

THE STORY OF CHRIST

BY GIOVANNI PAPINI

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THE DESERT

As soon as Jesus emerged from the water He went into the desert. From the multitude to solitude! Until then He had lived among the waters and the fields of Galilee and in the green meadows along the Jordan. Now He went up on the rocky mountains whence no springs arise, where no seed sprouts, where the only living creatures are snakes. Until then He had lived among the working men of Nazareth, among John's penitents; now He goes up on the solitary mountains where no human face is seen, where no human voice is heard. The New Man puts the desert between himself and humanity.

The person who says, "woe to the solitary!" only gives the measure of his own cowardice. Society is a sacrifice, meritorious in proportion to its hardness. For those rich in soul, solitude is a prize and not an expiation, a period of sure value, a time when inner beauty is created, a reconciliation with the absent. Only in solitude do we live with our peers, with those solitary souls who think the great-hearted thoughts which console us in the absence of other consolations.

The people who cannot endure solitude are the mediocre and the mean. They have nothing to offer, they are afraid of themselves, of their own emptiness. They are condemned to the eternal solitude of their own minds, a desolate inner desert where the poisonous plants of waste lands are the only things to grow. They are restless, unquiet, dejected when they cannot forget themselves in others, deafen themselves with the words of others. They delude themselves with the factitious life of others who are in their turn deluded by it. They cannot live without mingling, a passive atom, in the streams which overflow every morning from the sewers of the cities.

Jesus lived among men and He was to return among men because He loved them. But in the years to come He often hid Himself, to be alone, far even from His disciples. To love men, you need from time to time to depart from them, far from them, we draw near to them. The small soul remembers only the evil they have done him. His night is restless with bitterness and his mouth poisoned with anger. The great soul remembers benefits alone, and thankful for a few good deeds, forgets the great evils he has endured. Even those which were not pardoned at the moment are blotted out from his heart, and having renewed his original love for his brothers, he goes back to men.

For Jesus these forty days of solitude are the last of His preparation. For forty years the Jewish people (prophetic symbol of Christ) wandered in the desert before entering into the kingdom promised by God. For forty days Moses remained close to God to hear His laws; for forty days Elijah wandered in the desert fleeing the vengeance of the wicked queen.

So also the time allotted to the new liberator before announcing the promised kingdom was forty days of close communion with God to receive the supreme inspiration. But even in the desert He was not to be entirely alone. About Him throughout the vigil will be angels and angels; beings inferior to man and beings superior; those who pull man down and those who lift him up; beings all matter, beings all spirit.

Born an animal, man struggles to become an angel. He is matter changing by slow transmutation into spirit. If the animal gets the upper hand, man descends below the level of the beasts because he puts the remnants of his intelligence at the service of bestiality; if the angel conquers, man becomes the equal of angels, and instead of being a mere soldier in the army of God, partakes of divinity itself. But the fallen angel condemned to wear the form of a beast is the astute tenacious enemy of all men who wish to climb that height from which he was cast down. Jesus is the enemy of the material world, of the bestial life of the many. He was born into the world in order that beasts should become men, and men become angels. He was born to change the world and to conquer it, to fight with the king of the world, that enemy of God and of men, the malign, the suborner, the seducer. He was born to drive Satan from the earth as His father drove him from Heaven.

Therefore at the end of the forty days, Satan came into the desert to tempt his enemy.

THE ADVERSARY

Our slavery to matter is branded on our lives by the daily need of our bodies for food, and Jesus wished to conquer our slavery to matter. Whenever He shared human lives, He consented to eat and drink, because His friends did, because it is right to give to the flesh that which belongs to the flesh, and finally as a visible protest against the hypocritical fasts of the Pharisees. The last act of His earthly mission was a supper, but the first after His baptism was a fast. Alone where His abstinence could not shame His simple-hearted

companions, where it could not be confused with ostentatious piety, He forgot to eat.

But after forty days He was hungry. Satan, tenacious and invisible, was waiting for this moment of material need, and seized on it. The Adversary spoke: "If thou be the Son of God command this stone that it be made bread."

The reproof was prompt: "It is written that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." Satan did not admit a defeat, and from the top of a mountain showed Him all the kingdoms of the earth: "All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them; for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will give it. If thou therefore wilt adore me, all shall be thine."

And Jesus answered: "Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

Then Satan took Him to Jerusalem and he set Him on the pinnacle of the Temple, "If thou be the Son of God cast thyself down from hence."

But Jesus answered quickly: "It is written; thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." "And when the Devil has completed every temptation," Luke goes on, "he departed from him for a season." We shall see his return and his last effort.

This dialogue seems at first sight only a bandying about of Scriptural texts. Satan and Jesus do not use their own words, but compete by means of quotations from the Scriptures. We seem to be listening to a theological dispute; but as a matter of fact it is the first Parable of the Gospels acted out and not put into words.

It is not surprising that Satan should have come with the absurd hope of causing Jesus to fall. It is not surprising that Jesus since He was a man should have undergone temptation. Satan only tempts the great and pure. To the others he does not need even to murmur a word of invitation. They are already his, from their childhood on. He need give himself no trouble to win their allegiance, but in his arms before he summons them. And yet many of them do not know that he exists. He never has presented himself to them because they obey him from a distance. Thus, not having known him, they are ready to deny him. The devil's cohorts do not believe in the devil. It was said of old that the devil's shrewdest ruse was to spread abroad the rumor of his death. He takes all forms, so beautiful sometimes that no one recognizes him. The Greeks, for instance, the gods of Greece, that intelligence, had no place for Satan in their mythology, because all their Gods, when closely examined, show the horns of Satan under their crowns of laurel and grape leaves. Satanic is tyrannical and lustful. Jove, adulterous Venus, Apollo the flayer, murderous Mars, drunken Dionysus. They were so astute, the gods of Greece, that they gave the people love-potions and distilled perfumes to keep them from detecting the stench of the evil that consumes the world.

But if many do not know him and laugh at him as at a specter invented in church for the needs of penitents, there are some who cry out upon those who know him but do not follow him. He seduced the innocence of the first two created beings, he suborned David the strong, he corrupted Solomon the wise, he accused Job the righteous before the throne of God. Satan tempts and always will tempt all the saints who hide themselves in the desert, all those who love God. The more we go away from him the closer he is; the higher we are, the more he rises to bring us low; he can soil only that which is clean and he gives no care to the filth which spontaneously accumulates under the hot breath of animality. To be tempted by Satan is a proof of purity, a sign of greatness, and shows a man that he is on the upward path. He who has known Satan and has seen him face to face, may well have hope for himself. More than any other, Jesus merited this consecration. Satan challenged Him twice and tempted Him once. He asked Him to transform dead matter into matter that gives life and to cast Himself down from a height so that God by saving Him should proclaim Him as His true son. He offered Him the possession and the glory of earthly kingdoms on condition that instead of serving God, Jesus should promise to serve the Demon. He asks material bread and a material miracle of Him and promises Him material power. Jesus does not take up the challenge and refuses what is offered.

He is not the fleshly, temporal Messiah, desired by the Jewish crowd, the material Messiah such as the Tempter in his baseness imagines Him. He did not come to bring food to bodies but food to souls—truth, that living food. When His brothers, far from home, lack bread enough for their hunger, He will break the few loaves which His disciples bring and all will have enough and they will fill baskets with the remnants. But except in cases of necessity He will not be the distributor of that bread which comes from the earth and returns to earth. If He should change the stones of the street into bread, every one would follow Him through love of his own body and

would pretend to believe everything He said. Even the dogs would come to His banquet. But this He does not wish. Those who follow Him must believe in His word in spite of hunger, grief and poverty. Thus those who wish to follow Him must leave behind them fertile fields, they must leave behind them money which can be changed into bread. They must go with Him without knapsack or payment, with one garment, and live like the birds of the air, husking ears of grain in the fields, or begging alms at house doors. One can live without terrestrial bread: a fig left on the tree among the leaves of Earth into the lake can take the place of bread. But no man can live without heavenly bread, if he wishes to escape eternal death, which is the portion of those who have never tasted it. Man does not live by bread alone, but by love, fervor, and truth. Jesus is ready to transform the Kingdom of Earth into the Kingdom of Heaven, furious bestiality into happy sanctity, but He does not deign to transform stones into bread, matter into, other matter.

For similar reasons Jesus refused the other challenge. Men love the wonderful, the visibly wonderful, the prodigy, the physical impossibility made possible before their eyes. They are ready to prostrate themselves before the wonder-worker even if he is an evil man or charlatan. From Jesus they all asked for a Sign, meaning by that, a gigantic juggling feat; but He always refused. He did not wish to be persuaded by means of the miraculous. He consented to cure the sick—especially those sick in spirit and sinners—but He often avoided the occasion even for these miracles, and He begged those cured not to speak the name of their healer. And He never used this power for His own safety, not even at Gethsemane when Satan tempted Him to put away the cup of death from His lips, nor when He was nailed to the cross and Satan repeated his challenge by the mouth of the Jews. "If thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross and save thyself." In the night of His vigil and in the high noon of His death, He resisted Satan and had recourse to no miracle to save Himself. Men must believe Him in spite of all contrary evidence, believe in His divinity even when confronted with what seems His common humanity. It is no fit deed for Jesus needlessly to throw Himself down from the Temple; to bring an end to the pain of another with the sole purpose of conquering men, and fascinating them with wonder and terror; to put God to a test, to force Him as it were, to accomplish a rash and superfluous miracle, only in order that Satan may not win the infamous and arrogant. Loving, it is to human hearts He wishes to speak; sublime in character, He wishes to bring sublimity into human lives; a pure spirit, He wishes to purify other spirits; deep-hearted, to light the flame of love in others; a great spirit, to bring greatness to little, mean, neglected souls. Instead of throwing Himself like a vulgar magician from the precipice which is below the Temple, He will go up from the Temple upon the Mount to give out from on high the beatitudes of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The offer of the Kingdoms of the Earth must have been horrible to Him, and still more the price that Satan asked. Satan has the right to offer what is his. The Kingdoms of the Earth are founded on force and maintained with deceit. They are Satan's own country, they are his Paradise regained. Satan sleeps every night on the pillows of the powerful. They pay material tribute to him, and give him daily offerings in thought and deed. But Jesus could have taken away their Kingdoms from the Kings without bending knee to the Adversary. He had only to offer men bread without work. If like a juggler, mountebank He had opened a public theater of popular miracles, the multitude would have acclaimed Him. Had He wished to seem the Messiah for whom the Jews had been longing during their dreary slavery, He could have corrupted them with plenty and with marvels. He could have made of every land a country of grace and enchantment and He could have occupied at once every seat of the procurators of Satan. But Jesus does not wish to be the restorer of the fallen kingdom, the conqueror of hostile empires. Authority is of little importance to Him and glory still less. The Kingdom which He announces and prepares has nothing in common with the Kingdoms of the Earth. His Kingdom is destined rather to bring to naught the Kingdoms of the Earth. The Kingdom of Heaven is in us. Any day when a soul has

turned to righteousness the Kingdom of Heaven is enlarged because it has acquired a new citizen, snatched from the Kingdom of Earth. When every one is good and righteous, when all love their brothers as fathers love their sons, when even enemies love one another (if there still are enemies), when no one thinks of amassing treasure, and instead of taking away from others, every one gives bread to the hungry and clothing to those who are cold,—where on that day will be the Kingdom of the Earth? Where will be the need for soldiers when no one wishes to enlarge his own land by stealing that of his neighbor? What need will there be for Kings when every one has his law in his conscience and when there are no armies to command nor judges to select? What need will there be for money and for tribute when every one is sure of his living and satisfied with it, and there are no wages to be paid to soldiers and the arrogantly virtuous, the humble sinners, free and prisoners. The sun of God will shine on all, the citizens of the Kingdom will be one family of fathers and brothers and the gates of Paradise will be open again to the sons of Adam become as gods.

Jesus conquered Satan in Himself and now came out of the desert to conquer him among men.

TO BE CONTINUED

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