

WORD OF LIFE

by Chiara Lubich

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'One does not live by bread alone.' (Lk 4:4)

These words come from the narration of Jesus' temptations. The scene took place after his baptism on the banks of the Jordan River, where he had been proclaimed the Son of God and the Holy Spirit had descended upon him. Jesus then went into the desert to prepare himself for his public ministry. During this time of seclusion, made up of prayer and fasting, the devil tempted Jesus in his capacity as Son of God and Messiah. In essence, the tempter - who presents himself as the 'prince of this world' - tried to coax Jesus into asserting himself by exercising his right and authority as Son of God to satisfy his own physical needs, to win popular approval and to possess power.

Instead, Jesus answered that he would base his work and activity on faithfulness to the path laid out by the Father, even if this way would pass through opposition, loss of prestige and failure. It is precisely through his absolute faithfulness to the Father that Jesus reveals himself as the true Son of God.

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Let's look at to the first temptation. Taking advantage of the fact that Jesus was certainly very hungry and weakened by his fast, the tempter suggested he use his miraculous powers to satisfy his basic needs. He could transform stones into bread to satisfy his present hunger and in the future, the hunger of the crowds.

At first sight, this proposal doesn't seem at all unusual. In fact, what need, what problem is more fundamental, than that of hunger? Isn't bread essential to the life and dignity of God's children? Had not God promised, through his prophets, that hunger and misery would disappear in the kingdom of the Messiah?

Of course, concern for one's daily bread is more than legitimate. However, the deceit and vulgarity in this temptation consists in using Jesus's human need for bread to corrupt his relationship with his Father, tempting him to manipulate God. This was something totally contrary to the attitude of filial abandonment to the Father that he continually sought to have. At the same time, by suggesting a miracle of this sort, the tempter tried to insinuate that the kingdom of God lies in possessing material goods. And this is outrageous!

Of course, Jesus would later provide physical nourishment, too. Indeed, he would even multiply the loaves to feed the crowds who followed him to hear what he had to say. But when that same crowd wanted to make him a king, in their excitement

over the miracle, Jesus withdrew from their sight, because he could not accept the confusion of values that their actions implied.

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Jesus is inflexible on this point. As precious and indispensable material bread may be, by itself it can never be enough. The heart of the human person is made for another kind of ‘bread’, for the Word of God, for the bread that the Father has given us in the very person of Jesus.

Jesus will always refuse to reduce our freedom to being free only from material limitations (hunger, deprivation, illness, physical death, etc.). The freedom that he wants to give us is much more profound. It is freedom from ourselves, freedom from our selfishness, pride, hatred, rivalry, thirst for power, pleasure, etc. His freedom is in the joy of loving, of serving, of giving ourselves, in order to build a world that is more beautiful and more in tune with heart of God. For Jesus, even freedom from hunger should come only as a consequence of this inner freedom.

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This Word of Life puts us on our guard against the very strong and always attractive temptation to make our happiness depend primarily on external conditions and material goods. Above all today, when, thanks to progress, there are many means at our disposal to improve the conditions of our life, we can be more easily tempted to think that a more comfortable house, a healthier and more beautiful body, more money available to enjoy ourselves, to travel and so on, would make us happy and solve our problems. Of course, these aspirations are also important and should not be disregarded. Nevertheless, Jesus repeatedly tells us that these things alone are not enough. He continues to proclaim the primacy of the Word of God. We are made for something immeasurably greater. We are made for God. The greater the promise of material well-being as a result of technical and scientific progress, the stronger should be our resolve to live the Word of Jesus - especially the commandment to love our neighbor - which alone can give meaning and fullness to our lives.