

A391 Dominica I in Quadragesima – Sermo unicus

**St. Vincent Ferrer - Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent –
The Temptation in the Desert – Mt 4:1-11**

Mt 4:1-11 Douay trans.

1 Then Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert, to be tempted by the devil. 2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterwards he was hungry. 3 And the tempter coming said to him: If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. 4 Who answered and said: It is written, Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God. 5 Then the devil took him up into the holy city, and set him upon the pinnacle of the temple, 6 And said to him: If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down, for it is written: That he hath given his angels charge over thee, and in their hands shall they bear thee up, lest perhaps thou dash thy foot against a stone. 7 Jesus said to him: It is written again: Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. 8 Again the devil took him up into a very high mountain, and shewed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, 9 And said to him: All these will I give thee, if falling down thou wilt adore me. 10 Then Jesus saith to him: Begone, Satan: for it is written, The Lord thy God shalt thou adore, and him only shalt thou serve. 11 Then the devil left him; and behold angels came and ministered to him.

"And behold angels came and ministered to him," (Mt 4:11) Today's gospel tells us of the holy fast of Jesus. The four points are as follows:

- First, a convenient location,
- Second, a sufficient time during which he fasted,
- Third, an appropriate manner how he fasted,
- Fourth the fruit which resulted from the fast.

And about this fourth the theme speaks, "...angels came." etc. The fruits of what follows from the fast, because the angels came...etc.

LOCATION

I say that today's gospel tells us about the holy fast; and first, the convenient place where he fasted. Notice that when Christ wished to fast for forty days, he chose not to fast in the city of Bethlehem, where he was born, nor in the temple where he was presented, nor in Nazareth where he was nourished, nor among men, but in the desert which is the habitat of beasts. This he says at the beginning of the gospel, "Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert," (Mt 4:2) – supply, wishing to fast – and this location was very appropriate. The reason is because of the fittingness which the desert offers for the purpose of the fast. A fast is ordered to a three-fold end; namely restraining, liberating and merit.

First for restraining sins and vices, which for the most part happen from the inclinations of the flesh. Because of this fasts are ordered for refraining. For just as in the case of a stupid man who is armed, the arms with which he could do much harm, are taken away, so likewise the body of man, stupid, armed with food and drink and other delights, which God gave us for the necessity of nature, when indiscreetly taken, often kill the soul. So they should be prudently taken away and removed from him.

Second, a fast is ordered for freeing the soul, which, as long as it is united to the body, is much impeded by the body in spiritual goods. And so it is said, "For the corruptible body is a load upon the soul," (Wis 9:15). So that the soul might be free for working spiritually, the flesh is restrained through fastings, and so the soul is raised freely to God. It's like a scale. When one side is weighed down, the other is raised, and vice versa.

Third, [a fast is ordered] for meriting and acquiring spiritual treasure, because just as through the whole year a man works for the needs of the body, so, by fasting, at least in this holy season, you labor for the soul. Thus the Apostle, "...every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labor," (1 Cor 3:8). For all of these reasons, see the authority of blessed Gregory [the Great], who says, "You who restrain your vices by a bodily fast," –note the first, to restrain – "you raise your mind," – see the second, namely, to free the soul – "you will receive virtue and rewards," – see the third, to merit. Thus the triple ends of fasting very much fit a desert place, where vices are restrained, because you do not have the occasion of sinning, nor by seeing with your eyes, etc. and so for the other senses. It is clear, therefore, that the desert is the convenient place for a fast.

Thus about that text, "Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert," blessed Gregory say in his homily today, "some are accustomed to doubt by which spirit Jesus is led into the desert? Truly and without any question it is appropriately understood that by the Holy Spirit he is believed to be led into the desert." But some might say " These reasons are not appropriate for Christ, who in his body never had any bad inclinations. Also neither is his soul impeded by the flesh, and that he had merited his complete blessings. Also, because already he merits both as God and as man.

I respond that regarding the person of Christ there is a good reason. For he did this so that he might give us an example, that in the time of the fast we might go to the desert leaving our cities, villages and communities. Understand it this way, that in the holy time we set aside our daily business, problems and conflicts etc. The model here is given for all. First to the religious and clerics. In this holy time [of lent] it is enough that they are occupied about the hours and the office. Workers however in this holy time ought to hear Mass and a sermon, if there is preaching in some place, the first thing in the morning and afterwards go about their business, so that they might provide for their children and household. The wealthy ought to get up in the morning for worship. They should hear a high Mass and a sermon, and afterwards pray the psalms after Mass, praying up to lunchtime. Those rich people who don't know the psalms, after Mass, should visit churches, monasteries and hospitals for praying, where often there are many indulgences. After lunch then they can take a nap. Finally, they should go to Compline, [night prayer], and afterwards say Vespers [evensong] or the seven penitential psalms or the Our Father, etc. This is how someone goes out to the desert.

The great king David believed this, saying of himself, "Lo, I have gone far off flying away; and I abode in the wilderness. I waited for him who has saved me from pusillanimity of spirit, and a storm," (Ps 54:8f). We don't read that David, after he was crowned king, was in the desert, but he remained alone in his palace room, far from his

business, and so he achieves his purpose, "I waited for him who has saved me." And the fruit of his merits," from pusillanimity of spirit," –see the freedom of the soul – "and a storm," – supply, of the evil inclinations of the spirit. It is clear then, [the desert is] a convenient place for a fast.

TIME

I say secondly, etc. that the duration of forty days was sufficient. For the text says that he fasted forty days and forty nights. And why does it say forty nights? I respond that this is said to differentiate the fast of the Jews who of old fasted through the day, and at night would eat their fill, just as the Muslims do. Don't believe that the fast of Christ in that forty days and forty nights was like that, because he consumed nothing.

Nevertheless, the duration of forty days and forty nights was sufficient. Reason: Because already you know that all God's commandments are ten in number, in which all others are fundamentally included. Just as God gave ten fingers to the body for doing all things, so he gave ten commandments, like ten fingers, for working meritoriously. These commandments we break in four ways, namely by thought, word, deed and omission.

- By thought we break two precepts especially, that: You shall not desire your neighbor's wife, because it does not suffice to keep the body clean from this deed, but also the soul from the thought. Secondly that: You shall not desire your neighbor's house nor anything which is his. From desires arise divisions and war, and so it is said, "For the desire of money is the root of all evils," (1 Tim. 6:10).

- By speech we break two other commandments, namely that: You shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, because one should never swear unless out of necessity or usefulness. And the other: Thou shalt not bear false witness, for whatever reason, neither in court or outside.

- By deed we break four, namely: Thou shall not worship other gods. Thou shall not kill. Thou shall not commit adultery. Thou shall not steal.

- By omission we break two, namely: Not keeping the holy days, and not honoring our parents.

Therefore by these four ways we break the ten commandments, and four times ten equals forty. For this reason we undertake forty days of penance, because we sin 4 x 10 [ways] because of the flesh. And so Gregory: "Through mortal wills of the flesh we break the Lord's commandments, which were received in the Decalogue, because therefore through the desires of the flesh we show contempt for the commandments of the Decalogue, it is fitting that we afflict the same flesh forty times." Behold, therefore, it is a sufficient time that Christ fasted, giving us an example.

Now there is here a three-part question about Christ, since Christ fasted in the desert for forty days. And the first question is, where did he sleep? Second, what did he do? Third, what company did he keep?

Now listen devoutly, for the evangelists have not said expressly where he was sleeping, but often through symbols the truth can be elicited, just as from a husk the grain can be extracted. Christ's sleeping in the desert was prefigured in the patriarch Jacob. When he was a pilgrim and traveler from Canaan to Mesopotamia, he passed through parts of this desert. At night when he wished to sleep he put a stone under his head and in the night he saw the heaven opened and a ladder etc. See the story found in Genesis 28. All the [church] teachers say that Jacob signifies Christ. The ladder, penance. You have forty rungs for fasting. Some [people] ascend continuing their fasting, some descend breaking their fast. And Jacob, excited, was afraid, and he trembled at this vision. To him it was divinely revealed that Christ, the Savior of the world, would fast there and sleep at that place. Then Jacob said, "Indeed the Lord is in this place," (Gen 28:16). The first question is clear.

But contemplate this a while. Christ began his fast on the day after the Epiphany [his Baptism], when it was the coldest, and he was sleeping on the ground then, giving us an example, that in this holy season we should set aside our linens, mattress and [such] luxuries. And so David said, "Blessed is he who understands concerning the needy and the poor: the Lord will deliver him in the evil day...The Lord help him on his bed of sorrow: thou hast turned all his couch in his sickness." (Ps. 40:2,4)

The second question: What was the man Christ doing? both because he was not working with his hands, and since he stayed forty days, was he not idle? The text doesn't clearly tell what he was doing, but Luke elsewhere says what Christ was doing in the desert: "And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and he passed the whole night in the prayer of God." (Lk. 6:12). Therefore he would spend his nights in dreaming and in prayer. But during the day what was he doing? I reply, that in three activities, namely in reading, in contemplating and in praying.

-- Of the first he was reading in the book which he always had with him, the greater part of the whole bible, namely the book of life, i.e. of the knowledge of God in which is written all the things that ever were, are, or can be. And every day Jesus Christ was reading this whole book, reading the first chapter, namely of the glory of Paradise. And second, of the arrangement of the angels. Third, of the penalties of the damned. Fourth, of the sufferings of those in purgatory, and so on. Also about the natures of the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the animals of the earth. And all these he was seeing not only in general but even in particular, in their individuality, not only as God but also as man.

-- Second, he spent time in contemplating all these things.

-- As for the third, after the previous reading and contemplation, he was praying saying the prayer which later he would teach us, namely the Our Father. For

"Jesus began to do and to teach," (Acts 1:1). and in our person he himself would say "Our Father." And, "forgive us, etc.," because just as the mouth speaks for the feet and the other members, so Christ as the head, speaks in the person of his members. In these [activities] therefore we should be about in this lenten time after the example of Christ. So he was saying, "Labor not for the meat which perishes," namely, the business of this world, "but for that which endures unto life everlasting," (Jn 6:27) namely, meritorious works.

The third question, Whose company did he keep? I say, that of wild animals, and beasts and robbers. Of beasts, it is said in Mark 1 that in that jungle (frondoso) desert there were lions, bears, wolves and many other animals. The text says: " And he was in the desert forty days and forty nights, and was tempted by Satan; and he was with beasts, and the angels ministered to him," (Mk 1:13). Practically, you can imagine that the aforesaid animals hid during the day in caves, and at night they went out to eat. And when they saw Christ we are able to say that, just as the ox and the ass adored Christ, so also [these] etc. This was the company Christ kept at night. During the day he had the company of thieves and other evildoers. For that desert is between Jerusalem and Jericho, of which Luke 10 says, "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers," (Lk 10:30). Here the place is called "adumim" in Hebrew, and is translated "redland" or "red rise." This place, where the man fell among robbers, is cruel and bloody. Imagine how it was when the robbers spied him from afar, they would approach to see if by chance he might have some money. But Jesus Christ changed their hearts and wills, and they showed Christ a great reverence. So we, in a moral sense, dwell with the beasts, the wild beasts of sin, thinking how we have lived like beasts, by sinning etc. Among robbers, thinking how by sinning, by appropriating honor and grace for ourselves, we have robbed God of [his due] honor and reverence and fear. On this account David said: " Not to us, O Lord, not to us; but to thy name give glory," (Ps 113:9).

MANNER

Third, the way in which Christ fasted, who overcame the temptation of the devil, is seen to be fitting. The teachers and especially the Master of History says that when in the baptism of Christ the voice of the Father sounded saying, This is my beloved Son, " You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased," (Lk 3:22), he says that the devil heard this voice. He already knew that the time for the Messiah was completed, and so when he saw the miracles of Christ he concluded that he was the Son of God. But when he saw him hungry, he suspected the opposite. For this reason he wished to tempt him.

Taking a human form and in the robe of a holy man, he saluted him. To whom Christ, responding, said, "You have come. You do not believe." Briefly he spoke to Christ, " If you be the Son of God...", (Lk 4:3). But the evangelist leaves it to us that we might touch on the practical point. So note, when the devil came to Christ himself saluting him he said: "Some are thinking that you are the Son of God. For the Son of God of old changed the staff of Moses into a snake, the water of Egypt into blood, (Ex 7), the wife of Lot into a pillar of salt. (Gen 19). So " If you be the Son of God, command that

these stones be made bread," (Mt 4:3) And replying, Jesus said: " It is written, Not in bread alone does man live, but in every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," (Mt 4:4; Deut 8:3). See how appropriate this is for us, because when we fast now, the devil tempts us saying, "command that these stones be made bread," (v.3)etc. We impatiently complain using harsh and cruel words, if our dinner is not ready or something else etc.

Second temptation. The devil, defeated by Christ in the first temptation from scripture, "Not in bread alone, etc." taking the next move from the fact that scripture, the word of God, is taught in the temple, proceeds to the second temptation, saying , "Are you willing that we go to the city to the temple? Christ, however, as a good soldier, wishing to present himself to his enemy in every situation, followed him to the temple, where there was a great crowd of people gathered. Then the devil said to Christ, "Are you willing that we ascend to the pinnacle? because there we can pray more privately." And when they were on the very top, the devil said to Christ, "Look at the crowd of people are here below! There are many who do not believe you to be the Son of God, so, 'throw yourself down,'(v. 6)" because it is written of you, " For he has given his angels charge over you; to keep you in all your ways," (Ps 90:11). Christ said to him, "It is written again: You shall not tempt the Lord your God," (v.7). Here Christ gives an example to spiritual and devout people. When the devil tempts them to vainglory, they should stand firm, lest they fall.

The devil, seeing that Christ excused himself, so he would not incur vainglory, wished to tempt him again, and said to Christ, "Let us go to the desert, to a mountain high enough where we will be alone and can pray" And when they were on the mountain the devil showed Christ every corner of the earth, saying that all was his and he was able to give it to whomever he wished – but he lied – and he said " All this will I give you, if falling down you will adore me." (v. 9). Christ, who in the other temptations patiently excused himself, in this temptation became indignant and shouted out saying, "Be gone, Satan: for it is written, The Lord your God shall you adore, and him only shall you serve,"(v. 10; Deut 6:13). But why?

Chrysostom says that some temptations touched on humility, but this touched on adoring the divinity, and on the crown of God, etc. St. Jerome says that Christ here gives us an example that we should tolerate injuries to our person, but those which touch upon God we should rebuke indignantly. Chrysostom: In all personal injuries it is praiseworthy to be patient; injuries to God, however it is not wrong to rebuke to the utmost. Note the story about St. Louis the king of France who was used to brand the tongues of those who blasphemed God. A proof from the prophets: Isaiah 52 " They who rule over them treat them unjustly, says the Lord, and my name is continually blasphemed all the day long."(Isa 52:5).

REWARD

Fourth. The fruit resulting from fasting, is shown in the theme, when it is said: "And behold angels came," (Mt 4:11). Here is an image you can understand. It is like this, when two great lords, or princes, fight a duel in a closed arena, where the king keeps

the field secure, and the friends and the army of both await the outcome on one side and the other. And when the battle is over, the defeated one flees with his entourage and servants, and the friends of the victor joyfully rush out to him with all the assistance necessary.

So it was with Christ and Lucifer, the greater princes of the world, as the Master of History says, but differently, for Christ is the prince of holiness and Lucifer of iniquity. Today they fought a duel, and God the Father kept the arena secure. Christ, as Chrysostom tells us, commanded the angels to stand back so they wouldn't be seen by Lucifer. Lucifer did the same with his minions, and only the two entered the arena. The weapons of the devil were three: the lance, the sword and the dagger. With the lance of pride and vainglory, with the dagger of gluttony and with the sword of avarice he tempted Christ and approached him. Lucifer himself had slain many with these weapons, but they could not harm Christ in any way. So, vanquished, he fled. And so it is of Christ the theme speaks, "and behold angels came and ministered to him," (v.11).

But how did they minister to him? Note that Christ was most in need of food, so they ministered to him in this way. Some devout contemplatives have said that the holy angels hastened to the Virgin Mary, who did not know anything of her son nor where he was. They told her of his battle and victory. When she heard from them the story of his victory, she sent him some food which she had prepared for him: cabbage, bread, spinach and perhaps some sardines, asking the angels if she could go to him, or if he could come to her, for lunch. Thus did the angels approach and minister to him.

So will it be for us. Now, in lent, we are in a battle with the devil in a closed stadium. If we are victors over gluttony, vainglory and avarice, when the battle is over, on Easter day the angels will come, that is, the priests, and they will minister the food which the Virgin Mary prepared for us, at least materially – the Holy Spirit effectively – in the oven of her virginal womb, namely the body of Christ, in the consecrated host. Thus Christ says, "To him who overcomes, I will give the hidden manna, ... which no man knows, but he who receives it," (Rev 2:17).

Greg., Hom. in Ev., 16, 1: Some doubt what Spirit it was that led Jesus into the desert, for that it is said after, "The Devil took him into the holy city." But true and without question agreeable to the context is the received opinion, that it was the Holy Spirit; that His own Spirit should lead Him thither where the evil spirit should find Him and try Him.

Greg., Hom. in Ev., 16, 5: The Creator of all things took no food whatever during forty days. We also, at the season of Lent as much as in us lies afflict our flesh by abstinence. The number forty is preserved, because the virtue of the decalogue is fulfilled in the books of the holy Gospel; and ten taken four times amounts to forty. Or, because in this mortal body we consist of four elements by the delights of which we go against the Lord's precepts received by the decalogue. And as we transgress the decalogue through the lusts of this flesh, it is fitting that we afflict the flesh forty-fold.