

Matthew 4:1-11 Sermon for 11am

Every week we talk about Jesus as the Son of God. We say it in our creed or affirmation of faith, we often sing about it in our songs and hymns, and very often we sign off our prayers with it. At Jesus's baptism and also in the mysterious incident when he was 'transfigured' on a mountain, we hear a voice from heaven describe him as God's Son. But what does it mean to be God's Son? The famous verse in John says, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,' and so clearly it is important, so today, in our reading we'll find out more about what this means.

We learned some weeks back when we talked about God is 'Our Father' that in the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament, the people of Israel were collectively termed God's Son. This terminology was used in Exodus when God was claiming his people back from their slavery in Egypt. It was an archetypal story of liberation for God's children.

Even further back in the Bible, near the start, there is a promise to Abraham that God would bless him and make him a great nation. His family, over time, become the Israelites, and they were to be a light to the nations through which all the world is blessed. So, God's Son, Israel, was to be a blessing to all nations and a light for the whole world to look towards. Israel were freed from Egypt by epic divine deliverance and then were tested in the desert to see if they would follow God faithfully. Unfortunately, they failed every test, and yet God did not leave them. This failure along with God's patience and persistence became the pattern for the whole of Israel's history throughout the rest of the first section of the Bible. The Old Testament ends with the people of Israel split into two nations, both of which are swallowed up by oppressors and in exile, and then freed again, only to be swallowed again by the might of Rome. They were waiting, just as they had waited in Egypt, for someone to save them. They were waiting for a Messiah figure to liberate them and for God to come and live with his people.

And into this context, Jesus was born. At his baptism, Jesus is announced as God's Son, with whom God is well pleased, and today's story of Jesus being tested in the desert comes straight after that event. We are used to hearing about today's story in church circles, but today I want to focus on what it tells us about being the Son of God.

Jesus ends up fasting in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, and in this, there is direct connection back to Moses and the people of Israel as they wandered in the desert for 40 years. The whole context is set up to equate Jesus, the one who is proclaimed God's son and then finds himself in the desert, with the people of Israel, proclaimed as God's firstborn son, freed from Egypt and then finding themselves, with Moses, in the desert. And each of Jesus' temptations has its parallel with those faced, and failed, by the Israelites so long ago. Jesus succeeds where they failed, and therefore it is Jesus who becomes the blessing and light to the nations promised to Abraham right back at the start.

The first test the Israelites faced was hunger. In Exodus 16 they were starving in the desert, but instead of relying on God for 'their daily bread' as we learned about a few weeks ago, they grumbled against Moses and wished themselves back into their slavery. God fed them with manna from heaven, but even then, you can read how they disobeyed and tried to accumulate food rather than trust God each day. God's teaching on this is explained a bit later in the Bible:

Deuteronomy 8:2-3:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

It is no accident that when tested by hunger, Jesus refers exactly to this passage. He knew and trusted that God would provide for all his needs. By choosing to exercise his own power to turn stones to bread, Jesus knew that this would demonstrate, both a lack of reliance on God, and also a belief that life's needs were all about bread, rather than whatever God provides. Test number one – tick!

The second test for the Israelites in the desert was a lack of water. The people not only grumbled this time. They quarrelled with Moses to the point Moses thought his life was in danger. God acted through Moses to give water, but this went down in history as the Israelites 'putting God to the test' (*Deuteronomy 6:16*). They challenged God's adherence to his promise to look after them by demanding that he appear, right here and right now, to show he could save them. Even Moses fails this one, if you look at the account in the book of Numbers 20 – where rather than trusting God to make the water appear, he takes it on himself to strike the rock and so the honour came to Moses and not to God. It's a sad tale as this is what stops Moses from seeing the promised land. Israel, the son of God, failed this test.

But Jesus, God's Son, passes this test when similarly tempted to take matters into his own hands in a big demonstration of divine power. It is no wonder that he appeals to the same phrase as was used against the Israelites about putting God to the test. He doesn't commit the same error as Moses, he doesn't question whether God will fulfil his obligations and instead take God's place. And therefore he is qualified to lead God's people into the promised land. Test number two – tick!

Test three. When God gave the people of Israel the Ten Commandments, Moses went off up the mountain to receive them. Incidentally, he was there 40 days and 40 nights, just like Jesus in the desert. During this time, the Israelites made the really strange decision, considering the amazing sight of God on the mountain, that Moses wasn't coming back, and so asked Moses's brother to help them make a giant golden calf to worship. I suppose 40 days and nights is a long time to wait for God and maybe feels like it'll never end, and therefore the temptation to find something else to worship in order to get what you want must be difficult to resist.

That's the situation for Jesus though. 40 days later, famished and weak, he is tempted to jettison God for a short cut to a 'celebrity following' and leadership of the world. Surely this is really what it is all about – being the Son of God, a light to the nations. Surely the quicker he can take his place on the international stage, the better for everyone. But Jesus recognises that worshipping something that isn't God in order to get where you want to be is a really poor choice. God's command is to worship God alone, and Jesus does not forget this. Test three – Tick!

So we have three tests, which together are all about the temptation to treat God as less than God – not relying on God, not giving God the honour for his work, and giving up on God and wandering off to worship something else. These are temptations we can all resonate with. The key thing is that the Son of God, Jesus, unlike the Song of God Israel, did not fail in this temptation. And as a result, he is the one who is the light to the nations, the one through whom the whole world is blessed, and the one who can lead us into the promised land of God's Kingdom coming. Israel, through their disobedience failed, and so the gospel of John calls Jesus God's 'Only' Son.

This isn't anti-semitic, just in case you were worried – I'm not saying anything about the Jewish state, or even anything judgmental about the Israelites of old. The fact is that it is God's Son, Jesus, who passed these tests, which all of us fail most of the time. As we learned weeks ago, we are all God's children as he is Our Father. But we all fail to rely on God for our daily needs. We all find ourselves failing to give God the glory he deserves for what he has given us and done for us. And we all start putting other things in place of God for all that we need and all that we want. We all start making our own mind up over issues of ethics or calling rather than submitting to God's authority. None of us are any different from the Israelites of old, so who am I to judge!

However, this is why Jesus is different. This is why Jesus passed the test and is God's Only Son come to save us. He is the road to liberty, but also the one who paid for the freedom. He is God come to save us and God come to live with us. He is the light of the world, its saviour, and its king. It is only through Jesus that we have any chance of being part of the Kingdom of God. Let's pledge ourselves anew to the Son of God, and in doing so recognise our failings, but also our wish to live in this new promised land. Amen.