.

3. How does Matthew treat the temptation story?

First, remember that in Mt 26:36-46, at Gethsemane, which is also a scene of *peirasmos*, Jesus withdraws from his disciples *three times*. "*Pray not to be put to the test*")

In Mt 26:69-75, where Peter is tested in the Passion, he will deny Jesus *three times*.

Second, the temptations of Jesus move from a low place to a high place (*desert, pinnacle, mountain*) as the intensity of the testing increases.

Third, Jesus in every temptation quotes the book of Deuteronomy, chs. 6 - 8. This is the key to the whole story: what we have here is a story which has been drawn from reflection on *Israel in the desert*. This kind of story is called a *haggadah* by the rabbis. Here is Deuteronomy 8: 2-3:

*And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these **forty** years **in the wilderness**, that he might humble you, **testing you** to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you **hunger***

Rabbis were used to disputation involving the firing of texts at each other: this is what Jesus and Satan do in the account. Here is a particular rabbinic text which speaks of the *Shema Yisrael* of Dt 6: 5, which observant Jews repeat three times every day:

"You shall love the Lord your God....

"with your whole heart", meaning "with both good and the evil inclinations": this links perfectly with the craving for food in our text.

"with your whole soul" means "even if God should take your life from you": this links with the temptation to throw himself off the temple.

"with your whole might" means "with all your property": which links with the devil's offer to give Jesus all the world as his possession.

4. The First Temptation.
This is the full text of **Deuteronomy 8: 1-10**

You must keep and put into practice all the commandments which I enjoin on you today, so that you may survive and increase in numbers and enter the country which Yahweh promised on oath to your ancestors, and make it your own. Remember the long road by which Yahweh your God led you for forty years in the desert, to humble you, to test you, and to know your inmost heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. He humbled you, he made you feel hunger, he fed you with manna which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, to make you understand that human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. The clothes on your back did not wear out, and your feet were not swollen, all those forty years.

Learn from this that Yahweh your God was training you as a man trains his child, and keep the commandments of Yahweh your God, and so follow his ways and fear him.

But Yahweh your God is bringing you into a fine country, a land of streams and springs, of waters that well up in the deeps in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines, of figs and of pomegranates, a land of olives, of oil and of honey, a land where you will eat bread without stint, where you will want for nothing, a land where the stones are iron and the hills may be quarried for copper. You will eat and have all you want and you will bless Yahweh your God in the fine country which he has given you.

5 The Second Temptation
The devil cites **Psalms 91**:

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and spend your nights in the shade of the Almighty, saying to the Lord *My refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust!*

He rescues you from the snare of the fowler set on destruction; he covers you with his pinions, you find shelter under his wings, his constancy is shield and protection.

You need not fear the terrors of night, the arrow that flies in the daytime, the plague that stalks in the darkness, the scourge that lays waste at noon. Though a thousand fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, you yourself will remain unscathed. You have only to keep your eyes open to see how the wicked are repaid; you who say *Lord, my refuge*, and make the Most High your fortress.

No disaster can overtake you, no plague come near your tent: he has given his angels their orders about you, to guard you wherever you go. They will carry you in their arms, lest you trip against a stone. You will walk on wild beast and viper, you will trample young lions and snakes.

(God says:) "Since he clings to me I will rescue him, I raise him high since he acknowledges my name. He calls to me and I answer him, in distress I am at his side. I rescue him and bring him honour. I shall satisfy him with long life, and grant him to see my salvation".

Jesus replies with **Deuteronomy 6: 16** (here in bold):

Do not follow other gods, gods of the people around you, for Yahweh your God among you is a jealous God; the wrath of Yahweh your God would blaze out against you, and he would wipe you off the face of the earth. **Do not put Yahweh your God to the test** as you tested him at Massah. Keep the commandments of Yahweh your God, and his instructions and laws which he has laid down for you, and do what Yahweh regards as right and good, so that you may prosper, and take possession of the fine country which Yahweh swore to give to your ancestors, driving out your enemies before you: such was Yahweh's promise.

6 The Third Temptation
Jesus replies from **Deuteronomy 6: 13** (here in bold):

When Yahweh has brought you into the country he swore to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would give you, with great and prosperous cities you have not built, with houses full of good things you have not provided, with wells you have not dug, with vineyards and olive trees you have not planted, and then, when you have eaten as much as you want, be careful you do not forget Yahweh who has brought you out of Egypt, out of the place of slave labour. **Yahweh your God is the one you must fear: him alone you must serve;** his is the name by which you must swear.