

## Gospel text

### **Matthew 4: 1-11**

1 Then Jesus was driven by the spirit into the desert where he was tested by the devil. 2 After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he finally became hungry. 3 Then the tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread with your word. 4 But Jesus answered, "The Scripture tells us that man cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." 5 Then the devil takes him to the holy city and places him on the ledge of the temple, 6 and says to him, "If you are a son of God, throw yourself down, for the Scripture says, 'He will give orders to your angels to carry you in their hands, so that your foot will not hit a stone.'" 7 But Jesus said to him, "The Scripture says again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain to show him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 Then he said to him, "All these things I will give you if you will kneel down and bow down to me." 10 But Jesus said to him, "Go away, Satan. For the Scripture says, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and to him alone shall you worship.'" 11 So the devil left him alone, and behold, angels came to serve him.

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## Gospel commentary - Homily

### **Who are we as human beings?**

All I have to do is open a page of today's newspaper to be immediately exposed to all the failings of humans. For example, this entry:

Mauritania's judiciary had former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz arrested Tuesday afternoon on the eve of a trial where he will face charges of abusing power to amass a huge fortune, one of his lawyers said.

Then, on the next page, a file that explains the riots in Peru:

On Dec. 7, the Peruvian Congress, made up of 120 elected officials, was scheduled to vote on the impeachment of Pedro Castillo. The president was accused of corruption. In office since July 2021, Mr. Castillo decided to dissolve the Congress before this vote, announcing that he was going to govern by decree. The move was denounced as an attempted coup, leading to his impeachment and imprisonment.

The accusation of corruption comes up so often that one wonders if it is not a common practice that is part of being human. In any case, this temptation is so strong that few people resist it. But who are we as human beings?

As surprising as it may seem, today's gospel, called the story of the temptation of Jesus, offers us an entry into what it means to be human. To read this story properly, we must replace the word "Jesus" by "me" or "the human being". For this story is simply a theatrical production of the whole of Jesus' life, giving us an inside view of the choices he had to make as an incarnate being, assuming our human life in all its dimensions. To look at him is to look at ourselves.

The story is set in a deserted, uninhabited place. Why is this so? It is in the silence that we are confronted with ourselves, with the choices we have to make, without being distracted by the noise of our occupations.

The first choice concerns our body, our biological needs. We need to eat and drink, and even to eat and drink well. And we have sexual needs that are part of our being. Now, the tempter proposes to Jesus to use his capacities to put them at the service of these needs. What is the problem, since these are legitimate needs? The problem is twofold. First of all, these are the only needs identified, whereas our needs are so much broader. To speak of every word coming from the mouth of God as Jesus does, quoting Scripture, refers to everything God says about human beings: they are sons and daughters who are loved by a Father who watches over each one of them, entrusts them with a mission and wants to integrate them into a people. Thus, we do not only need food, we also need to love and be loved, to feel important and supported, to perceive that our life has a meaning. When we forget these needs, knowingly or unknowingly, the needs of the body take all the place with all the possible distortions and a form of mal de vivre. There is also another problem in the choice proposed by the tempter: the capacities are oriented only towards our own needs, forgetting the needs of others. The word of God constantly speaks of the needs of our brothers and sisters. This is the first choice to be made.

The second choice concerns the acceptance of the human condition. When the tempter proposes to Jesus to throw himself down from the ledge of the temple, the highest building in Palestine, with the assurance that God will see to it that there will be no impact on his messiah, he is proposing to him to escape from what is proper to the human condition: the possibility of dying, suffering, injuries, handicaps, accidents. And we too, how we would like to not worry about death, to never suffer, to never be sick, to never have any pain, to never suffer any accident or injury, to never grow old, to never be diminished, to never have a handicap. To accept the human condition is to accept all of this. Not that we want all these misfortunes to come. But to accept life is to accept its sorrows as well as its joys. Jesus' answer refers to the story of the Jews who had fled Egypt and who, hungry and thirsty, complained about their condition, and thus asked the question: Is the Lord among us, yes or no? The Jews then want to submit God to their will, i.e. to be God. Surprising as it may seem, the second choice has to do with the recognition that we are not God.

The third choice is about a desire that runs extremely deep in human beings, the desire to control everything and thus to exercise power over one's destiny. The only way to fulfill this desire is to have authority over everything. If we believe the

tempter, who showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, this is what all kings, dictators or tyrants do when they exercise absolute authority over their kingdom. And if the tempter is to be believed, this authority does not come from God, but from Satan himself, for such authority is exercised not by love, but by fear, repression, violence and summary executions. Now, by asking Jesus to bow down to him, the tempter asks Jesus to submit to the logic of power that is exercised by force, fear and violence. A human being who enters politics is very soon called to make a choice of this kind. And we ourselves, on a small scale, do not like to feel vulnerable and to see our destiny in the hands of others: as we would like to have control over everything. The same is true at the corporate and government level: we strive to have complete control over the supply chain. Jesus' answer to the tempter can be summarized as follows: God alone will be an absolute authority in your life. What does this mean? First of all, no human being, including gurus and sages, can be an absolute authority. Secondly, to speak of the authority of God is to speak of the authority of an infinite mystery, and therefore means that the search for truth is a constant and never-ending quest, which obliges us to continually surpass ourselves, based on the light left by Jesus and his Spirit of love poured into the hearts of humans. In short, the third choice is between authority and power at all costs or faith always on the move and a fundamental trust in life.

Matthew's account ends with Mark's text: after Satan or the devil leaves, God's angels are at his service, i.e. Jesus' needs will be truly met by God throughout his life.

Who are we as human beings, we asked. We are that free being who is constantly called to make choices. When a politician gives in to corruption or repression, we know what choice he has made. The gospel reveals to us the choices Jesus made. What are ours?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, January 2023