

Sermon 6 March 2022 (First Sunday in Lent)

Luke 4:1-13

Temptation is something we encounter every single day of our lives, more than we probably realise. In our reading Jesus experiences temptation in the form of Satan himself and he meets this challenge head on. The tools he uses in this confrontation are the scriptures and his relationship with God. Therein lies an important message for us.

So Lent is under way. The focus word for Lent is *repent*. Repent is a word that is widely misunderstood. The Greek word used here is *metanoia*, which literally means 'a change of mind.' So to repent means to change one's mind, or perhaps more aptly in this context, one's mindset. In other words, to change our attitude or the way we look at things. A modern phrase we could use here is 'Get real.' Get real means to 'wake up to the reality of a situation.'

When Jesus tells us to repent, he doesn't want us to go around wracked with guilt, but rather to evaluate and to get real about our relationship with ourselves, with others and with God. This triangle of relationships lies at the heart of our ability to live whole and fulfilled lives. Get these three relationships right and we are well on the way to being the sort of people God wants us to be.

Firstly, we need to get real about ourselves. We are not perfect, we make mistakes, we have our faults. That is fine, that is being human. But we do need to recognise that, and that recognition leads to a dependence on God, because it is in God's love, as expressed in and through Jesus, that we receive that forgiveness which affirms us as loveable and fulfilled human beings. There is a strong element of humility involved, and humility enhanced the mana of a person.

Secondly, we need to get real about our relationship with others. We need to have an attitude of love and service, especially if they are different to us or disadvantaged in any way. If we are unable to reach out to others and spread a little love and kindness around, I don't believe we can ever be happy and satisfied. Our fulfilment does not lie with what we can do for ourselves, it lies completely with what we can do for others.

Thirdly, we need to get real about our relationship with God. I go back to what I was saying about the recognition of our humanness leading to a dependence on God. The good news is that God wants us to have a relationship with him; the not so good news is that the ball is in our court. The responsibility lies with us. It won't just happen – we have to make it happen. God will not impose himself. We have that freedom of choice which is vital. It means we have to work hard in order to create an awareness of God and therefore a relationship with God. That's what makes it so meaningful.

I want to share with you the story of someone who changed his mind, his attitude; someone who evaluated his relationship with himself, with others and with God, in other words, he repented. I refer to John Newton, who over 200 years ago, wrote the words of that wonderful sing, Amazing Grace, which Dinuk and Shenali will be singing shortly.

John Newton's mother brought him up to read his Bible and say his prayers but he soon turned his back on all that. First, like his father, he joined the navy, but he was a poor sailor and a very doubtful character. He deserted and was flogged when he was caught. Then in West Africa he worked for a man whose job was to catch Africans and sell them to slave traders. He returned to England and he became a slave trader himself, picking up shiploads of Africans, sailing across the Atlantic and selling them as slaves in the West Indies. Without doubt, not a very nice character and seemingly beyond redemption.

But he did change. He saw the error of his ways, he changed his mind and his attitude, and believe it or not, he became a clergyman in the Church of England, and a very good one. Of course, he didn't change himself. He realised he was a lost soul and so he turned to God. He asked Jesus to save him, to put him back on the rails, to give him back his dignity and feeling of self-worth. And the rest is history, as they say.

If Jesus can change John Newton, then his grace and loving forgiveness is enough to save and change anybody. In our reading Jesus meets temptation head on. The challenge for us is to do the same. It is an issue we should be tackling all year round, but Lent is a time when we can focus on that tension in our lives. It is a time when we can focus on our relationship with God, which then gives us the tools to deal with that challenge.

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