

MATTHEW 4:1-11
“AND THE WINNER IS...”
(This sermon was preached at Ratho Church)

“And winner is...” It’s how all good competitions end! *Strictly Come Dancing*, *X-Factor*, *Britain’s Got Talent* – they all end with the tension building and the presenter saying “And the winner is...” and then all is revealed; you are left to debate the result endlessly at work or with your family; the neighbours think that someone else should have won; they voted for the other person, the other act. Then, of course, there have been voting scandals, that not all is as it has seemed and the person who’s won is under some kind of cloud because not all has been above board! Did they really deserve their victory? Should the other person have won? Sometimes we see that the person who comes second in the contest actually does better in real life, the become more of a star than the winner because they are more talented!

Christus Victor: sounds a bit like a Russian spy or a writer of spy novels. Actually it is the title of a book that basically says “And the winner is... Jesus!” It is the title of a book published in 1931 which set out to show how Jesus wins! The Gospel is a drama, a great story of God winning over His enemies; of Jesus coming into our world, facing up to His enemies and winning, defeating them forever. Because He is the winner, we win too! He shares His victory with us so that we can be strong people, people who live by faith, people who are able to follow Jesus faithfully. When we look at Christians today and at the Church today, it doesn’t seem as if we are winners; it often seems as if the Church has lost its battles and is defeated and lost and we are constantly having to fight to prove ourselves or to prove Jesus; in fact, Jesus has won the battle and gives us strength to fight the faith-battles for ourselves.

The story that shows this to us most of all is in Matthew 4, Jesus in the desert at the very start of His ministry. He has been baptised by John the Baptist; He has heard God say “*This is...*” (3:17) and has been affirmed as God’s Son and now He is in the desert. He has been there for 40 days and nights fasting and praying, all part of His preparation for the ministry for which God had sent Him, and at end of these 40 days the devil comes to test Him. The question at the heart of all of this is “What kind of Messiah will Jesus be?” God sent Him to be the Messiah and there was a plan in mind, but that plan is questioned and challenged here. Will Jesus obey His Father and be the kind of Messiah that God wants? Or will He listen to the devil and go a different way? We know the result, but that doesn’t mean this was easy; we know that Jesus wins, but these must have been real challenges for Him. There are three of them:

First of all, “*If you...*” (4:3) It’s all very subtle; Jesus 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...*” (v3a) 40 days before God has said “This is my Son” so the devil tries to sow seeds of doubt; “If...are you really God’s Son? Prove it by turning these stones into bread!” He is looking to undermine Jesus’ faith, looking to question and make Him doubt His Father. It is the same tactic he has used all the way through the Bible: in Gen 3 the devil in the form of the serpent says to Eve: “*Did God really say...*” which is all about sowing the seed of doubt in Eve’s mind about what God had said and making her question. “*Man does...*” (4:4) “There are more important things in life than bread”, says Jesus; “we need to put first things first” and for Jesus that meant listening to God and being the kind of Messiah that God wanted; He is more concerned to obey God than satisfy his stomach with magic bread!

The second test: *"Then the..." (4:5f)* "So Jesus, you're going to quote the Bible at me; well, let me quote it back to you: Psalm 91 says "you will not strike your foot..." so jump off the roof of the temple and God will keep you safe." Jesus is defeated before He has begun if He does this. He would become famous, a celeb, with His picture all over the front of *Hello!* Magazine; He'd be interviewed on all the TV chat shows as the man who can jump off high buildings without a safety net or without a rope and not hurt himself; the only man in the history of the universe who can defy gravity. Don't try this at home; it doesn't work; gravity will make you fall and God will not protect you! *"Jesus answered..." (4:7)* God sent Jesus to be a Messiah who would serve people in need and who would ultimately die on a cross for the sin of the world; that's the kind of Messiah that God wanted of Jesus and Jesus knew that and that nothing would be allowed to get in the way of His calling.

The third test: *"Again..." (4:8f)* 'Father of lies' – the devil is well-named! Who's in control of the world? That's the battle Jesus came to fight. Is the devil in control? Or is God in control? This is a battle for the hearts and minds of the people of our world. The devil offers Jesus power and authority and glory because he thinks it is his to give but Jesus sees something different. *"Away..." (4:10)* Victory for Jesus is in being faithful to His Father; loyalty to God was far more important for Jesus than His own power, fame or glory; He knew that He would only complete His God-given mission by being faithful to His calling to serve; by going to the cross and by helping and serving people in need.

So Jesus won that part of the battle. The battle would go on as Jesus faced other challenges. There were people who didn't like His teaching; people who were challenged and threatened by His authority; people who ultimately tried to get rid of Him, who plotted His downfall and His death. The last battle for Jesus was the cross, where this battle for the hearts and minds of the people of the world was finally played out once for all time. When Jesus died on the cross, He cried out "It is finished!" – now there are two ways of hearing these words: first of all, it can sound like a cry of defeat: Jesus is beaten and this is a cry of despair that He has lost battle and He has been defeated by His enemies, most of all by the devil. Secondly, it can also be heard as a victory cry: 'it is accomplished; I've done what I came to do; it is done!' and for me this is what these words really are all about; Jesus has won the battle. It seems as if the cross is the place where Jesus was beaten, where He was defeated; what else could it be since He has died! But, in fact, this is the place where Jesus accomplished the mission that God sent Him to do; so it is mission complete, mission accomplished; sin is dealt with, death is defeated, the devil is beaten. When Jesus was raised on Easter Sunday, victory was declared for the whole world to see. "And winner is... Jesus!"

There are all sorts of ways in which this impacts on us and our life and our faith. First of all, it tells us that we have a Saviour who knows what our life is like. So often, we struggle with all kinds of choices and dilemmas; we know what is good and right, we know what we should do, but so often we do the very opposite. Or we try to be strong and get things right and be the right kind of people, but our weaknesses overtake us and we give in to our bad habits and our faults and failings keep rearing their ugly heads. Doubts and questions fill our minds at times; we'd like our faith to be clear, cut and dried, strong and sure, but it's not always like that, doubts and questions are there and we don't always find the answers. Jesus knows all of this; He knows what we're like, what our life is like and because He has faced these same dilemmas, these same doubts, He is able to help us deal with them; His grace and power are enough to help us overcome these things; He doesn't take them away by magic, but He is able to help us through them, to overcome them and to be better Christians!

Then there is forgiveness. Forgiveness is the key blessing of the gospel and is ours because Jesus has won the battle. That's what Romans 5:15-19 are trying to tell us: they are full of contrasts between sin and the effects of our sin on one hand and Jesus and the effects of His obedience on the other. Let me give you just one example: "*If the...*" (Rom 5:15) Sin entered the world with Adam in the Garden of Eden; because of his sin, the world has been feeling the effects of it ever since; it is now part of our very human nature and death is part of the world because of Adam's sin; there is judgement from God on a sinful world. But Jesus has changed all of that and at the heart of all of this is forgiveness. Because Jesus died on the cross, God's grace has gone to work so that now there is forgiveness for us and for our sins. We are forgiven, the slate is wiped clean; all of our faults and failings and mistakes are gone and we are forgiven people. So there is no need to carry around any feelings of guilt and failure; because Jesus has gone to the cross and is raised, we are free and forgiven people. His victory has profound implications for us.

Even death is defeated. We don't talk about death very much in our society; it is not the done thing; that means that we're not sure how to handle it when we have to face up to it. Jesus, crucified and raised has defeated even the power of death; forgiveness takes the sting out of death; we have the hope that we will share Jesus' glory and so we live between two worlds, this world and all its pressures and struggles and the other world with the hope of heaven, that we will share Jesus' glory for ever and be new people.

There is a confidence that comes from knowing Jesus is the winner! Confidence matters in all sorts of walks of life. If you play sport, confidence makes an enormous difference to way you play: you go for your shots because you're confident that you will make them; you go for the pass in any team sport because you are confident that you will make it; you go for the line in tennis because you are confident that the ball will land just where you want it to land. But if you play without that confidence, you will play well inside the lines, you will play the safe pass, you will not go for your shots and the chances are you will not play nearly as well. "Confident Christians": it seems almost a contradiction in terms in Scotland in 2011. It doesn't come naturally to our Scottish way of thinking and our culture; we are more aware of our faults and weaknesses. But this is not about us; this is about Jesus. It is not self-confidence, but confidence in Jesus that matters more. If we are confident in Jesus then we will be more willing to take risks, more willing to live by faith, more willing to step out in obedience to God. We can be confident that Jesus will help us, confident Jesus will bless our faith and loyalty.

Every step of the way Jesus is the winner. In the desert battle with the devil, Jesus is the winner; in the battle with His enemies Jesus is the winner; in the battle with sin and death, Jesus is the winner. Because Jesus is the winner we have such a great salvation. We have a Saviour who knows what our life is like and who is able to help us; we have a gospel that tells us that our sins are forgiven and that we are free; we have the hope of heaven and will share Jesus' glory forever. Our confidence is in Jesus; we can walk with a spring in our step, because Jesus is the winner.