



## Remaining In The Desert

On the first Sunday of Lent the Church always presents us the scene where Jesus is tempted by the devil in the desert. During the B cycle we listen to Mark's account. He doesn't give us too many details of how this came about, but with his characteristic simplicity tells us that Jesus "remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan" (Mk 1:13). The word "remained" struck me in a particular way. Jesus asks us to remain in his love (see Jn 15:9); this is certainly good, but why would you remain in the place where you are being tempted? Would it not be wiser to run away?

I am afraid that, till now, unconsciously, I had a bit of an image of Jesus in this scene as some kind of superhero, the image of total self-control and sobriety. He would be the perfect model of the one who makes a good resolution for Lent and keeps it to the end, instead of forgetting about it after the fifth day and, three days before Holy Week, wonders: what happened with that good thing I was going to do? Where does time go? But praying with Mark's gospel has helped me to see things differently.

Jesus, in his baptism, has just been reaffirmed in his true identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved; in whom I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11). He knows who he is and he doesn't have to prove it to anyone. He does not go to the desert because he wants to meditate or to fulfill some kind of self-imposed penance. He is being docile to the Spirit, who is leading him to the place where he will engage in battle with the evil one.

He has embraced our sins as he has been baptized by John, and he has turned the waters of repentance into the source of salvation for all of us. He has erased our sins but not our inclination to sin—what is properly called our concupiscence—and he wants to make his this reality too, so that we understand that in all circumstances we are also beloved sons and daughters of the Father. Jesus makes himself most vulnerable in the desert and on the cross. In both places he overcomes Satan in the weakness of his own flesh, the flesh he has made his by becoming incarnate; in all things like us except sin. His acts of healing and his exorcisms show us how his power can overcome sin and evil in our humanity, but the first and the last battle he fights for us in himself. Is it not so for all of us?

Jesus chose to remain forty days in the desert while he was being tempted just as he chose to hang upon the cross. He did not run from his own weakness, and he invites us to do the same. There is where he is going to save me. Lent, like all Christian life, is not a plan for saving myself but for embracing God's salvation in the unique circumstances of my own life and my own being. St. Paul experienced this reality in himself when he said: "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2Cor 12:10). In our own weakness we feel the ferocity of the "wild beasts" (Mk 1:13) that surround us, but only there we are also "waited by angels" (Mk 1:13)—there grace can reach us in particular and powerful way.

If you are discerning your vocation, you may need, especially during these days of Lent, to make yourself vulnerable to God's grace, that is, to embrace your own weakness. Don't run away from your doubts, fears, and conflicting desires, from all the things that escape your control. Don't enter into dialogue with them either, just as Jesus recognized the presence of the devil, but did not follow his suggestions. When we become aware of our temptations, we can treat them as such, and we are less prone to give in to them. This is a great step towards true self-knowledge.

Remaining in the desert may mean for us to remain in our hearts and not so much in our heads and our own plans for the future. It may mean to remain in those realities in us that are painful because we cannot fix them ourselves. It may also mean that we need to accept that things are not moving as fast as we wanted, or that we do not have all the clarity that we were counting on to move in one or other direction. If the Spirit is leading you to this interior space of uncertainty and even interior struggle, don't run away from it, Jesus wants to have his victory; your victory, right there. Easter will come, if only we dare to live our Lent now.

And finally: "repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15). Only you know what you need to repent from, but I will dare to suggest something: maybe the act of repentance and that of believing are very much one. Maybe you and I need to repent from believing too little that Jesus has "good news" for us, that he has a victory of joy and peace to offer us, a victory of love that does not exclude our weakness but embraces it in a new identity, that of being his beloved.