

MATTHEW 3:13-4:11
 “LOVED AND TESTED!”

“The Confident Christian!” Some suggest this person doesn’t exist in Scotland, or that it is a contradiction in terms, that confidence is not a quality Christians enjoy and some suggest shouldn’t enjoy because it smacks of arrogance, being smug and self-reliant, and self-satisfied. However, confidence makes a world of a difference to our attitude to life: if you play sport, then the key to being successful is confidence; you go for shots because you think you can make them. Confidence is not about being arrogant or smug, but is simply about a good sense of who we are and the Bible has so much to tell us about who we are; it is good for us to hear that so that we see life in the right kind of way. The confident Christian knows what God has done, knows the way in which God has blessed us and is glad, thankful and humble and has a sense that God is there. The confident Christian will be able to let something of that rub off onto others.

Confidence is undermined by a number of things: we know ourselves only too well, our faults and failings and shortcomings; we know that we’re not the people we should be and so we think that we’ve nothing to be confident about. Life is full of hard things and these difficult times knock any kind of confidence or self-esteem that we might have; added to that is the sense that God might not be there to help us when life is hard and we simply see life as a struggle and a trial rather than anything to be confident about. We enjoy the good things in life, the good days, the days of celebration, but somehow we don’t trust them; we have this sense of gloom that for every day of celebration there will be a day of suffering to come.

We’re going to look at two events in the life of Jesus, events that come side by side in Matthew’s gospel. I want us to try to understand the events in themselves and what they show us about Jesus, but also I want to reflect on the fact that these two events come side by side in the gospel; they are very different kinds of experience for Jesus and I want to ask “Where is God in these events?” Our Christian confidence is not something that we self-generate; Christian confidence has to come from sense of God and what God has done and is doing for us and in us. When we ask that question about these two events in Jesus’ life we might see some surprising and valuable things.

First of all, there is Jesus’ baptism. He appeared one day at the Jordan river where John was baptising. John had been calling people to repent of their sins and baptism was a sign of that repentance and of God making them clean. John recognises Jesus and clearly feels that the boot is on the wrong foot here: John needs Jesus’ baptism of the Spirit and fire rather than Jesus needing John’s baptism for repentance and cleansing. Jesus says: “*Let it...*” (3:15) He stands alongside the people, identifies with them in their need and has come to “enrol as a member of the purified and prepared people of God.” (France) “*At that...*” (3:16f) What a wonderful moment for Jesus; this is high point in His life to this point; nothing like this had ever happened to Him before, I imagine. He is affirmed as the Son and commissioned to serve God! The Spirit came upon Him and the voice of God declared Jesus as the Son of God. This is an affirming, confidence-giving moment in which God was there and Jesus had the deepest sense of the presence and blessing of God on His life. His baptism affirmed Him in who He was and launched Him on His God-given mission to bless the world. This moment was supremely fulfilled in the cross and resurrection; He is the Saviour of the world.

The other experience is a very different kind of time for Jesus. Matthew tells us that “*Jesus was...*” (4:1) Actually ‘tempted’ is probably the wrong word; ‘tested’ is better; ‘to see what was in His heart’ is the idea of this experience. He is launched on His God-given mission and here is that calling tested; here is the testing of Jesus’ priorities in life and ministry. “Where is God in this experience?” 40 days in the desert and at end of that time, Jesus is hungry, at His lowest ebb physically, and the devil comes to test Him. “*If you...*” (4:3) It is all very subtle: He is a hungry man so the devil’s first tactic is to attack his stomach and give him a way out of his hunger; ‘turn these stones into bread!’ But there is an even more subtle attack: “*If you...*” (v3) In the baptism God had said “*This...*” (3:17) and here is the devil attacking that very sense of who Jesus is; “if...are you really? Prove it by turning these stones into bread; since this is who you are you can do this in your sleep.” “*Man does...*” (4:4) According to Jesus, there are more important things in life than bread; “we need to put first things first, like listening to God and living for Him.” What kind of Messiah did God want: someone who could do magic with bread or someone who was ready to listen and obey?

“*Then...*” (4:5) “So Jesus, you’re going to quote the Bible at me; here’s the Bible for you” and the devil quotes Psalm 91. “So jump off the roof and God will make sure that you don’t hurt yourself! God will keep you safe.” If Jesus does that, He is guaranteed celebrity status; His picture will be on the front cover of *Hello* magazine; He will be interviewed on all the chat shows – the only man in history who can defy gravity. “*Jesus answered...*” (4:7) God sent Jesus to be the Saviour for the world, serving people in need, ultimately dying on the cross for the sin of the world. Nothing should be allowed to get in the way of that calling. The third test: “*Again, the...*” (4:8f) The devil offers Jesus power and world domination, if only Jesus will sell His soul. You know the legend or the story of Faust who bargained with the devil, who sold his soul for the delights of the world. Jesus resisted: “*Away from...*” (v10) Loyalty to God is far more important than the delights of this world, far more important than His own power, fame and glory. He knew that to be faithful matters more and God called Him to be the Messiah who would go to the cross and that is what Jesus will be.

We have the sense that Jesus won that battle. There would be more battles to come, but Jesus won this one. Don’t let that sense of winning the battle take away from the difficulty of this testing. It was not easy for Him; it was a real test of what was in His heart. None of these gospel experiences for Jesus are easy or superficial. There is a real sense of being tested and tried, of His calling being tested, of His heart tested and these are not easy times. It was a very different mood from His baptism; the high point in His life moved quickly to a low point, when He was physically hungry, and spiritually tested. Where is God? The answer: right there with Him. “*Jesus was led by Spirit...*” (v1) “*Angels came...*” (v11) Two different ways of testifying to the presence of God with Jesus all around and all through this testing. God was there, right in midst of that experience, just as He had been at baptism; God was sustaining Jesus, attending Him, helping Him.

Let’s tease this out a little bit more. It is fascinating to see such different kinds of experience right next to each other in the Bible. Let’s see that in this Jesus is no different from us because our life experience is exactly the same; we have good days, days of celebration, followed by, and mixed with, days when we feel tested and tried to the extreme. “*A time to...*” (*Ecc 3:2ff excerpts*) The preacher in Ecclesiastes 3 paints us this picture of life, full of different kinds of experience and not all of them on every day, but all of them making up the pattern of our lives. They also made up the pattern of Jesus’ life:

Hid was no easy path, no ivory tower, no succession of good and great days full of peace and blessing. But, for Jesus too, there were days when He was tested to the full, when He was tried to the extreme and He had all sorts of bad days to experience. There were days when there was this clear affirmation *"this is..."* (3:17) and days when that was challenged and doubts were fired at Him *"If you..."* (4:3)

For me, the hugely powerful reality is that God was with Jesus in all of these days. We come to Church and there's a buzz about worship, a good feeling and we might even dare to say that we've sensed the presence of God here amongst us; we leave on something of a high, we feel good; the Bible words are ringing in our ears, the hymns and songs are in our hearts. God is with us! Then we go home to care for someone who is ill; or we go to work tomorrow and face criticism that is unfair; or someone laughs at our Christian faith; or we have an exam this week that we're worried about and we can't sleep very well. "Where is God now?" He seems very far away. The God we sensed in worship amongst our fellow-Christians seems to have deserted us and all that sense of affirmation and confidence has evaporated. But here is the reality: God is there too! God is with us in the stresses of caring for someone, in the exam hall, in the office and at work, helping us deal with our situations, helping us when life is hard. Even there, in the difficult places, we are loved, affirmed, sustained, blessed.

"That's just wishful thinking!" "That's just for Jesus; not for me!" You might object. Well, I have reasons for saying what I say. Romans 8: *"you did..."* (v15, 17) This is who we are! This is what we have. Here is the best foundation for our confidence. Read these words and let their meaning sink in to your heart, and your mind; *"this is who I am!"* First, we are children of God. Don't be put off by 'sons' as if this is only for us men! This is not about gender, but about status; we are children of the Father. *"This is my Son..."* said God of Jesus; *"you received..."* says Paul of us; we are children of the Father, adopted into His family. This is who we are; it is not a status to be earned, it is already ours! We don't need to prove ourselves to God; He has already called us His children and said to us *"call me Father!"* Then, secondly, we are heirs: *"if/since..."* (8:17) God does not die for us to inherit, but the promise we have is to share in His imperishable glory. We are heirs; Christ rests in glory and we will share that glory with Him. This is who we are; we don't need to persuade God to give us this blessing, it is already ours!

The confident Christian? I'm not asking you to go about boasting and bragging – "do you know who I am?" That bubble would soon be burst and rightly so! It is not about "Wha's like us? Precious few and they're all dead!" No, this is about us knowing who we are in Christ: be affirmed – we are children of God; we are heirs of God and will share in His glory! This is who we are; this is what God has made us because of Christ and what Jesus has done; these are the gifts of the gospel. There are days when that sense of affirmation is strong and powerful and clear, with a keen notion of the presence of God with us. There are other days when that is dented, disturbed, undermined – in those days too, we are God's children; in those days too, God is with us. There is something here to give us a spring in our step, to hold our heads high; be confident Christians. This is the pattern of Jesus' life: the glory day of His baptism; then He is tested and tried in the desert – God is with Him in all of it! This is the pattern of our lives and the same true for us; God is with us in all of it. Do we have confidence in our God?