

1 March 2020

Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7

Matthew 4.1-11

One of the roles that I found particularly fulfilling when I was working as a Regional Minister with the London Baptist Association was being part of the Ministerial Recognition Committee.

The task of this committee was to interview people from the Baptist churches in London who felt that they had a calling to be a minister, and to commend them to the Baptist colleges for training. It was extremely rewarding meeting a wide range of people from different backgrounds, all with very different stories to tell, but all exploring whether God was calling them to be a minister.

The group of people we had on the committee were very insightful ... and on many occasions we had to either 'No' ... or 'Wait ...'

One of my tasks was to communicate with the candidates after the interviews, and when it was a 'No' or a 'Wait' I always pressed the committee to try to sum up their reasons, so that I could feed this back to the candidates.

One of the most common reasons that people were turned down came down to a 'lack of self-awareness'.

Normally, this would be a failure to recognise their own weaknesses or short-comings, or a failure to come to terms with a set-back in their lives, or a failure to understand the impact they have on other people.

Now I have often wondered whether Jesus would have got through our Ministerial Recognition Committee!

No least because some people were turned down because we thought they had a 'Messiah complex'.

If he had been turned down, I don't think it would have been because of a lack of self-awareness.

The story of the temptations of Jesus is a story that speaks of Jesus' deep awareness of his humanity and of his true calling in God.

Through his temptations Jesus confronts all of those forces that threaten to undermine his relationship with God. Those forces are the forces that are at work in all of our lives as human beings, and are forces that can threaten our relationship with God.

1. Confronting the power of the appetites

The first temptation is all about the power of basic human appetites to control us.

After fasting for forty days, Jesus is hungry ... desperately hungry.

And the tempter knows the power that the basic need for food can have over any human being.

And so the thought comes into Jesus' head. 'Why shouldn't I turn these stones into bread?'

'If I'm really the Son of God, can't I do that? ... No one will be harmed.... No one would know ...'

But Jesus knew he was here in this barren, lifeless place because the Spirit had led him there.

He knew his hunger was for a purpose.

Jesus knew it was a time of deep learning ... about connecting with the deeper appetite for God.

'Man cannot live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

He knew he needed bread ... but he knew even more that he needed to depend on God, and that his dependence on God needed to be deeper than his dependence on food.

There are a range of basic appetites which drive our behaviour as human beings:

- the need for food and water
- the sexual appetite
- the social appetites
 - the need for companionship
 - the need to belong
 - the need for recognition

And usually we are not aware how much they affect our lives, until we have to go without something.

And these appetites can take very particular forms. We have this way of creating artificial needs and appetites.

- many people would now be lost without their smartphone and without social media

The question is, are we shaped and controlled by our appetites, or do we order our appetites so that we are shaped and controlled by God.

These basic appetites are not wrong or evil in themselves ... but they do need to be ordered. Otherwise they dominate our lives and we never nourish our appetite for God.

2. Confronting the power of human anxiety

In the second temptation Jesus is taken to a high point on the walls of the temple.

'If you wanted to prove that you really trusted God, you could throw yourself off and God would never let you fall to the ground.'

What Jesus knew is that to do this would not be an act of faith, but an act of distrust in God.

'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' Don't test God ...

The tempter is playing on the deep torrents of anxiety that threaten to undermine us as human beings.

The anxiety that keeps on asking the question, Can I trust you? Can I trust him? Can I trust her?

We all know, don't we, that relationships are built upon trust.

And we also know deep down that if we do something artificial to test someone's trust, and if the other person finds out what we have done and why we have done it ... just doing it is a sign of distrust.

And the relationship becomes shakier rather than stronger.

Again, anxiety or fear is not always in itself a bad thing.

At its best, it is nature's fire alarm siren, warning us that something is wrong, that we need to be alert to impending danger.

A child that feels no fear in walking on the edge of a high surface is a danger to themselves.

When something significant is happening feelings of anxiety can make the adrenalin flow and make you more focussed on what you are doing ...

But equally anxiety can take over our lives, and too often our lives and our decisions are driven more by our anxieties than they are by our securities.

I am not talking here about clinical phobias that need expert treatment ... I am talking about the way in which everyday, run of the mill anxieties can shape and dominate our lives.

Again it is the question of whether our anxieties control us, or whether we are sufficiently aware of our anxieties to ensure that our lives are ordered by our trust in God.

Anxiety that is out of control undermines faith ...

3. Confronting the power of human ambition

In the third temptation, ambition comes under the spotlight.

He is promised by the tempter “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.”

All he has to do is to bow down and worship the tempter.

Anybody might be tempted by that offer – it encompasses everything doesn't it – power, influence, fame, wealth ...

And Jesus knew his destiny ... following his resurrection he says to his disciples, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me.’

But he also knew that there was only one way for him to live his destiny ... and that was the way of obedience to his Father and not by bowing down to the power of evil.

Again, we have to say, that human ambition in itself is not wrong.

It is what makes human beings who we are:

curious, adventurous, pressing forward, exploring, creative, searching for answers, a desire to make the world a better place, a belief that we have a purpose in this world.

But equally, our ambitions get the better of us ...

And that is what Jesus learned ... how to shape and direct his ambitions into the service of God.

To follow the way of the cross.

So the question for us is:

Are we shaped, controlled, determined by our appetites, our anxieties and our ambitions?

Or are our appetites, our anxieties and our ambitions controlled, directed and ordered by our allegiance to God?

And have we developed sufficient self-awareness of the part that these forces and powers play in our lives to ensure that we remain true to our allegiance to God?