

## Jesus' Temptation in the Desert and the Mission of Evangelization

On the first Sunday of Lent, we receive St. Mark's account of Jesus' temptation in the desert and the beginning of his evangelical ministry. When reading this account in Scripture, we see a word that Mark uses quite frequently throughout his gospel: "at once." The Greek is *euthys*, which is also translated as "immediately." I am sure many of us may have felt surprised that the season of Lent has already come upon us, and without us realizing it we are "at once" plunged into this penitential season.

Our Christian tradition has recognized that spiritual battle is always a part of life in Christ. Of course, we can recognize that the entire drama of human history is one of struggle against the powers of evil. And following the example of our Lord, who in human solidarity entered freely into this struggle, we are immediately driven into this world, which is a spiritual desert, a place where the battle with sin and temptation is at hand, a place "among wild beasts." And just like our Lord, the human weapons that we are given to fight against sin and temptation in order to repel the enemy from our lives, are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It is a time of perseverance against a wily and cunning enemy who sadly knows our thoughts and our desires and is ever so quick to use them against us.

We must remember that our Father in Heaven allows us to be tempted. But why you might ask? Because these are the opportunities the Lord has given us in which our mettle is tested. The desert has always symbolized a period of testing. Think about how St. Anthony and those who developed the earliest monastic traditions left the comfort of cities and towns to live in the desert. In Middle Eastern warfare, the most significant battles were waged in the desert. And to carry this analogy forward, the most feared and effective military units are those that have already been battled tested. Commanders send

their most experienced and tested units on the most important missions, for they have already been proven. This whole liturgical season of Lent, these 40 days, are providentially designed to make us stronger, to be battle tested. But to what end? St. Mark tells us why, for immediately after Jesus' own battle against temptation with the Devil, we hear him preaching the gospel in Galilee. John's mission has ended, it is "the time of fulfillment" for Christ's mission of evangelization has begun. And so it is for us. For our period of testing prepares us for the most important of missions in this period of Lent. The Spirit is driving us into the desert with our Lord, so that we might be better able to bring the joy of Easter to the whole world on the other side.

So this Lent, let us look at our penitential practices not as simply obligations, but as means that make us stronger for mission, for evangelization. And let us do so joyfully, knowing that Jesus is there with us, and the angels will be there to minister to us in our times of weakness or struggle. Therefore, we too may help people repent, and believe the kingdom of God is truly at hand.