

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 12th January 2020

Matthew 2: 13 - 25

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

'This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests,'¹ said God to Jesus in our reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests.' Which parent wouldn't say such words to their son, or similar words to their daughter? This is my Son – or daughter – on whom my favour rests. Which parent wouldn't say those words?

Quite a few, actually. Many parents might be more inclined to quote from the Gospel of Mark rather than the Gospel of Matthew. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark recount the story of Jesus' baptism, but when it comes to the voice from heaven that accompanies the baptism, Matthew and Mark's recollections are not the same.

Whereas Matthew says, as we heard, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests,' Mark reports that God said, '**You** are my Son, my Beloved, on **you** my favour rests.'² What's the difference between 'this is my son' and 'you are my son'?

Mark's words, 'You are my Son ... on you my favour rests,' is personal, whereas Matthew's words, 'This is my Son ... on whom my favour rests,' is public. One reflects an intimate moment between two people, something for example that might happen between a parent and a child in their own home. The other is a public statement made to everyone who is listening – a statement made before witnesses. 'You are my Son...' is personal. 'This is my Son...' is public.

Declaring your love for another person, making a commitment to them, and committing yourself in promises and vows, is much more difficult to do in public before witnesses than in private where no one else can hear. When made in public a declaration and a promise are more binding, even if they feel less intimate and personal.

This morning Barbara and James have chosen to make a public declaration with regard to how they will bring up Stewart, their son, their beloved, on whom their favour rests, although I am sure that there have been many intimate times when they have chosen to tell Stewart that they love him in private at home in a personal way.

But, this morning, in bringing Stewart here to be baptised, they have chosen to declare their love for him, and to acknowledge the love God has for him, in public. They have chosen to declare publicly something about their family relationship and how they intend to bring Stewart up. That is a brave thing to do because they are making promises and vows before witnesses. It is a committed thing to do that reflects things what they believe about people of any age and how we should treat each other, and therefore it is a deeply loving thing to do.

There is in theological circles, and in church circles, often a debate about whether or not Jesus knew who he was in relation to God, and at what point in his life he knew, if he knew at all. Did he know during his lifetime that he was God incarnate, that he was going to die, anything about his resurrection? If he did, when did he find out, at birth, at his baptism, or later? When

¹ Matthew 3: 17

² Mark 1: 11

we are talking about the Bible in Bible Studies here at St. Ninian's, or about the sermons at the Sermon Discussion Groups, those kinds of questions often come up.

In it is difficult to find a conclusive and a definitive answer; even the Gospels disagree. In Mark's Gospel Jesus appears to know who he is from the very beginning; Mark's account of Jesus' baptism makes that clear when God said to Jesus, 'You are my Son ... on you my favour rests.' But, Matthew equivocates. 'This is my Son,' says God, addressing the gathered crowd, future readers of his Gospel, and us, 'This is my Son ... on whom my favour rests.'

For Mark it was important that his account of Jesus' baptism makes clear that **Jesus** knew who he was, hence 'You are my Son.' For Matthew it was important that his account of Jesus' baptism makes clear that **we** know who Jesus is, hence 'This is my Son.' This difference is born out further at the end of Matthew's Gospel when Jesus is crucified. It is only Matthew that records Jesus' words on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' For Matthew it is not as important that Jesus understood who he was, as it is that we understand who he is.

There is a good reason for that. In Matthew's Gospel much will happen to Jesus in his life. John, who baptised Jesus, will come to doubt him. Jesus will overturn the traditions and conventions of his nation and religion. In the Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded in Matthew and not in Mark, Jesus will even re-write the Ten Commandments. He will break the law, be betrayed, be abandoned by God, and die a deeply sacrilegious death, to name just a few things. Throughout all of this Jesus will remain faithful, so faithful in fact that he will go to his death not certain that, ultimately, he will be saved. What Jesus' believed wasn't Matthew's problem. He was worried that given the things Jesus did and the things that were done to him, his readers wouldn't believe.

For the Gospel writer Matthew, the question of who Jesus understood himself to be wasn't so important, it was enough to know that Jesus was faithful to his calling whoever he thought he was. For Matthew the important thing is not who Jesus believed himself to be, but who we believe Jesus is. That is why at his baptism, God's words are directed at us, because if we, with our fickle faith, don't know who Jesus is right from the beginning, given what he will do and what will be done to him over the course of his life, then we might give up on him before the end. That is why Jesus was baptised in Matthew with a public declaration, and it is why Stewart was baptised in St. Ninian's with a public declaration.

We don't know, of course, what Stewart will do over the course of his life or what will be done to him, but we do know, do we not, what it is like to be a human being growing up in this world. Is it not a world full of love and pain? Is it not a world in which we are sometimes the best people we can be, and sometimes the worst, and often something in between? Stewart will be all those things, just like us. Is this not a world in which it is just too easy to give up on people before the end because of what we see them do, or what is done to them?

It is too easy to give up on people because of what we see them do or because of what see done to them, which is why we need to know right from the very beginning that Stewart is loved by God, whatever happens to him in his life; he is loved by God. If he seeks God's people out or comes knocking at the door of God's heart then there will always be a place for him here, in the bosom of God's people, and in the heart of God's love, no matter what he does or what happens to him in life. He will always be beloved of God.

Jesus was loved by God, no matter what he did in his life or what was done to him. Stewart is loved by God no matter what he does in his life or what is done to him. And so too are you, all you who have been baptised. You are loved. The Gospel writer Mark wants you to know that, and the Gospel writer Matthew wants everyone else to know that. Whatever it is that

has happened to you in your life, and whatever you have done, you are a child of God, beloved, upon whom God's favour rests. There is a place for you at the table amidst God's people if you come looking for it, and there is a place for you in God's love if you knock on the door of God's heart.

That was made clear to you when you were just an innocent child, and it was made clear to everyone who witnessed your baptism. Now that you are no longer innocent. Now that you have grown up to be who you are, that promise made to you personally, and declared in front of witnesses so that they knew too, still stands. Whether you understand it or not, whether you believe it or not, whether you think God has forsaken you or not, you are yet a child of God, loved, upon whom God's favour rests, and if you coming looking and knocking, you will find a place here at his table, in the company of his people, with him.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.