

Sermon Series:

Who is this man?

Jesus' early ministry (Luke 3-9)

TRUST IN THE LORD – Luke 3:21-4:13; Deuteronomy 6:10-19; 8:1-3

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Who is Jesus? A Christian research organisation here in Australia does regular surveys to get an idea on what Australians think about God, Christianity and the church. Recently, they asked people what they believed about Jesus. 49% thought Jesus was a real person, 22% thought He was a mythical character, and 29% don't know what they believed about Him. They went on to ask the 49% who thought He was a real person who Jesus was. You can see that people's opinions are divided into four roughly equal groups. 26% thought He was God in human form, 29% thought He was an important spiritual leader, 20% thought He was just a normal human being, and 25% had some other idea or didn't know who He was. This means that of the people around us, only 10-15% believe that Jesus lived on the earth 2000 years ago as God in human form.

You can see that there is a fair bit of uncertainty in the community about who Jesus is. I think some of this is because many new immigrants have never heard about Jesus before, so they know nothing. I think there is also a growing percentage of younger people who have never gone to church and so have only heard of Jesus in passing. In this environment, it is important that we have a clear understanding of who Jesus is – both so that we know who it is that we are trusting with our lives, and so that we can introduce other people to Him as well.

Back when Luke was writing His account of the life of Jesus, he wanted his readers to also have a clear idea of who Jesus was *“so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”* (Luke 1:4) As they faced difficult times, and even persecution for their faith, they needed to know who and what to trust and build their lives upon.

In our studies of Luke's gospel so far, we have seen a couple of things about Jesus. In the birth stories and John the Baptist's description of Him, we have seen that Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah who would come from God, bringing a greater salvation from sin and an inward change that would enable us to live as God's people.

In today's reading, Luke continues to introduce us to Jesus and His preparation for His public ministry. This passage can be divided into three sections. We'll look briefly at first two and then focus on the third.

1. Jesus' baptism (3:21-22)

Luke has less detail about Jesus' baptism than is found in the other Gospels. In his writing, it marks the transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to the ministry of Jesus. It is the handing on of the baton as it were.

The obvious question to ask is why Jesus was baptised. Because He was without sin, He had no need for repentance, which, as we saw last week, was the point of John's baptism. I think He did it partly to show His piety by identifying Himself with what might be called a national "back-to-God" movement centred around John the Baptist. But for Jesus, it meant something different. It was not about repentance, but about dedicating Himself to God's service. And we see that God approves of this in His response:

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (3:22)

We can understand this response in two ways. Firstly, Jesus is God the Son, sent into the world by the Father. Those who would have heard God's voice here probably wouldn't have understood it that way, however. They would have understood the term "my Son" as an identification of God's Messiah. Psalm 2, which talks about the Messiah, says:

He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. (Psalm 2:7,8)

In God's pronouncement at the baptism of Jesus, God is claiming Him as His chosen Messiah. This is further sealed and blessed by the descent of the Holy Spirit which is similar to royalty being anointed with oil at their coronation or even me being blessed by the Presbytery when I was officially commissioned into this role. It is not that God the Father and the Holy Spirit weren't a part of Jesus' life up until this point, but this is Jesus' public blessing and anointing for ministry.

2. Jesus' ancestry (3:23-38)

Luke pauses in his historical account here to bring in another witness to Jesus' identity as he gives us Jesus' lineage. This was extremely important for those wanting to understand Jesus' relationship to Jewish history and heritage.

Luke starts out by giving a nod to the virgin birth by saying, *"He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph" (3:23)* Many scholars believe that what follows is actually Mary's lineage. Joseph was *"the son of Heli"* by virtue of having married Mary and becoming a part of her family. Many of the names which follow are of unknown people who do not appear anywhere else in the Biblical account. This is especially true between Jesus and David. The people mentioned are not part of the line of Davidic kings, but still descendants of David. This lineage means that Jesus was genetically eligible to be the kingly Messiah as prophesied.

But the lineage doesn't stop with David. Luke continues down the line to Abraham, showing that Jesus is one of God's chosen people, part of the line of God's promise that was given to Abraham and his descendants forever. The genealogy in Matthew's Gospel stops here because his focus was on Jesus' Jewish heritage. However, Luke keeps going, back through familiar names of the early chapters of Genesis, all the way to "*Adam, the son of God*" (3:38) Luke wants his readers to understand that Jesus was a part of created humanity, a new Adam, who will live as God intended humanity to live and in doing so, will save all of humanity, not just the Jews.

Luke has already highlighted the universal nature of Jesus' work in the birth. When Simeon blessed Jesus in the temple soon after His birth, he said:

*For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel. (2:30,31)*

Luke will make a point of including Gentiles in the stories He chooses to tell from Jesus' life, showing that right from the beginning, Jesus reaches out to the Gentiles around Him, including them in His ministry. It was always God's intent that the Jews would be a channel of blessing to the Gentiles around them, but they had failed in that mission. Now Jesus will do what they failed to do.

CONCLUSIONS

What does Luke want us to learn from these two sections? On the one hand, Jesus, in His life on earth, was an ordinary human being. He shared a human ancestry – he was a Jew from the line of David. He could trace His lineage all the way back to Adam. He didn't just drop from heaven, he was born as a human baby, with a human family. Jesus grew up as a Jewish boy, earning the Torah and observing the Jewish holidays. He did what other Jews around him did – including being baptised to show His allegiance to God.

On the other hand, God had sent Him into the world to play an extraordinary role as God's Messiah. And God announces this in a dramatic fashion at His baptism. God's pronouncement, to those who were listening, must have been a shock – the Messiah they had promised for centuries was really here! Luke is setting up the paradox of Jesus. He is both God and man. And as a man, He is both ordinary and extraordinary.

3. Jesus' testing (4:1-13)

The next event in Jesus' life was His testing in the wilderness. We read:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted (or tested) by the devil. (4:1,2)

First notice that Luke twice mentions the Holy Spirit. The Spirit had descended on Jesus at His baptism and now the Spirit is guiding Jesus' actions. At the end of the forty days, the Spirit will lead Jesus out of the wilderness and back to Galilee. This event is planned and controlled by God and accomplishes His purposes. We can be

doing exactly what God wants us to do and still encounter testing times. Sometimes, God allows us to be tested, not because we are failing, but to show us and others that we are doing the right thing.

We are told that Jesus was tested for forty days, but only three tests are described. I wonder how the disciples came to hear about what happened here. They weren't there to see it first-hand. Jesus must have told them at some point.

First, the devil tests Jesus' dependence on God's provision.

He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If (Since) you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" (4:2-4)

In the Greek, this is not a challenge to prove He is the Son of God, but a temptation for Jesus to use His status and power to get what He wants – and even what He needs. He's been fasting for forty days and He is hungry! Why should He need to wait? In answering the devil, Jesus quotes from Moses' words in Deuteronomy:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you ... causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna ... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone ... (Deuteronomy 8:2,3)

You see all those words which are the same as we find in Luke's writing? Jesus is identifying himself with the Jews in the wilderness. There God provided for their every need, but they had to trust Him. They couldn't make the manna appear, they had to wait and trust that God would do what He said He would do. They didn't live because of the bread they could make but they lived because God's words which promised that He would provide. When the time was right, God would provide all Jesus needed. The devil is testing Jesus to see if He really believes that, whether He is willing to be dependent on God's provision.

While Jesus' testing was unique, there are things we can learn from it. The devil loves to get us to doubt that God will do what He has said He will do. Do we trust God to know our needs and have the ability to meet those needs? We know He can – but when it doesn't seem like provision is coming, do we worry and fret, trying to meet our own needs, or do we wait patiently for God's provision? Do we really trust Him?

Secondly, the devil tests Jesus' allegiance to God's plan. The devil took Jesus to place where He could see all the nations of the world. This was probably in a vision, since one can't physically see all the nations of the world!

... he (the devil) said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" (4:6,7)

Could the devil have followed through on his offer? Not really. Like everything the devil says, it is a mixture of truth and lie. Yes, there is a sense in which the world lies in the power of the devil until God brings in His final victory and removes him from the world. However, the devil does not have absolute power. Later, Jesus would cast out demons and defeat the devil's schemes. He didn't really have the power to give Jesus what he promised.

But there was one who could do that. Remember what we read earlier from Psalm 2?

*He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession."
(Psalm 2:7,8)*

God had promised to give Jesus rulership over the nations of the world – not through bowing down to the devil, but by His death and resurrection which would defeat the devil once and for all. But it wouldn't be easy, and Jesus would need to trust God's plan and submit himself to it, even when things looked bad. He would have to serve God through the bad days and trust that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

Do you ever struggle to trust God's good plan for your life? When life takes a turn that looks bad to us, isn't it easy to turn away from God and seek other options? When God seems to be allowing things in our life that we can't see how they could possibly turn out well, do we try to work things out on our own? Or do we trust God, even in the darkness?

Finally, in another vision, the devil takes Jesus up to the top of the temple, one of the most public places in Jerusalem and indeed, all of Israel. There he tests Jesus' submission to God's ways.

*"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written:
"He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." (4:9-11)*

Jesus is starting out on His ministry. What better way to bolster His confidence and prove that God was indeed with Him than a spectacular demonstration like this. But Jesus rejects this option.

Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (4:12)

Again, Jesus is quoting from Moses' words in Deuteronomy where he goes on to provide an example of when they had put God to the test – at Massah in the wilderness, soon after they had left Egypt. Not surprisingly in the wilderness, water was scarce, and the people begin to grumble and doubt. Was God still with them? Why wasn't he doing something about the water issue? Instead of trusting that God would take care of them in His way and His time, they are demanding that He do what they want Him to do and when they want Him to do it. God did provide water for

them, but the relationship was damaged. They put God to the test, and He passed, but they failed the test of their trust in Him.

Are we every tempted to doubt God's timing and methods as He works in our lives? Do we ever ask God to prove that He is still with us? Or do we have enough confidence in our God to rest in His love for us – even when we can't see what He is doing?

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the forty days, the devil leaves Jesus for the time being. He will always be there, stirring up trouble for Jesus, but He has not succeeded in breaking the trust between Jesus and His Father. In fact, it seems as though this bond has been made stronger through having been tested. Jesus has declared His complete trust in His Father and obedience to His will. And this trust will continue throughout His earthly life as He lived out this trust through the power of the Holy Spirit. As I was working on the sermon, I was reminded of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, the night before His crucifixion. There Jesus knows the certainty of the suffering He is about to endure, and He asks the Father if there isn't another way to accomplish salvation. But then He rests in His trust of the Father, saying "Not my will, but yours be done". Jesus trusts that God will provide all He needs to face the cross, He willingly aligns His life to God's plan and submits to God's way of purchasing our salvation. The decisions He made back in the wilderness, are carried through to the very end.

Jesus was both God and man. God gave Him an extraordinary role to play as the Messiah. But He was also an ordinary man, one who lived as God intended humanity to live, day by day, walking with the Father, trusting Him for every step. And this is where we can learn from Jesus about how we should live today. God wants us to trust Him the same way that Jesus trusted Him. God is more than able to provide all that we need for any situation we might face. His plan is best, as are His ways. Everything God is and all that He does comes from His love for us and is backed by His unlimited power. We are not the Son of God, but we are His children, and He will never abandon us. But God cannot do anything for us if we don't trust Him. The devil loves to get us to doubt God and try to take things into our own hands or just give up. But we can choose to trust, even when we can't see the way forward, or maybe we can see what's up ahead and it terrifies us. That is when we need to turn to God and say, "I don't know how this is going to work out, but you do, and I trust you." Can you say that today?