

Son of David or servant of Satan?

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[0:00] Only God and certain madmen have no doubts. That came to mind as I was preparing this sermon and I couldn't think who had said it.

! I thought actually it was Samuel Johnson, but it turns out, I was surprised when I looked it up to find it was actually Martin Luther who said it. Only fanatics, only madmen have no doubts. Here are some scriptures about doubt. Just a few texts. James, talking about prayer, says, When he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

But on the other hand, Jews tell us to be merciful to those who doubt. And Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 13 verse 5, Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

Test yourselves. Do not realise that Christ Jesus is in you unless, of course, you fail the test. It doesn't mention the word doubt, but it is suggesting that there's some things we should doubt.

[1:21] There's some things we should be careful about. Make sure that we've got it right. And the crowd finds itself in a state of doubt here, or perhaps one should say a state of confusion.

They see the signs that Jesus is doing. And they say, well, this is some of the sort of thing we might have expected that the son of David would do.

But it just doesn't seem quite right. The commentators say that the more accurate. Really what is said here is, surely this can't be the son of David, can it?

It's not. They're not. They don't really think it is, but they're not totally convinced either way, is what the crowd is saying here. Is doubt a good thing or a bad thing?

I've just seen James points out that doubt can cripple prayer. And yet Paul tells us to examine ourselves. And as I say, isn't that an invitation to a kind of doubt?

[2:30] Don't take your profession of discipleship at face value. Test it to see if it is real. Remember, Jesus himself warned that not everyone who calls him Lord, Lord, will be admitted to the kingdom of heaven.

And as Martin Luther pointed out, to eliminate doubt entirely is to become insane. To become a fanatic. I've got a whistle somewhere.

And fanatics usually come to a sticky end. When faith is blind, in fact, it ceases to be faith and becomes obsession.

Real faith involves a rational consideration of the options and a conscious informed choice. At the beginning of this section of Matthew, John the Baptist, who had himself prophesied that Jesus was the Messiah, comes to doubt.

We looked at this passage a few weeks ago. Comes to doubt and seeks reassurance. Because what Jesus was actually doing didn't quite fit his expectation of what the son of David was supposed to do.

[3:49] And all through this section, there is doubt about who Jesus is. And what is the nature of his mission. Particularly, what is the nature of his mission and who is behind it.

In our passage tonight, we find that doubt is focused. What is doubt? What is to be done about it? So I thought before we look at the passage, I'd just be a bit more precise about what we're talking about. Doubt, I would suggest, these are my definitions.

You could argue with them. This is what I mean by doubt. Doubt is to be unsure of the truth, about the truth of either a particular fact or perhaps the interpretation of that fact.

What that fact actually means. We hear so much, don't we, nowadays about fake news. We hear so much about scammers. Saw a statistic quoted that said 29% of people over 65 have been victims of

scammers.

[4:56] And the average loss has been about 800 pounds. I don't know where they got this information from, but it's believable, I guess. Or perhaps that's fake news, I don't know. It pays to be sceptical somehow, sometimes, doesn't it?

What is scepticism? Everybody talks about scepticism. Scepticism, I'd suggest, is a more sophisticated form of doubt in which we reject the surface explanation and we seek a deeper one. Scepticism is educated doubt. So you might think of it as doubt with a PhD. Doubt that is thought about doubt, thought about something and tries to find a deeper explanation.

And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you do actually find a real explanation, a deeper explanation. Other times you'd end up with something just plain absurd as the Pharisees managed to do in this case.

So I'd like to look at this passage in terms of these four headings.

[6:13] First of all, the popular doubt, the doubt of the crowd, the confusion of the crowd. And secondly, the scepticism of the elite, of the teachers, the rulers.

And then I'd like to look at scepticism today. I've called it chronological snobbery, which I believe was C.S. Lewis's description of it.

The fact that something happened 2,000 years ago cannot possibly be worth thinking about today.

And then I would suggest that Jesus comes here with the right sort of scepticism.

So I've called that a bit controversially perhaps, but I've called my last heading Jesus the Skeptic.

And I'm going to try and make that, as it were, our application.

I think Jesus makes his own application here, so I don't need to make one up, as it were. I think it's very clearly made here. So let's look first of all at the popular doubt.

[7:19] The people are confused. They're unsure. Is Jesus the promised Messiah? A prophet? Who is he? Jesus asked Peter that, what the crowd was saying, and on another occasion, and we're told that he got all sorts of different answers.

Some thought he was the promised Messiah, but they certainly weren't convinced. But clearly something extraordinary is going on. The trouble is, though, it doesn't quite match up to their expectation.

The crowd is expecting a king. A king who will do what David did, but on a larger scale. A king who will not just unite the tribes of Israel, but will conquer the world.

They want a king who will lead them in revolt against the Romans and establish a Jewish hegemony. There had been leaders who had claimed to do that, but they'd all turned out, in the end, to be fanatics, and they'd all come to a bad end.

And there will be more in the future as well. And yet the crowd's expectation was not entirely without foundation. Because some Old Testament prophecies clearly could be read that way.

[8:51] For instance, in the well-known prophecy in Daniel, in Daniel 2, Daniel talks about the rock that will break the empire of iron and clay. And pretty well everyone who thinks about prophecy agrees that the empire of iron and clay is the Roman Empire.

That's one thing nobody really seems to doubt much. Nobody agrees that's what it's about. And so they were expecting that the coming king would break the empire of iron and clay.

So how does Jesus answer this kind of objection? And how does Matthew in his commentary address the issue? And he does it, of course, by comparing scripture with scripture.

They quote from Hosea and from Isaiah. It's not that they were wrong to believe Daniel's prophecy, but they've misinterpreted it. The writer to the Hebrews says, In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

And so we have these quotations from the prophets here that we, well, there are several of them. In the next chapter, we have the seeing they do not see, hearing they do not hear or understand.

[10:14] Or in the passage we looked at, well, I wasn't here, but in the passage considered last week, the passage is aimed to answer that confusion, doesn't it?

Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love in whom I delight. I will put my spirit on him and he will proclaim justice for the nations. Yeah, they got that bit right.

He will proclaim justice for the nations. But he will not quarrel or cry out. No one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break in a smouldering wick.

He will not snuff out till he leads justice to victory. And in his name, the nations will put their hope. Which is a promise not of a violent revolution, but of a, well, a revolution, yes, but a revolution of an entirely different type.

And a king of an entirely different type. And one for whom the nations will not find destruction, but whom the nations will put their help. We need to, quote, compare scripture with scripture if we want to get the right understanding of prophecy.

[11:23] Because actually, it's in the nature of prophecy to be, to some extent, veiled, isn't it? It must be. It's impossible for it to be different. It's impossible to describe the future in detail simply because we lack the historical context to understand it.

But that doesn't mean that the Old Testament prophecies are useless. Prophecy had indeed created the expectation of a son of David, a king and the lion of David.

The crowd had certainly got that bit right. But prophecy had also given us enough information to identify him when he came. Otherwise, how would we have known? But it only works if we approach it without writing our own prejudices into the text.

If we keep our mind in that sense, open. If we ask the right questions. What sort of king was it that the Old Testament prophets had predicted?

predicted. So let's go and look at the conflict now with the Pharisees.

[12:41] If you want to be an influencer, and that's what people want to be nowadays I'm told, to be an influencer on Facebook or on Twitter, simple doubt won't do if you want to be an influencer.

To keep one's position you have to give the impression that you know what's going on. And so doubt won't do.

We need scepticism. Scepticism has to be analytical. It must try and provide a deeper explanation for an apparently confusing reality.

And these Pharisees very much wanted to be influencers. They wanted to show that they were the ones who really understood what Judaism was about and they really understood what God was doing.

Only the problem was they were struggling a bit here. Because in principle they were in favour of healing people and casting out demons and the like.

[13:59] Only they weren't in favour of Jesus doing it. Because he was influencing the crowd in entirely the wrong direction as far as they were concerned. And so the best they can do is to accuse Jesus of sorcery.

for this really isn't very plausible. This is when scepticism lends you you'll end up not with a deeper explanation but with complete nonsense which is what very often happens.

Jesus doesn't take very long to demolish their arguments. First of all he points out it is not really an explanation at all. How can it make any kind of sense for Satan to get rid of his own messengers? Why would he do that? He would be destroying his own kingdom and his own household. The word they use for Satan here is Beelzebub which was the name of a Canaanite god it's thought a Baal. People argue about what it means but one explanation is that Beelzebub itself means lord of the flies but that's perhaps a deliberate corruption of the Aramaic Beelzebul which is used in some translations and that means something like lord of the house or lord of the height.

[15:33] So it's the name of a Canaanite god which has been adopted by the Jews and corrupted as a name for Satan himself. But perhaps Jesus picks up the literal meaning here the original meaning of the lord of the house whose house is this the lord of whose household is it because that's the approach he takes.

Can Satan's household be divided against itself? If it will it will surely fall. But there's also a deep irony here in fact because it is very much the Jewish nation that's divided against itself.

There are a host of competing political and religious parties and sects vying for control. In the scriptures we read of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the supporters of King Herod and the

Zealots a revolutionary group.

And historians tell us there were others the Essenes and many other groups all of whom were claiming to be the true voice of Judaism the true voice of Yahweh and yet all disagreeing and competing with each other and only united in their opposition to Jesus.

In fact it was this very fragmentation of Jewish society and Jewish identity that would actually lead to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The city just became ungovernable.

[17:10] Exactly what the political leaders feared was exactly what happened not because of the message of Jesus but because of the message of all these competing people who seemed to think they had the only true way.

So as I say there's really a deep irony here. It is in fact the household of the Jews that is divided against itself. Then Jesus brings a second argument in that the Pharisees' criticism would apply even more to themselves in verse 27.

It's not entirely clear but it's thought that some Jewish leaders did practice exorcism. exorcism then as indeed now is generally carried out with a certain amount of ritual and paraphernalia bell and book and candle and saying ritual words and really it does sound like a kind of magic.

Jesus drives out demons and hails people with a single word of command. If there is any sorcery going on it is in the Jewish exorcisms we read later don't we in Acts of Simon the Magus who claimed to do just that sort of thing.

But he discovered that the Holy Spirit was more powerful. So their argument would apply even more to themselves. When Jesus and his apostles healed in most cases there was nothing more as I say than a simple word of command.

[18:52] And then Jesus gets to the crux of the argument. What's the spirit does that point to? If it's not the spirit of Satan then whose spirit is it?

Verse 20 that Jesus drives out demons rip by. And if that's the case then what does that mean? What should they learn from that?

thought. But I thought before we move on to that final bit let's look at the relevance to us today. Because various phrases have been used to describe the fact that we always look down on the past.

Chronological snobbery was the phrase that C.S. Lewis used. argument fatigue was another word I've heard before. The fact that an argument is old means it can't possibly be valid.

That is the suggestion. And actually we are rather programmed to believe that what we were brought up to must be correct. And everyone else who's geographically or historically separated must therefore be wrong.

[20:12] Of course there is some plausibility to this argument. We are able to renew the past and review the past and perhaps see its mistakes. And yet it was an atheist philosopher who said that history teaches us nothing.

We can review the past and see its mistakes but when we do that we forget the future will be looking back and seeing ours. And of course from the viewpoint of post enlightenment western thought in this 21st century all this talk of spirits and demons seems rather bizarre.

Yet there are lessons for us here. It's very difficult to think outside the box of the world view we grew up in. This is so much a part of us that we almost accept it without question.

That was what the Jewish crowd was up to they'd so got this view of what the kingdom of the Messiah would be like, what the son of David would be like, they found it almost impossible to think of anything different.

Because that's what they grew up to. And so in the West we're convinced that western liberalism is the only rational doctrine.

[21:44] And this is in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. I mean the Arab world, China, India, they all see the world differently, don't they? Are they clearly so benighted that only western civilization has the true path, the true way?

our own history? 150 years ago, imperialism was the height of fashion, wasn't it?

That's what everybody did, everybody in Europe anyway. that was the only way to look at the world. The way to look at the world was to conquer it by military force, if necessary.

Economics is better if you can do it that way, if necessary, by military force. And now actually we struggle to make sense of our own past, don't we? We try and label the empire good or bad, and of course in a sense it was neither of those things, it just was what it was.

Yet it all seemed to make sense at the time, didn't it? And then if we look at our current experience of post-modern thought, it's got to be illuminating in itself.

[23:11] The enlightenment was an intellectual movement that was supposed to promote the rule of reason, rational argument, scientific debate, and yet what do we find today?

The so-called rule of reason has resulted in a society in which rational debate has largely disappeared. Our universities, which were once the bastions of free speech, now ban disagreement in the name of safe spaces, whatever a safe space is.

I've quite figured out what a safe space is, but it's a thing you're supposed to have nowadays, it seems. there's nothing more intolerant than tolerance.

Now debate is not allowed, disagreement is not allowed, and so all you can do is shout louder than your opponents. Happens in Brexit, happens in debates over sexuality, happens everywhere.

Fake news is the way to go. Perhaps not total lie, because a total lie often doesn't work, but you can spin it, you can slant it, make it mean whatever you want to make it mean.

[24:36] And so, as I say, rational debate has largely disappeared from our society altogether, because you're not allowed to disagree anymore. And as I like to say, Epimenides paradox always gets you in the end, you always land up contradicting yourself.

Here's another popular saying, I used to think I was the most sceptical person in the world, but now I'm not sure. But actually it's very difficult to be sceptical about scepticism.

It's very difficult to be sceptical about the worldview we came up in, grew up in. Being sceptical about scepticism is actually very hard.

We need to mark the lessons of history. Just because you grew up believing something doesn't make it true, but it does make it hard to change your mind.

That was the problem of the crowd. They just got so fixed in their heads of what the son of David was going to be about. They just couldn't get their heads around where Jesus was.

[25:53] And so they were confused. They weren't totally rejecting it, but they weren't going for it either. They just found themselves confused. So that's, if you like, the philosophical reason to take this passage of scripture seriously, it reminds us that just because we grew up believing something doesn't make it true.

And it is actually very difficult to think outside the box. It's actually very difficult to be sceptical about scepticism. But there's, if that's a bit too philosophical for you, there's a more practical reason also to take this passage of scripture seriously.

Because what the sceptics tell us, of course, the modern sceptics, is that, of course, in the past, people believed all that religious stuff. They expected demons and miracles. They were all too ready to accept such reports.

But the only trouble is, in this case, that explanation won't quite wash. Because far from being ready to accept all this stuff that Jesus was doing, the Pharisees were absolutely convinced that they didn't want to accept it.

They really, really wished it would go away. But it didn't. They only came up with this rather bizarre Beelzebub thing out of desperation.

[27:21] It was never a very good argument. They just couldn't think of anything better. And of course, what would have been better would have been to cover up, to deny that these things had happened at all.

And that's of course what people do nowadays. They had every interest in convincing people that these signs had not taken place. They certainly weren't keen to accept them.

Only they just couldn't do it. This wasn't the report of a few biased observers which could easily be suppressed and discredited.

the Pharisees were always trying to do that but it just didn't work. This was all public knowledge. There were multiple first-hand accounts.

The accounts actually differ slightly which is argument for their truth in a sense because we all see things in a slightly different way. And that's what you expect from eyewitness accounts that they will all have a slightly different view of things.

[28:25] Whereas if it's a made up story, people are very careful to make sure they get all the details consistent. But the Pharisees would have suppressed this if they could but they couldn't.

It was all public knowledge. And so what is undeniable is that 2,000 years ago in Judea in a small Middle Eastern country something extraordinary happened.

And that's something that would change the world forever. this change is written in every page of our secular histories of the world isn't it?

Something happened then that changed the world forever. Of course you can argue about what it was and what it meant. But to deny it happened at all is simply nonsense.

the Pharisees and their Jewish successors couldn't deny these events were happening and so they were obliged to put it down to magic.

[29:34] I would say to the modern skeptic well if it's not magic what's your explanation then? And that is precisely the argument that Jesus brings.

Whose spirit is it? Who's at work here? So I say I don't want to be controversial for the sake of it but I think I'll stick by this title of Jesus the skeptic because Jesus here challenges the ideas of both popular opinion and intellectual dissent.

Jesus was looking for a deeper explanation of both where the crowd was coming from and where the Pharisees were coming from. The first interaction that Jesus had with the teachers of the law seems to have gone very well.

We read about it actually in Luke 2 46-47 and it was when Jesus was just 12 years old. Jesus had made his first visit to the temple and we read after three days his parents found him in the temple courts sitting among the teachers listening to them and asking them questions.

Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. Started so well didn't it? But unfortunately it went all downhill after that.

[31:12] Since then and particularly during the days of his public ministry his relations with the Jewish authorities had gone from bad to worse. Matthew 12 verse 14 we realise that by this stage the Pharisees had resorted to trying to kill Jesus as the only way to keep him quiet.

And what's Jesus' attitude to this? What's Jesus' reply to all this dissent? Well it's a radical scepticism. He's sceptical about the expectations of the crowd.

He's sceptical of the motives of the Pharisees. He insists that his opponents put their case because actually their arguments make no sense as a rational analysis reveals.

Now having answered the Pharisees' case in 25 and 26, Jesus goes on to the offensive and he has four points to make. And I think we can use those as our conclusion as well.

I don't think I need to think up a conclusion to this because I think the very points that Jesus makes here are equally relevant to us today. And the first point is that their own actions judge them.

[32:37] Actually verse 27 is a little bit obscure. Who are they who are the judges? In verse 27, is it the Jewish exorcists? Perhaps that is what they mean, I don't know.

Perhaps Jesus is saying, well, you have exorcists among your own ranks. You're going to start accusing them of magic, they're going to turn on you. But it's their actions basically and what they say that judges them.

If Jesus is guilty of sorcery, so are the exorcists and they won't like that accusation. But in essence, perhaps the they that are doing the judging here is just the future.

Their own words and deeds will find them out. Their own actions will prove them to be hypocrites, as indeed they did. And of course this idea is expanded in verses 30 to 37, which is the passage for next week.

So I won't expand that further here. But the first point is that by their fruits you shall know them.

Their own actions will find them out. And Jesus' second point is that if it's not the spirit of Satan at

work, then whose spirit is it?

[33:51] Who is it who is actually engaging Satan in conflict? It has to be the enemy of Satan, surely. And what does that mean?

The only reasonable interpretation is that the kingdom of God is at work. the battle is joined. The offensive indeed is taking place, but the battle is joined not against the Romans, but against the kingdom of Satan himself.

And then he points out in verse 29 that of course the household of Satan does need to be bound if the kingdom of God is to progress. you can't rob a house if the owner is standing there with his rifle. It won't work. The enemy does have to be bound to them and if you want to rob a house you have to either get the owner out of the house or tie him up. Satan is not going to leave willingly.

He has to be tied up. He has to be bound by the spirit of God. And it is exactly that warfare that Jesus is engaged in.

[35:19] And it is exactly that warfare that the apostles were told to engage in a few verses earlier in chapter 11.

men. And that is the sort of king, the sort of warrior that Jesus is. He is indeed at war, but he is at war not with the Romans, but with the kingdom of Satan himself.

and those who follow him, as we'll be singing in the hymn at the end, must engage in that same conflict. The apostles did and all who come after him must engage in that conflict.

conflict. And it's a strange sort of conflict as I was talking about a few weeks ago, because sometimes it's a conflict in which the way forward is to get yourself killed, not the enemy, but to put to death yourself, to take up the cross.

And so in verse 30, Jesus makes the point. Time to decide. which side are you on?

[36:33] You can't equivocate as the crowd was doing. You can't go around and think, well, maybe, maybe, but, you know, not sure about this. It is time to make the decision.

It is time to put aside doubt and say that the spirit of God is indeed at work. It is time to acknowledge the spirit of God and his anointed king.

And which side of the conflict will you join? You've got to join one side or the other. You're either a gatherer or a scatterer. That's what Jesus says, isn't it? Will you welcome and work for the kingdom of God?

If not, then eventually it will be seen that you're working for the enemy. You mightn't realise it. The Pharisees didn't realise it. I'm sure they were quite convinced they were on the side of God.

But you're actually working for the enemy if you don't stand up for the Lord Jesus Christ. You might not realise it, you might not mean it, but you can't sit on the fence as the crowd was trying to do.

[37:49] You can't come up with plausible but ultimately spurious objections like the Pharisees. We're not ultimately rational beings. Ultimately our behaviour is, our reason indeed, is in enmity, a state of enmity towards God and that skews everything we do, including our reasoning.

You can't come up with plausible but spurious objections like the Pharisees, because the kingdom of God has come near. The conflict is engaged and it demands a response.

So I thought by way of conclusion we would sing a hymn about that very thing, that the Son of God is indeed engaged in the conflict.