I don't know if you're in to sailing, but last month was the America's Cup - which dates back to 1851 and is the oldest sporting trophy for any sport, still competed for. And needless to say, because it's a sport, the British didn't just lose, they got walloped, again.

But as old as the America's Cup is, - it's nothing compared to the contest played out in today's passage from John's gospel. Because as you listen in on the verbal sparring, the attack and counter-attack of this argument between Jesus and his opponents - you're not just witnessing a 2000 year old battle of words. From what Jesus says, you've got a ring side seat on an intensification the most ancient of battles, a fight whose origins go way back.

And the thing is, what becomes clear, and whether you like it or not, is that you're also caught up in that battle. Because it's *this* contest that helps explain why - if you're a Christian - you might face opposition for your faith, and why, if you're *not* yet a Christian, you might have all these conflicting thoughts as to whether to become one - and you feel torn. Or why, for any of us, you can want to do what's right, but the wrong seems so tempting. Why you can want to deepen your relationship with God, and find his purpose in your life, but other stuff just seems more interesting and distracting.

So we're going to look at the combatants in this fight and then what it's go to do with you.

The Seed of the Serpent

Now, my brother and I are very different from each other - he's into beer, and I'm into books. He's big and I am not. And when we were kids, and he wanted to torment me, he'd say, 'you're adopted!'And if you know the movie, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, it's the same taunt used against Mark, who the other kids call *Fedex*. Because he's so different from the rest of the family he can't possibly be genetically related, he must have come in the post.

But if you noticed, it's this issue of descent that's behind this conflict we're looking at. Because the people opposing Jesus are basing their value, how they see and think about themselves, on their *physical* descent: v39, 'They answered him, "Abraham is our father."'

So what tells them that they're ok, and people of worth, and better than others? Their ethnicity, that they are descended from Abraham, and physical, genetic members of God's chosen people. It's why in v41, they go one step further and say, "We have one Father - even God."

Now, I don't know if you've read it, but in his book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, the soon to be vice-president of the US, JD Vance, describes getting into repeated fights as a boy whenever anyone insulted his family. And you and I probably don't put too much weight on where we've physically, genetically come from, until it's challenged, or insulted, and that surge of defensiveness or anger tells you, your physical roots matter, even to you.

And yet, what Jesus makes clear is that *physical* descent is not the most important. It's *spiritual* descent that counts.

Verse 39, 'Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did." In other words, they can be *physically* descended from Abraham - and Jesus says they are, back in v37, "I know that you are offspring of Abraham" and yet not live like they are.

I mean, you've probably heard the expression, 'mini-me'. It's one of the most terrifying things about being a parent, as you watch your child say or and do something and you think, 'O boy, that's me'. Actually, it's one of the terrifying things about being a child as you watch yourself becoming your parent.

But Jesus is saying to them, 'yes, but that's not happening with you.' In character and conduct you're not showing any family likeness to Abraham.

Verse 40, "You seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did." You see, Abraham heard God's word, and trusted God's word but, v37, "My word finds no place in you." And v43, "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word."

But was that because God's word to Abraham was less challenging than Jesus' word to them? No. Whenever God spoke with Abraham it challenged him. In calling him to leave his homeland, it confronted his love of comfort and security. In promising him offspring, when he and Sarah were old and barren, it stretched

his faith. In the call to give up his son Isaac it made him face what he loved most. But each time, even though obedience was costly, Abraham trusted and obeyed.

So, if they really were Abraham's children, not just physically, but spiritually, if they loved God and his word the way Abraham did, v42, "If God *were* your Father, you would love me."

But rather than love, they are resisting Jesus at every turn. So while their physical descent is not in doubt, their spiritual father must be someone *other* than Abraham. Because Jesus is saying, *mini-me* also works spiritually. Verse 44, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."

Now people say that the moment you resort to insult in an argument, or debate, like calling your opponent a Nazi, you've lost. Because not even you believe in the persuasive power of your arguments. So is that what Jesus is doing when he effectively says, 'you are children of the devil'?

And the answer's 'no'. He's setting this argument, and every other battle when God's word, or God's will, or ultimately God's Son is being opposed, in a much more ancient battle. You see, way back in Genesis 3, and in the fallout of the Fall, God addresses the serpent behind it all. Verse 15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, *and between your offspring* and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

In other words, there's going to be a battle of the offspring. And Jesus is saying 'you're the offspring, the seed of the serpent' because it's not Abraham you imitate, but him.

Verse 44, "He was a murderer from the beginning". And here they are, plotting to kill Jesus. Would Abraham have done that?

And the serpent, v44 again, "Does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." In the garden, he twisted God's word and promised Adam and Eve life, liberty and happiness, but then gave them the opposite. So when Jesus' opponents refuse to hear God's word and trust it, is it really Abraham's influence they're under or someone much darker?

But think how that contest, that battle runs down to today.

You see, if you're not yet a Christian, but you're considering it, are there days when you feel like you're being pulled in two different directions?

Or if you are a Christian and you face opposition for that, maybe in your family or on campus or at work, why does that opposition exist at all?

Or think about truth and lies, and how in an age of fake news, or deep fakes, or alternative facts, or publication or algorithmic bias we can struggle to know what's true. Why does such a struggle exist?

Or think of how euthanasia is becoming acceptable, and in some of our countries abortion is no longer even debated, and how the most vulnerable, the unborn and the elderly, the sick and the dying are victims of a culture of death and ask yourself, 'Why?'

Or think about your own heart. And the temptations that promise you much and fail to deliver. Where do they come from?

And Jesus is saying, the world we inhabit is not a spiritually neutral children's soft play zone. It's not a place of bouncy castles, it's a battlefield. In your heart and in your mind. And there's a war on truth and a war on life.

Ok, but if that's the nature of his opponents, what about the one they're standing against?

The Character of Christ

And talk of the serpent and his offspring would be doom and gloom if it wasn't that Genesis 3 makes clear they're not going to have free run of the world. There's going to be another offspring, a seed of the woman. And this seed, God says to the serpent "Will bruise your head."

And read the Old Testament and that promise narrows down to Abraham - to whom God promises an offspring who will defeat his enemies and bless the world.

And then it narrows down to David, to whom God promises a Son who will rule in righteousness forever.

And then you get to the New Testament, and Matthew's gospel which opens by saying, chapter 1, verse 1, 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.' (Matt 1:1). In other words, here is the lineage, the line, the descent of Jesus - and he's *the* son of David, and *the* offspring of Abraham which means, the seed of the woman to crush the serpent has come.

And the serpent and his offspring lie, but, v40, Jesus says, I have "told you the truth." And so in a world darkened by misinformation, Jesus stands as a beacon. And the serpent entered the garden as the sworn enemy of God. But Jesus says, v42, "I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me." And so in a world where you are pulled this way and that by temptation, or competing world views, Jesus says, but I've come as God's ambassador.

In the 1988 US vice presidential debate, Dan Quayle compared himself to the late president Kennedy. To which his opponent replied, "I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, *you're no Jack Kennedy*." And over dinner, Lady Astor was arguing with Winston Churchill, who she found impossible, and said, "Winston, if I were your wife, I'd put poison in your coffee." To which Churchill replied "Nancy, if I were your husband, I'd drink it."

And put downs do just that, don't they. They put your opponent down. So Jesus's opponents try it: v48, 'The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that

you are a Samaritan and have a demon." And to call someone *a Samaritan* was the worst of racial insults, and a demon was a demon. So they're saying, 'you are no better than scum.'

How does Jesus respond? Verse 49, "I do not have a demon, but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me." And back in Eden, the serpent cast God as a kill-joy and a liar. He dishonoured God. And every time you read or hear something that presents a false or twisted picture of God, you know the tactic hasn't changed.

But with Jesus things are different. Verse 50: "I do not seek my own glory." But it was that hunger for glory - the glory that's God's, that led to the devil's downfall in the first place, and his dishonouring of God. And it's that hunger for glory, and the need to be noticed, or praised, or be the centre of attention that can lead to our downfall, as it clouds our judgment and corrupts our motives.

But Jesus is not glory hungry. Verse 54, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me." Why doesn't he hunger for it? Because he's secure in his Father's love.

And if the devil trades in death and lies, Jesus says in v51, "Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." So it's not just the serpent he's going to squash, but suffering. Not just the devil, but death itself.

But why should you believe that? I mean, just about every politician makes promises they cannot keep. So is Jesus just one of them?

Well, look at v46. Because he asks them to examine his life: “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” Now, when I was a junior doctor, one of my senior colleagues introduced 360 degree appraisals to our department for the first time. And she volunteered to be the guinea pig.

So because this was the first time any of us were doing this, all the juniors thought, ‘ok, we need to take this seriously and answer accurately’. And because all of us, ultimately, are average at most of what we do, or else it wouldn’t be the average, that’s how we scored her - 3 out of 5, 3 out of 5, 3 out of 5. Is she at the level we would expect for a senior doctor? Yes. Is she below that? Definitely not. Is she above that? Nobel material? Probably not.

But to get your scores back and be told you’re average can be devastating can’t it?

Well, what if you were to have a 360 degree appraisal - not just of your work but your whole life, how would you fare?

And yet, that’s what Jesus is asking his opponents to perform on him. To examine his life and draw a conclusion. And speaking on this passage, John Calvin says that Jesus asks it out of ‘complete confidence’. Because he knows that while they can accuse him of many things, and they did, no one could convict him of any sin before the court of heaven.

But could you say that? Could I say that? And if the teachers and judges of Israel could not come up with any evidence to convict him before the judge of all the earth, maybe they should re-examine their attitude towards him. Verse 46, "If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?"

Ok, if he's the only one who stands sinless before God, the only one against whom no charge can stand, who is he?

Your Fortress in the Fight

Now, the crowd are not stupid, are they? I mean, they know that even Abraham, the father they're claiming, died, and here is Jesus saying those who keep his words will never die. Verse 52: "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"

But that's the whole point, isn't it? He's not making himself out to be anything. He's not claiming to be anyone other than who he is. Verse 56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

Now, is Jesus referring to those times when God promised Abraham that he'd have a descendant who would bless the world and Abraham believed it and rejoiced at it? Or is he referring to that moment when Abraham had a knife in his hand, raised above his beloved son Isaac, bound as a sacrifice, and God said 'stop' and there was a ram caught by his horns in the bramble bush? And as he realised that God

had provided a substitute his heart filled with grateful joy? And that in these moments, however dimly, Abraham saw a shadow of Jesus' own coming, the one through whom the world will be blessed, the beloved and only Son who will be the perfect sacrifice?

We don't know. What we *do* know is that Jesus is saying he's the fulfilment of every promise and every hope that ever brought joy to Abraham.

But that's no comfort to his opponents. Verse 57: "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Abraham's been dead for 2000 years - and you're saying you're older and greater than him?

Infinitely older, and infinitely greater. Verse 58, 'Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

Now, if Jesus had just wanted to say that, like any angel or demon, he pre-existed Abraham, he could have said, 'before Abraham was, I was.' But he doesn't. Instead, he takes upon himself the most sacred and holy of divine names.

You see, when God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, and called him to go back to Egypt and lead the people to freedom, Moses used every reason imaginable for why he should *not* go, and he said to God, 'but if I go back, who am I going to say sent me?' To which God says, '"I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you." (Ex 3:14).

And Jesus is saying, ‘you’re asking me who I am. Well, I AM.’ And the crowd pick up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

But go back to the burning bush. Why is Moses hesitating? Because he knows he’s being sent back to a battle. A battle for freedom against slavery, of truth against lies and life against death. And he grew up in Pharaoh’s court, so he knows the dark magic that will be deployed against him. He knows he’s being thrown into the age old battle against the serpent. And he feels utterly inadequate for the job.

Maybe you know what that feels like - the battle against temptation, the battle against despair, the battle to find meaning, the battle against those who are out to hurt you.

So what can give Moses the courage to enter that fight, and not in his own strength, but in God’s? ‘I AM has sent you.’ I AM - the one who never changes and is never needy. I AM - the one who darkness, death, and lies can never touch. I AM - the one who is always faithful and whose power never fails. I AM - the one whose victory is always certain. I Am has sent you.

And when you know that Jesus is ‘I AM’ it will give you courage for the fight you face. The fight against temptation or the fight against those voices telling you 'don’t take another step towards Christianity’. It might be the fight to get up in the morning when you feel desolate or the fight of faith when sickness, or even death are stalking you.

I AM - the fortress you can hide in when the flaming arrows are flying. I AM - the ground you can stand on when everything else is shaking. I AM - the true offspring of Abraham through whom you and the whole world are blessed. I AM - *the* son of David, the king who reigns forever. I AM - the long promised seed of the woman who has come to crush the serpent's head.

But how does he do it? Well, the serpent was told, back in Genesis 3, "He shall bruise your head, *and you shall bruise his heel*." He will crush you, but in the process he himself will be crushed. And at the cross, the One who no-one could convict of sin, became sin for us. And the I AM - by whom, and through whom and for whom all things were created and have their breath, breathed his last. And the immortal one died.

And he did it that you might never die. That you might never stand accused by darkness. So that all the power of heaven might come to your aid. Because by rising again, death itself has been defeated, and the head of the serpent has been crushed. So whatever fight you face, hold fast to his word and he will be your fortress and your firm ground to stand on. I AM has come to you.