

## **SERMON: 1 March 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **" Temptation, Fasting and Growth"**

**(Genesis 2:15-3:7 and Matthew 4:1-11)**

1

Let me say a few words about fasting and Jesus' experience being tempted in the desert. And then I'll say a few things about the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and the apple. And then we'll try to draw a couple of conclusions that we can take away and think further on.

Lent - became a particular time of prayer and fasting

Anna's waiting for Messiah - Luke 2:27.

Pharisee's boast - Luke 18:12.

What did Jesus say about it

Matthew 6:16-18 and 9:14-17 "Whenever you fast" and "When the bridegroom is taken away then they will fast".

Early church fasted and prayer - Acts 13:2, 14:23.

6th Century council fasting compulsory twice per week.

Might it help us as a discipline?

[SLIDE] 'The hidden power of prayer and fasting' by Mahesh Chavda at Wester Hailes 10 years ago - they had prayed and fasted during their vacancy.

- Makes us weak (so God is strong).
- Anger and greed surface at these times so they can be dealt with.

What might fasting look like?

Maybe not food? Social media?

Giving up? Doing without? Letting go? Being content?

If we choose to try it, it might look differently for every person.

Maybe our prayer might be,

Lord, are you calling me to fast?

If so, what will it look like for me? And what might it lead to?

2

From today's reading we know that Jesus went without food for 40 days. He fasted in the desert. And during that fast and that time of trial, there were three specific temptations that were thrown at Jesus by the evil one.

Henri Nouwen wrote a book on desert spirituality called "the way of the heart". In it he describes the three temptations Jesus faced as follows:

To be relevant, to be spectacular, to be powerful.

[SLIDE] His take it that we need desert moments in life to drive us to solitude, silence and prayer which will be agents in our transformation where we deal with our anger and our greed and prove faith genuine and make us more compassionate people.

And so, for example, he calls solitude the "furnace of transformation", the place where change happens; solitude being a place where there is just you and God. And as we all know, it's not always easy to get to that place in today's busy and noisy world.

[SLIDE] The aim of these three movements are to find rest and out of that rest to minister compassion.

Something Nouwen did especially in his later years working with the most profoundly disabled people. But he had to learn to get there and to find his true calling and face temptation and get through his own tests and desert experiences on the way there.

It's almost exactly one year ago that we looked at the temptation account in Luke and I don't want to repeat what I said then. But there might be a couple of things worth repeating.

Spirit led - the Spirit of goodness must see this as a way to bring goodness rather than resorting to selfishness (sin/self)

Conflict with evil one - Jesus lived in direct opposition to the works of the evil one. Its a battle. And although the war is won, the battle still rages on.

'If you are' - the evil one wants to rob people of their identity in Christ. How do we stand against that attack? By being in the Word of God and living with the Word of God. 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'.

Stones to bread - the urge to satisfy immediate need rather than see the longer term fruit. Every opportunity for our growth in faith will have early escape routes, ways we can withdraw or exit or give in or give up.

Throw yourself down - the urge to make ourselves spectacular in order to get recognition. To make ourselves more than we are rather than be who we are.

We don't need to prove ourselves. Jesus didn't fall into the trap of having to prove himself in that way but he let God prove his faith, his character, through his complete trust in the God who loved him for who he was.

It's not good to put God to the test by feeling like we have to be spectacular. It's enough to rest in God for who we are.

The temptation to have it all - to sell our soul in order to acquire wealth or possessions or status is a temptation to put ourselves on the throne, to make self king and it doesn't work. We are made to worship the Lord our God and serve him only.

Jesus was able to resist these challenges at the very beginning of his baptised ministry. But remember he'd lived perhaps 30 years prior to this point. I don't want to imply that his earlier years were not ministry because I believe they were? But I wonder if this temptation was somehow the culmination of his years of growing in favour with man and God rather than, what we've often assumed was the beginning of his ministry? If this was a beginning, was the temptation in the desert the beginning of the end for Jesus?

3

Let me jump to say something about the Genesis story for today.

The Lord's food advice was given to Adam only, before Eve was conceived - what was good to eat and what wasn't. How life was to be lived - in submission to or partnership with God.

Companionship is important - animals (from the ground) and people (bone from bone, flesh from flesh).

The snake is present in the world (interestingly, created by God for companionship) misinterprets what God had said - adding to God's words, 'from any tree in the garden', widening the possibility of humans getting it 'wrong'. There is a voice in the world which isn't true.

Eve adds to what God had said by interpreting God's Words as being they are not allowed to even touch the tree in the middle let alone eat from it.

As well as being an example of humans hearing the wrong voice, is this the first example of human (mis)interpretation of God's Words?

The snake contradicts God's Word in telling Eve they would not die if they eat the fruit. The snake makes wrong doing less dangerous, less threatening, makes it easier for people to make the wrong choice. Someone once said that sin was so prevalent in the world because sin is made out to be so attractive.

But usually people have a deep knowing of what is right and what is wrong. People know when they have been disobedient or not.

But I wonder if a big reason for God placing a limit on human freedom is to keep us from falling into the trap of being overly judgemental of other people; or judging things outside our safe limit.

I think the Bible is clear about it being safer to leave the work of judgement to God. God alone will know the full story and see the big picture.

I'm sure we can all think of times when we've fallen prey of the temptation to rush too soon into judgement, only to be humiliated later.

And think of how much damage has been done because we walked headlong into the trap of making a judgemental comment. Or how many barriers have been created because we've judged that certain people are in and others are out.

No wonder Jesus himself said, judge not, lest you be judged; for by the measure you use to judge, so you will be measured.

And in the Genesis account we can see one of the outcomes of wrongdoing, and may I suggest that includes being judgemental, is shame. Shame enters the world as the very first human family realise they are naked after eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

Conclusion:

- Don't be quick to judge. Let things remain in God's hands. Above all, love one another and we shouldn't fall into the trap too often.
- Test everything you hear against God's word and in the communion of other seekers of the truth.
- And as for fasting, is there something or someone that we need to take a break from in order to keep our journey with God fresh? Why not take some time this week to meditate on that and see what you sense God saying to you?

