

Matthew 3:13-4:11

“A New Israel and a New Adam”

Introduction

This evening, as we’ve just read, we’ll be looking at Jesus’ baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. Now, one of the problems with not being around for the previous talks in this series so far is that I’m not entirely sure what’s been said already in terms of an overview of Matthew’s gospel. So please excuse me if I repeat anything which has already been said - but I would like to say a few things which will help us make sense of this passage.

First things first: Matthew – as in the writer of this gospel – is at pains to make sure we understand that Jesus is the fulfilment of everything that has gone before in the Old Testament. In Matthew 1, he emphasises the fact that Jesus is a “son of Abraham”, and does this by tracing the genealogies back via Abraham, David, and the Babylonian exile – all significant milestones in the history of Israel. In chapter two and the beginning of chapter three we see him unfolding the story of how the events of Jesus’ birth fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament.

So our passage today sees Matthew continuing that scene-setting introduction, an introduction which we need to have in order to understand who Jesus is, and to help understand the teaching that comes later on in the gospel.

Now what we’re going to do is look at this passage in two sections – firstly at Jesus’ baptism, and then spend a bit longer looking at his temptation. If you want to see where we’re going and follow along you should have an outline on the back of your service sheets.

Baptism (3:13-17)

Why Baptism?

In the first part of chapter three, Matthew tells us about John’s baptism. Now John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance: if you look at v11 John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance.” And then he says, “But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

So John understands that his baptism isn’t the ‘ultimate’ baptism – he recognises that the one who he is pointing to will have a greater baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At this point Jesus turns up, wanting to be baptised by John. Given what he said a couple of verses earlier, I think it’s understandable why he refuses Jesus baptism! He says in v14, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to *me*?”

He is incredulous that Jesus wants to come and be baptised by *him*. However, Jesus insists that he should be baptised, saying in v15 “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness”.

Now my question after reading this was, if John's baptism is of repentance, why does Jesus want to be baptised? Does that mean that Jesus needed to be forgiven – did he need to repent? What's the real reason? Surely he was sinless!

Well I'd like to offer you two reasons why Jesus was baptised. Firstly, I believe it was an affirmation of the sacrament of baptism. If you look at the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus says in v19, "Go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". By being baptised himself, he set the pattern for all the believers who were to follow him. In the words of J.C. Ryle, "An ordinance of which the Lord Jesus Himself partook, is not to be lightly esteemed."

In other words, because Jesus did it, we are to take it seriously. Baptism is not something which we can dismiss lightly. Although in itself it does not save someone, it does mean something: we should ensure we treat it with the respect it deserves.

The second reason I believe Jesus was baptised was in solidarity with us as human beings. Notice those words of Jesus in v15, to "fulfil all righteousness". Now what does that mean, to fulfil all righteousness? This is a complicated issue and a lot of people have written a lot of words about it over the centuries! However I think the heart of the matter is to do with our salvation.

What was the greatest problem that the Israelites of the Old Testament had? Sin: they kept on running away after other gods and forsaking the one true God, even when they were in the Promised Land and God had given them every blessing! That story is written across virtually every page of the Old Testament. But God doesn't leave it there – he promises to make a new covenant with them. In Jeremiah 31:33, God says:

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.
"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

The biggest problem of the Old Testament – the problem of sin and righteousness – God promised to solve permanently. We were thinking earlier about how Matthew is at pains to make clear that Jesus' coming is a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies – well, I believe this is exactly what he had in mind in including this passage.

So if Jesus is that fulfilment of God's promise to bring about a new covenant, how does that happen? *How* does that fulfil all righteousness?

The apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Christ Jesus bore on the cross the penalty of sin for us. That is ultimately how all righteousness could be fulfilled. And that could only happen if he was 'one of us', if he took on himself completely the sin of mankind. In the words of Isaiah 53:12, Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors": he became one of us, so that he might free us. Although Jesus had no need of repentance and forgiveness, Israel definitely did – and so do we!

So, in a nutshell, in being baptised Jesus was demonstrating his solidarity with mankind, demonstrating that he would ultimately fulfil all righteousness on the cross. He was showing that he was publicly committed to God's salvation plan.

Why does God speak?

And this public commitment is the reason why God speaks directly. As I'm sure you know there aren't many times in the Bible when God speaks directly down from heaven! So any time when God does speak directly has to be important. And I think the reason this particular occasion is important is because God is affirming that plan.

A few years ago, the popular Christian speaker and writer Steve Chalke wrote a book called 'The Lost Message of Jesus'. You may have heard of it, as it caused a fair bit of controversy at the time! In it he made the claim that the idea of a wrathful father (God) punishing an innocent son (Jesus) is akin to – in his words – “cosmic child abuse.” Now I don't want to get into the details now, but I think we can see from this passage that his accusation is simply not true. God declares his love for the Son, and says “with him I am well pleased.” This is not the image of a wrathful father punishing an innocent Son, this is the image of the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Spirit, and Son, coming together in unity to save sinful mankind.

Did you notice here how we have all three members of the trinity present in this scene: God the Father, speaking from heaven; God the Spirit, descending on Jesus like a dove; God the Son, on earth being baptised. To quote J.C. Ryle again, “It was the whole Trinity, which at the beginning of creation said, “let us *make* man.” It was the whole Trinity again, which at the beginning of the Gospel seemed to say, “let us *save* man.”

Temptation (4:1-11)

Now I believe that this public commitment of Jesus to God's plans leads him to go out into the wilderness. By fasting Jesus was able to focus intently on prayer for that period of time, prayer which he would need in order to sustain him for the next three years of his ministry on Earth.

Notice in 4:1 that Jesus was “led *by the Spirit* into the wilderness”. We were thinking earlier about how Jesus being baptised in some ways set the pattern for believers to be baptised today. Similarly, throughout his life on earth Jesus was led by the Spirit: I believe this sets the pattern for us today to follow the Spirit's leading. In Galatians 5:16 Paul says, “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

So, led by the Spirit, Jesus goes into the wilderness and prays for 40 days and 40 nights. As I understand it, 40 days is about the longest time someone can go without food without there being permanent physical damage. I should say at this point, if you're intending to fast for 40 days at any time, always consult your doctor: Don't rely on theology students for medical advice! As Matthew says in v2, after fasting for that length of time Jesus was “hungry”. If I'm honest I think that's probably a huge understatement.

So after praying and fasting for 40 days and nights, when Jesus is in his weakened state, the Devil comes to him to tempt him. The Devil knew that if he could encourage Jesus to sin at any point, it would destroy his whole mission. Now I think there is a lesson here for us already: the Bible teaches

that the Devil is real and active. 1 Peter 5:8 warns us, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

The devil is real, and we need to be on the alert for his attacks. And often, in my experience, he attacks us when we are at our weakest, especially when we are involved in something to do with outreach or specifically ‘Christian’ work. Why do you think that we see high-profile pastors fall from grace? I believe it’s because they haven’t taken adequate steps to protect themselves against the devil’s attacks. The Devil knows our weaknesses and will use them against us. We need to be on the look-out.

Well let’s just spend a few moments looking at the specific temptations of Jesus and see what we can learn from them. I think the key thing to say at the outset though is that we can’t just look at these temptations and then apply them directly to ourselves, i.e. that these are the specific temptations we are likely to be facing! Jesus was and is the Son of God, and as such the temptations he faced were specific to him. For example, I don’t know everyone here but I think it’s a fairly safe bet that none of us are able to turn rocks into bread!

No, all of these temptations proceed from the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he must therefore *live* as the Son of God. Is Jesus to be a wonder-worker, or to do spectacular but pointless miracles, or to establish a mighty empire ruling over the whole world? Jesus rejected each one of these temptations because none of them are in accord with the will of God.

That said, I think there are some general principles which we can extract.

Satan tempted with distorted Scripture

The first thing is the devil tempted Jesus with a distortion of Scripture. If you look at the second temptation in v6, the devil quotes part of Psalm 91 to Jesus. It seems to me that this is a tactic the devil will use with us too, to quote us part of Scripture which seems to agree with something, but ignore the parts which disagree with that point.

For example, you may have heard of Harold Camping. He is a preacher from America who originally said that the world was going to end on 21st May last year – a prediction that was widely publicised. He came to this conclusion by his own dubious reading of Scripture – a reading which is shared by no-one else! The date came and went, and here we are still. The upshot of all this is that Christianity is mocked in the eyes of the world: people see Harold Camping as representative of orthodox Christianity, and as such we are all tarred by the same brush.

I believe Harold Camping is an extreme example of this temptation to read things into Scripture which aren’t there – to distort the truth. But it is important to be on the lookout for it: much space in the New Testament letters is devoted to correcting false teaching. For example, Paul says in Galatians 1:9, “As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”

We need to stay true to the teaching of Scripture and resist the temptation to alter it for our own convenience or our own gain.

Jesus rebutted with Scripture

Secondly, notice that all three times Jesus was tempted, he doesn't come back with his own words. He comes back with Scripture. Specifically, he quotes from Deuteronomy – from the Israelite law.

I think this is something which is really important in combating temptation: how do we resist the devil? By knowing what the Bible says, and quoting it back to him! As the Psalmist says in Psalm 119:11, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you".

In order to combat temptation – and particularly to combat against the kind of temptation the devil uses when distorting Scripture – we need to *know* Scripture rightly. We need to know it to the extent that we can quote it back to him when we are tempted.

One helpful technique with this is actually to memorise Bible verses. When you are tempted, they will spring to mind more easily. If, for example, you are tempted with a particular sin, find out what the Bible says about it and memorise those verses. Meditate on them. Be reading your Bible and thinking about it as often as you can. Look at the promises of God and claim them as your own.

The upshot of all this is that when you are tempted, instead of your mind running back over its sinful course you should be able to think about the Bible and what God's will would be.

Jesus can sympathise with our temptation

Lastly on Jesus' temptation, as the writer to the Hebrews says in 4:15, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin". We can have confidence in our lives that Jesus understands what it is like to be tempted. We don't have a God who stands aloof and apart from the world – he has entered into the world, and has overcome. When Jesus quotes back Scripture to the devil, these are the same resources that are available to us in overcoming temptation.

And of course, it's not a sin to be tempted! As Martin Luther once said of temptation, "I can't stop the birds from flying over my head – but I can stop them making a nest in my hair." We can't help being tempted, but our response to temptation will be the key thing.

There is also a great encouragement here, in that Jesus is the one who overcame temptation. Although we have failed in the past and will fail again, Jesus never did. He overcame the Devil, he has defeated him. It is in Christ alone we can find forgiveness and life.

A New Israel and a New Adam

Finally, let's think about how all this fits into the wider Biblical picture. We were thinking earlier on about Jesus being the fulfilment of the Old Testament in many different ways. Well, this temptation passage in particular alludes very strongly to the Israel of the Old Testament. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. This is most probably a reference to the Israelites being led through the wilderness by God for 40 years. To support this idea, all the Scripture quotes from Jesus are taken from the book of Deuteronomy – the law given to the Israelites while they were still in the wilderness.

However, there is one major point of difference: unlike the Israelites, Jesus keeps the law – perfectly. In Exodus 19:6 God says to the Israelites, "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." They were meant to be set apart from the other nations as holy to the Lord – and yet,

they rebelled against the Lord constantly. In complete contrast to them, Jesus – the great High Priest – fulfils every aspect of God’s law.

But yet, there is more. I think there’s another reference tucked away in this passage. When was the last time that the devil came and tempted someone directly? The Garden of Eden. There is a distinction being made here between the first Adam, through whom death and sin entered the world, and the last Adam, through whom eternal life entered the world.

Paul makes the point explicitly in Romans 5:

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

Christ Jesus is presented as the ‘last Adam’, the one who is able to “fulfil all righteousness” because of his perfect obedience. Although sin and death entered the world through Adam, meaning that the human race could never meet the demands of God’s righteousness, through Christ those demands of righteousness were satisfied, and are given to anyone who believes in him.

Summary

In summary, then: we looked at Jesus’ baptism, and saw how his baptism affirms the baptism of all believers, and also how his solidarity with us as the human race enabled him to “fulfil all righteousness” on the cross.

We looked at his temptation in the desert, and saw that we need to make sure we know Scripture well in order to combat temptation. We also saw that Jesus’ temptation in the desert echoes that of Israel’s journey through the wilderness, except that Jesus did not sin even though he was tempted.

And we can take confidence from the fact that our saviour, the last Adam, was tempted and yet did not sin, and is able to help us in time of need. It is through him alone that we are able to fulfil the demands of God’s righteous law.

Let’s pray together.