The Testimony You Need
John 5:30-47

Fifty years ago, John Stott, the great Christian pastor and leader, wrote a book called, *Christ the Controversialist* - and he examined just some of the occasions when Jesus cut across the public opinion of his day.

Well, we're looking at John's gospel, and today at a part where, once again, Jesus is at the centre of controversy.

And the reason for that is that he's healed a man on the Sabbath - man who had been paralysed for 38 years. But in the eyes of the religious leaders, in that culture, at that time, it didn't matter how many years he'd been paralysed, to heal someone or, as they saw it, to work on the Sabbath was a no-no.

But in response to their criticism, Jesus says, "My Father is working until now, and I am working" (John 5:17). Now, if Jesus healing on the Sabbath was controversial, he's just poured petrol on the fire. Because the religious leaders knew that though, in the account of creation in Genesis 1, God rested on the Sabbath, so we should rest, in another sense God continued to work on the Sabbath, because he continued to uphold the universe even on the Sabbath. But he was the only one who could work. But now, here is Jesus, not just working, but claiming the right to work - just like his Father - which - as they rightly saw - was nothing less than a claim to be equal with God.

But, as we saw last week in v19-29, it gets worse. Because having claimed to be equal with God, Jesus goes on to make two additional, controversial, even staggering claims. Firstly, that he's the source of eternal life for all who believe in him and that at the end of time it's his voice that will call the dead from their graves. And secondly, that eternal judgement has been committed to him. And that when he judges, as he says in today's passage, v30, "my judgment is just."

Now just take a step back from all that for a moment, and ask yourself, Really? And just take the last claim, that he's the judge of all and when he judges his judgment will be perfect. And ask yourself, how good a judge are you?

Those of you who are parents, imagine one of your kids comes running to you in floods of tears, crying 'Joshy hit me!' What do you do? You get them all together and tell them, 'right, tell me what happened.' Because you figure if you can just get the story straight, you'll know who did what and who's wrong and who's right. But what do you get? 'She said this' 'but he did that' and within a few seconds you realise you do not have a clue who's right and who's wrong. And that's just trying to judge between your kids.

Or maybe you have friends, or colleagues, who have fallen out, and you try to help, but wisely you decide you need to hear both sides. So you hear both sides, but are you any the clearer? No you're not. And that's just a petty disagreement!

But here is Jesus claiming that he's going to judge every person who has ever lived - every thought, every word, every act, every motive, every conflict, every argument, every injustice, every sin, every exacerbating or mitigating factor, and that when he does his judgement will be just!

Who claims things like that? You'd either have to be a total narcissist, or delusional, or both. But when you sit down and read the gospels, you realise, 'but Jesus isn't a narcissist and he's not

delusional. In fact, it's the opposite. No one ever spoke like him.' Which leaves you with the question: So who is he?

Now, if you're buying something pricey, how many reviews do you read before buying? Or if you're in HR, appointing to a new job, how many references do you call for? Of if you're sat as a jury member in a court of law, how many witnesses, what kind of evidence would you need to convict? You'd want several wouldn't you?

So what about entrusting your life, and shaping the whole of your life, around a man who claims to be the source of eternal life, and the judge of all, and equal with God himself? What kind of evidence, what witnesses, what testimony should or could persuade you to do that?

Well, that's the dilemma these religious leaders faced. How could they know that Jesus was who he said he was?

And that's not an academic question for us, is it? Maybe you're not yet a Christian, but you're investigating. Maybe you *are* a Christian but you're doubting, or struggling with obedience in some area. Or maybe you're neither doubting nor struggling, you just want to persevere and finish the race well. So what can and should persuade you to trust Christ and allow him and his word to direct your life?

Well, interestingly, Jesus says that what he says is not enough. Verse 31, "If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true." By which he doesn't mean, 'don't believe a word I'm saying.' He means that if the only thing you have to go on is a man claiming to be God and the judge of all, you are on safe grounds to walk on past - because no one who's sane claims those sorts of things. But he also knows that at that time, in their culture, you needed 2 or 3 witnesses for something to be established. And on its own, Jesus' witness statement was not enough.

So what is enough? What should persuade them, what can persuade you, that Jesus really is who he says he is, and whether seeking, or doubting, or struggling, or just standing, you can build your life on him?

Well, what today's passage tells us is that the testimony you need is personal, confrontational, directional, and life-giving. And, you'll find it in the Bible.

It's Personal

Look at v32, "There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony he bears about me is true." And Jesus is talking about God the Father, who he returns to later. But before he does, v33, "You sent to John [the Baptist], and he has born witness to the truth… He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." (v33-35)

And back in chapter 1, the religious leaders had come to John the Baptist, asking him 'Who are you?', and he'd been clear - I'm not the messiah. But he'd been equally clear, but Jesus is: John 1:29, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Now John was Jesus' cousin, but this wasn't just a case of family pride. Listen to how John the writer of the gospel describes John the Baptist right at the beginning: 'There was a man *sent from*

God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.' (John 1:6-8).

So something far grater and grander lies behind John's personal opinion about Jesus - it's that he'd been sent to point to him. And Jesus describes him as a burning and shining lamp. Like a floodlight lighting up a priceless piece of art, Jesus was the masterpiece, and John was the lamp, helping you to see it.

And Jesus says of John and these leaders, "you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." Because we know from the gospels and from contemporary historians like Josephus, that John caused quite the stir. But only for a while. Because after a while, his calls for repentance felt too close to the bone. And as for the One he was pointing to, who does he think he is? And they hardened their hearts.

And the implication is, don't do the same. You see, in v34, Jesus says, "Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved." In other words, John's testimony wasn't for Jesus' sake, like when I'm feeling down and rubbish about myself and Su says, 'darling you're not *quite* that bad.' It's not like Jesus was plagued by self-doubt but 'if John says that's who I am, it must be true.' It's that John's testimony is for us.

But where do you get that? Well, here in the Bible, pointing you to Christ.

But from Augustine on, commentators have pointed out that's not the only personal testimony you get - that it's not just John who's a lamp. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes his disciples as being the light of the world. And when Paul writes to the Christians at Philippi he describes them as people who 'shine as lights in the world' as they hold out the word of life (Phil 2:15).

In other words, if you're a Christian, you're a light, holding out the word of life. And so, if you're not yet a Christian, talk to someone who is, and ask them - why do you believe this, why does this make a difference in your life? If you're doubting, get alongside a Christian you respect and ask them, how have you personally worked this issue through? If you're struggling with obedience, get alongside someone who's walked the same path, and who's still shining, and ask them - 'why did you choose to obey? Why is Jesus better than this thing that I'm being tempted by?'

But, of course, that also means those of us who *have* struggled or doubted talk about it, so they know who to go to; so that we create a culture here, not of 'look how great a Christian I am', but 'look how great a saviour Christ is'.

So, firstly, you need a testimony that's personal, and you'll get it in the Bible from John the Baptist, and in the church from those around you.

But secondly, the testimony you need is confrontational.

It's Confrontational

Verse 36, "But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, *the very works that I am doing*, bear witness about me *that the Father has sent me*."

And as you read the gospels, almost on every page you are confronted with the miracles of Jesus. And I say ‘confronted’ because who can heal a paralysed man simply by telling him to get up? Who can call a dead-for-four-days Lazarus out of the tomb, just by saying ‘Lazarus come out’? Who can raise a dead girl simply by saying ‘little girl, it’s morning, time to get up'? Who can still a raging storm with a word? Who can give sight to the blind, or cleanse lepers, with a touch?

And so his works confront us with the question - who is he? Because whose voice, whose touch has power over death, power over creation, except God the Creator?

But if that’s the case, Jesus' miracles don’t just confront us with who *he* is, but who *we* are. You see, we can tend to think that we’re self-made, or that our lives are a blank canvas for us to design how we like. That life is through us, by us and for us. But if Christ is the Creator, then the world was made *through* him and *by* him. And if it was made *by* him, it was also made *for* him. Which means *you’ve* been made for him. So it’s not just his identity you’re confronted with, but your own and that you’ll never discover who you really are, or what your purpose in life is, apart from him.

Now, unless you’ve totally drunk the Kool-Aid of our current culture, you know that if you’re to grow you need people in your life who don’t agree with you, who challenge you, and stretch you; who confront you with yourself, or with new ideas, or with old truths.

And, so if your version of Jesus is house-trained. If he’s always agreeing with you, and never challenges you, or confronts you, never calls you to repentance and faith, it’s almost certainly not the real Jesus. As John Calvin puts it, it’s ‘a shadowy ghost’ that you’ve christened Jesus. It’s an extension or projection of yourself.

But if the Jesus you’re coming to is confronting you with your self-centredness, and your self-inflated self-importance; if he’s telling you that he’s the King and you’re not; if he’s saying that life is found in him and that it’s in dying that you live, that it’s in giving that you receive, it’s in letting go that you keep, that it’s in repentance and faith and obedience that you find true freedom - that’s the true Jesus. The Jesus who confronts you with who he is and who we are.

And where do you find that confrontational Jesus? Not out there in the world, but here in his word.

But thirdly, the testimony we need is directional.

It’s Directional

Verse 37, “And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you.”

Now, when Jesus talks of the Father having borne witness to him, is he recalling his baptism and the voice from heaven, “this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased”? Maybe. But from what follows, he’s probably talking of everything that’s gone before in the life and history of Israel, and that through it all God is telling them: he is who he says he is.

You see, Jesus says, “His voice you have never heard.” But Moses had, at Mount Sinai, and he had believed. But here is Jesus, whose voice does what only God’s voice can do, and they’re not hearing. Then he says, “His form you have never seen”. Jacob had, when he wrestled with God at Peniel. And here is Christ, the ultimate image of God standing before them, whose touch can do

what only God can do - but they're not seeing. And then "And you do not have his word abiding in you" Joshua did, as he meditated day and night on God's word. But the Word of God incarnate is standing before them and they refuse to believe. So God's voice, God's form, God's word - it's all been fulfilled in me, Jesus is saying, but you refuse to hear, see, and believe.

But of course, the irony is that God's word, the Bible, mattered to them. Verse 39. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me." Think about that. Because that means that, like them, you can do in-depth, verse by verse Bible study; you can memorise it and teach it. You can bind it on your arms, and stick it to your fridge, and still miss the whole point.

Because, all along, Jesus says, the Bible has been pointing you, directing you, to me.

That he's the seed of the woman come to crush the dragon. He's the seed of Abraham, through whom the world will be blessed. He's the true Isaac, the beloved and only son sacrificed on the mountain. He's the ladder of Jacob bridging heaven and earth. He's the true Joseph, handed over to death but saving his people. He's the true Moses, leading his people out of slavery into freedom. He's the Passover lamb under whose blood God's people are safe. He's the Day of Atonement sacrifice, bearing the sins of many. He's the bronze snake lifted up in the desert - the one who becomes sin that we might be healed. He's the true and final tabernacle and temple where we can meet God. He's the Sabbath in whom we find rest. He's the offspring of David, the king who slays the giants of sin and death, whose victory is our victory. He's Isaiah's Suffering Servant and Daniel's Son of Man who reigns with everlasting dominion, in everlasting power.

You study the Scriptures, Jesus says to them, but you miss the point. Because the Bible isn't a list of rules, so you can make yourself worthy, anymore than it's a self-help guide giving you a daily motivational pep-talk. From beginning to end, Jesus says, it's about me. Directing you to him so that in him you might have life.

Because fourthly, the testimony you need is life-giving.

It's Life-Giving

Now, I don't remember much of what I learnt at medical school, but one class sticks in my mind - because it was the one on chest pain. And it sticks in my mind because of an image the lecturer used. You see, there are all these different types of chest pain. There's the pain of pericarditis, that's sharp and stabbing. There's the pain of an aortic dissection, that's tearing and goes through to the back. But then there's the pain of a heart attack. And that, the lecturer said, feels like you have an elephant sat on your chest.

So look at v45, "Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, *on whom you have set your hope*." You see, these leaders think that the Law of Moses - like, 'do no work on the Sabbath' - supports them and condemns Jesus. And it gives them hope because they think that by doing their very best to keep the law, they can earn God's favour.

But that doesn't give you hope, Jesus says, it gives you an accuser!

Why? Because if you think you've got to earn God's favour, but you realise that however hard you try you're never going to be good enough, then the law becomes this great weight pressing down on you. Far from giving you hope, it's like an elephant on your chest, crushing your heart, killing you.

But it will also kill you if you think you *are* good enough, because then you'll become self-righteous, and your heart and your soul will look like things an elephant has sat on. And you'll be narrow, you'll be spiritually and emotionally thin, the joy and the compassion and the love will have been squeezed out of you.

So, why would anyone think they *can* earn God's favour by keeping the law? Or by their moral record? Well, look what Jesus says right before this: v44, "How can you believe, *when you receive glory from one another* and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"

You see, there's a sense in which we're all hungry for glory, for affirmation, to be told you're ok, we approve of you. And whether through our upbringing or culture, you can be told you can get that glory through your performance: that by living the right kind of life, holding the right kind of views, wearing the right kind of clothing, posting the right kind of photos, or enjoying the right kind of success, or doing the right kind of job, you can win the glory, the praise, the applause that we're hungry for.

The problem is, that just as with the law, when that glory isn't coming, when it's not working, when you're not good enough, it can be like an elephant sat on your chest, crushing your heart.

And Jesus is saying, you'll never find life by seeking it in the approval of others, or in your moral record - conservative or progressive. You see, if you think about it, it's really not surprising that in our current cultural moment we see two things happening at the same time: judgmentalism and personal attacks and cancelling others is rife - on the left and the right, and social media is winning the world. Because they are both about seeking glory from others, they're both about performance. Because when you're seeking glory from others you either have to put others down, because that makes you feel better and look better in the eyes of your tribe, *or* you have to promote yourself and get the likes. Or both.

But Jesus says you'll never find life that way. You'll only ever find it in me. Because he's the only one who has ever perfectly kept the law. And he's the only one who has given himself for those who haven't kept the law.

Verses 40-42: "You refuse to come to me *that you may have life*. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have *the love of God within you*."

You see, Jesus is the one person who hasn't been caught in the glory trap; the one person free of the need to be flattered; free of the need to impress. Why? Because he knows who he is, and he is secure in his Father's love.

And when you believe that - when you know the personal testimony of John, that Jesus is the Lamb of God who has taken away your sin; and when you've known that confrontation with Jesus and come out the other side - that he's your Creator and that you're to live for him, because in him you have life; and when you see how all that has gone before is pointing and directing you to him, then whether you're exploring, or doubting, or struggling, or standing, you'll come to him for life.

And as you do, the implication of what Jesus says here is that your heart will be filled with love. Firstly, and above all, with a love for Christ, because you'll know who he is and you'll worship him; secondly, with a love for others because you know you're saved his grace - not your performance, so you'll love others regardless of their performance. But thirdly you'll also be filled with God's love for you - because you'll know who you are - that because of Jesus you are loved in the Beloved.