

Meditations: Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during this season of Lent.

- The desert trial
- Value of material goods
- Looking to the Cross for healing

AFTER CROSSING the Red Sea, the Jewish people must have experienced a deep sense of freedom. Watching the walls of water fall over their pursuers would have brought home to them their liberation. After so many years of slavery, their God had saved them.

But as time went by, the promised land seemed ever more distant, and some even remembered with nostalgia their life as slaves. *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”* (Num 21:5). The joy of being saved had given way to dissatisfaction and resentment.

Jesus also went through a trial in the desert. The forty days of Lent invite us to accompany our Lord in his apparent abandonment. In the moment of greatest weakness, Christ did not succumb to temptation, but put his trust in his Father God. Jesus taught us not only with his words, but above all with his own life, that often we need to pass through the desert to achieve full freedom. It is true that Christian life promises us salvation from sin and therefore joy. But the path leading us there requires rediscovering what really

matters in our lives and detaching ourselves from whatever hinders us.

“The desert is *the place of the essential*. Let us look at our lives: how many useless things surround us! We chase after thousands of things that seem necessary and that in reality are not. How good it would be for us to free ourselves from many superfluous realities, to rediscover what matters, to rediscover the faces of those who are beside us!”^[1] With Holy Week fast approaching, we can rekindle our desires to live close to Jesus, freed from everything that doesn’t lead us to Him: “My God! May I hate sin, and unite myself to You, taking the Holy Cross in my arms, so that I, in my turn, may fulfil your most lovable Will.... stripped of every earthly attachment, with no other goal but your glory.... generously, not keeping anything back, offering myself with you in a perfect holocaust.”^[2]

THE LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died (Num 21:6). The Chosen People had rejected God's protection. Tired of never reaching their goal, they had turned their hearts towards the material goods they continued to long for in Egypt, even though these were of little value and bore the marks of their slavery.

At times we too, like the people of Israel, can feel our apparent distance from God and the attraction of goods we have left behind. But when we contemplate Christ's poverty on the Cross – “left with nothing, save the wood of the Cross”^[3] – we grasp that happiness is not found in material goods. We realize how ephemeral these things are, which fail to reach the depths of our soul. Saint Josemaria said: “When a man tries to

build his happiness exclusively around the things of this world, and in this I have witnessed some real tragedies, he perverts their proper use and destroys the order so wisely established by the Creator. As a consequence the heart is left sad and unsatisfied. It starts following paths which lead to everlasting unhappiness.”^[4]

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 5:3). With these words, our Lord offers happiness, both on earth and in heaven, to those who place their security and riches in God. The poor in heart possess material goods without being possessed by them. Poverty of spirit enables us to truly enjoy what is good, because it connects us with what is simple, with persons, with God. In short, with everything that satisfies our deepest desires.

THOSE SERPENTS were not the Lord's final answer. The people repented and turned to Moses who, faithful to his vocation as mediator, interceded for his people. Then God, moved by his mercy, gave them a special medicine. All those who, after being bitten, looked at the image of a bronze serpent, would not die. Thus, what was the cause of death became at the same time the symbol of salvation. Therefore the serpent is an image that anticipates the Cross of Christ. There all the sins of the world are found and, at the same time, the One who has defeated them forever with his death.

Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me” (Jn 8:28). If we didn't know the end of the story, we

could think that the “lifting up” our Lord speaks of here refers to a future worldly glory. It is not easy to understand that his true exaltation took place on the Cross, and that being held fast by the nails is for Him true freedom. Therefore, by looking at and uniting ourselves to Christ’s apparent weakness, we acquire the strength of God. We too can make our own those paradoxical words of Saint Paul: *I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong* (2 Cor 12:9-10).

At the foot of the Cross we find our Lady. We can ask Mary to teach us how to always direct our gaze to the Cross, so that Christ will drive away the serpents that try to enter our lives.

