

## **IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD ...**

**based on Matthew 4:1-11, Hebrews 1:8-9, 2:1-4**

“If you are the Son of God ...”

If we were to come face-to-face with Jesus today, how might we finish this sentence? Would it be with a test? Or would it be with a question? Would we expect a show of power and sovereignty? Or would we be satisfied by the answer, “do not put the Lord your God to the test”? Then again, maybe coming face-to-face with Jesus will be enough; in seeing Jesus we will have no need to finish this sentence. But as we look at the broken world around us, as we try to share with others what we believe, the desire to be able to begin a conversation with Jesus in this way is, I find at least, never far away. After all, in the understanding of the world to be able to point at one sat upon a throne with all the world at their command makes a lot more sense than pointing at one hanging lifeless on a tree!

Yet, as we make our liturgical turn towards Easter, this is the challenge. The Son of God is enthroned on high, but this is beyond our seeing. What we see, what is important to be seen by the world, is Jesus being raised up on the cross. This is because it is only in this action that the true meaning of the Son is revealed. To explain this to a world which is full of pain, suffering, greed and insecurity, though, feels impossible. It is why we may find our prayers beginning with, “If you are the Son of God ...”

Take comfort, however, when we find ourselves in these moments, we are not alone! Others before us have stood in that place, and others to come will do likewise.

Now, saying this does not eliminate the elephant, or should I say little red figure with horns and a long pointy tail, if we pay any attention to medieval imagery, in the room. There will be those who would say that any doubt or uncertainty in our faith is the work of the devil! Sure, the “devil” is a biblical character, but only ever in storytelling sense. It is far easier to put the blame on something or someone else than describe an inner wrestling we all face in times of difficulty and challenge.

The purpose of the gospels is to tell us who Jesus is and cement the unbreakable connection between Jesus and God. The humanity of Jesus needs to be glimpsed—who Jesus is only makes complete sense with that—but Jesus’s perfection that comes from his divinity has to be front and centre. Therefore, even if in how Jesus described his time in the wilderness to the disciples he talked of an inner wrestling, that was never going to be how story would be shared more widely. In the times of the early church, to show any weakness in Jesus’s identity would have played directly into the hands of those who persecuted the church and wanted to discredit Jesus. It was the Son of God enthroned on high, who had authority in heaven and was greater than the angels, whom the church needed the world to see.

The gospel writer of Matthew addresses that perfectly, not only in how they retold Jesus’s sojourn into the wilderness, but in how the words of the “devil” reflected the pronouncement from heaven at Jesus’s baptism in the chapter before—words from heaven that the gospel

writer would reiterated later on a mountain top: “This is my Son, the Beloved.” (Matthew 3:17, 17:5)

In trying to make that point, however, the church was in danger of losing sight of why God sent the Son—to save the people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21)

This Lent we are reading our way through the letter to the Hebrews, and at its heart is this trying to make sense of what Jesus coming to save the people from their sins truly means. It is doing that, though, to the backdrop of the people to whom the letter is addressed being persecuted and almost forced back to their roots, which was Judaism. There was a sense among that church that it was safer to return to their old ways of faith, than forge on with their new life in God because of Jesus. Now this is probably not anything that would ever cross our minds today in this country, although there are moments having no faith feels like the far safer option. Yet in some countries, this is what the church faces on a daily basis, persecution that places on trial not only the Gospel but the people’s conviction in the Gospel—a persecution that almost forces the church to give up.

How might we respond?

If we learn nothing else for the letter writer to the Hebrews, their approach to the situation is sensitive with the purpose to rebuild the people’s confidence. There was no ridiculing the faith and practices that the people had lived by for years. The author showed that the people’s understanding of their relationship to God through the Mosaic Law and the Prophets was a good foundation. However, through Jesus that relationship becomes far deeper and personal: the fear of judgement turns to salvation, and what is transcendent also becomes immanent. By improving the people’s understanding of this change in their relationship with God because of what Jesus did on the cross, the letter writer hoped to restore the people’s sureness in the Gospel and strengthen their resilience.

As I have reflected on the words of the author of the letter to the Hebrews, I have been struck by how they encourage the people to really grapple with what is at the heart of the Christian faith, yet we tend to skirt around. Partly, it is far easier to sing our songs of praise with Jesus enthroned on high in heaven. But partly because talking openly about salvation is an ethical and theological minefield. It takes us to places where even the most surefooted of us can stumble. And we fear the wedges it might cause within our communities, which at times are fragile enough without potentially divisive theological discussions. Yet, as we turn towards Easter and journey again to the foot of the cross, how do we do this without a willingness to wrestle with the meaning of salvation?

I get how we might just want to sing to God on high and shout “Alleluia” on Good Friday, but if we do, we are risking what the letter writer to the Hebrews warns of—not paying full attention to what we have heard. Jesus is the Son of God, the Beloved, not so the world might know better the might of God. Rather so that everyone might come to know the true love and mercy of God. For as the gospel writer of John recorded, Jesus said: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17)

Therefore, let us be brave and not neglect our understanding and the understanding of others of what it means to have been saved by Jesus being raised up on a tree and breathing a final breath. Amen

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