Westlake Church Lausanne

Sceptics, Signs and the Family of God
Matthew 12:38-50

We're looking at the gospel of Matthew, and over the last few weeks we've seen how Jesus is in conflict with the religious leaders of his day. In fact, it's got to the level we're they're accusing him of freeing people from the power of the devil by the devil's power. And what we're going to read next is really an extension and a response to that opposition. And we're going to see that whatever the leaders think of him, Jesus makes it clear that what people think of him matters. And that's true today just as much as it was in Matthew's day.

Matthew 12:38-50

The Danger of the Sceptic
The American philosopher and educationalist, John Dewey, said that scepticism is 'the mark and even the pose of the educated mind.' In other words, if you're not asking questions, if you're not sceptical about the status quo, if you don't develop an enquiring mind, then you're not really thinking. If you're not always looking behind the way things are, to the *whys* and *hows* of life, you're never going to grow, and nothing's ever going to change. And you know how true that is, don't you? You know how frustrating it is at work when you ask, 'why do we do this this way?', and you're told, 'because we've always done it this way.'

So… given that asking questions and looking for answers is good, and given that that's true not just for engineering or economics, but for faith, why does Jesus respond the way he does to the scribes and Pharisees?

Verse 38-39, 'Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign."

Now, if you remember from last week, this whole discussion with the religious leaders began when Jesus healed a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute. But the leaders dismissed that, because in their minds evil could deliver from evil. And in response Jesus warned them that that kind of attitude risked a very bad outcome. But now their response to Jesus' warning is, 'no, Jesus, what we need is more proof. We've got questions about you that need answereing.'

Now think about that. Think about what they've already seen. They've seen lepers cleansed, the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear. But for them, that's not enough. They want something more. And not just another miracle, but a sign, something in the heavens, something so unambiguous, that it would answer all their questions as to who Jesus is.

And so they're sceptics, but not in John Dewey's sense, not in the sense that they genuinely want answers to genuine questions. They represent another type of scepticism.

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In a collection of essays called, *Unpopular Essays*, the British Atheist and Philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, 'While the dogmatist is harmful, the sceptic is useless. Dogmatism and scepticism are both, in a sense, absolute philosophies; one is certain of knowing, the other of not knowing.' In other words, the dogmatic person is dangerous because he refuses to ask questions, but the sceptic is useless because all he ever does is ask questions. He won't actually engage with the evidence. As a point of principle, he refuses to be persuaded.

You see, it's not that the endless sceptic believes nothing, is it? It's that he believes something different. He believes that he cannot possibly believe, that nothing could persuade him. In fact, if he or she is honest, maybe he doesn't really *want* to believe.

When I was a new Christian I was debating about the faith with a friend who wasn't a Christian. And it felt like we were going round in circles, and so finally I said, 'look Nic, if I could prove beyond a shadow of doubt that this really was true, that Jesus was who he said he was, would you believe?' And his answer was, No! But at least he was honest! So it wasn't that he was genuinely engaging with questions. He'd already made up his mind.

And here are these leaders, and on the surface what they want is just a little bit more proof, just a bit more evidence, to have their questions answered. But in reality, they've already made up their minds. They're not genuine sceptics seeking for answers. They're the kind of sceptic who wants to be left with his questions, who already knows what he believes. Now, maybe you're here this morning and you're already a Christian, and you know people like this. Or maybe you're not yet a Christian, but you're questioning. Well let me ask you a question? Are you the kind of sceptic genuinely seeking answers, or deep down are you not really sure you want the answers?

Because listen again to what Jesus calls these leaders: v39, "An evil and adulterous generation." Now that's strong language, isn't it? But to understand it, you need to go to the Old Testament, where the prophets used this picture of spiritual adultery to describe the nation of Israel turning away from God and running after idols. And the irony is that these Pharisees were about the most unlikely of any Jew anywhere to go running after foreign gods. So why does Jesus label them spiritual adulterers? Because he's saying to them, 'it's not God who has your heart'. You're looking elsewhere, you're worshipping your own intellect, your own moral goodness, your own ability to decide, your personal freedom, these are the ultimate things for you – not God. And in making them your ultimate, then and now, you miss out on discovering the very thing you say you're interested in, which is the truth.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. He doesn't leave it as a standoff between their scepticism and himself. He does offer them a sign – it's just not the sign they wanted.

The Evidence We Need
Verse 39-40, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Now, you don't need to have gone to Sunday School many times, or read many children's Bible stories, before you hear Jonah's story. But here Jesus takes it further. He says that all along Jonah's escape from death was pointing to something greater and more far reaching. That just as Jonah's dramatic rescue was evidence to the people of Nineveh that he was sent from God, so Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the ultimate sign that he was who he said he was.

Now, before we look at that, Jesus was hardly in the tomb for three days and three nights, was he? If he died on Friday afternoon, and rose on Sunday morning, that's hardly three days and three nights, in fact, it's not much more than 36 hours. So why does Jesus says he'll be in the heart of the earth, in the place of death, three days and three nights? Because, in Jewish thinking any part of a day counted as a full day. So a part of Friday equals all of Friday. A part of Sunday equals all of Sunday.

And what he's saying is that the one sign that people will have to decide on is his death and resurrection on the third day. You see, ultimately, Christianity is not a philosophy. It's not even a collection of the teachings of its great leader; it's not simply a way of life, or a worldview. Christianity stands or falls on the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and not whether he was a great guy or not, not whether or not he healed people or was a miracle worker or an inspiring teacher, but on whether or not he rose from the dead.

Now, I don't know how you answer someone who has questions about the validity of the Christian faith, or the Bible, or some issue in modern day morality, but if one of our girls asks me a question like that, sometimes they'll begin by saying, 'Dad I know what you're going to say', because they already know how I'm going to wrap things up. It doesn't matter what anyone else says, if Jesus of Nazareth really did rise from the dead 2000 years ago, it changes everything. If that event really happened, all of life has to be seen through that one lens.

Geza Vermes was Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Oxford. And he probably wasn't a Christian believer, but he describes the fact that the women found Jesus' tomb empty that first Easter Sunday morning as 'the one disconcerting fact.' Because no one denies the tomb was empty. It is, 'The one disconcerting fact'. The question is, why was the tomb empty?

Were the first disciples just naïve to believe it was empty because Jesus had somehow risen from the dead? Were people just more gullible, more easily

persuaded than us modern types, and they'd believe this kind of fanciful tale more easily? Well, you only have to read the New Testament itself to realise that's not the case. Both Romans and Jews were equally cynical, equally sceptical that someone could come back from the dead. Not even the disciples believed it… to begin with. So why did they claim that that was exactly what happened? As NT Wright, probably the foremost New Testament scholar today, argues, men who followed a leader who was killed either had to give up the revolution or find another leader. What they didn't do was go round claiming he'd come back to life! Unless, of course, he had.

And CFD Moule, Professor of History at Cambridge argues that the growth of the early church from a bunch of Galilean peasants, to the movement that rocked the Roman Empire, 'rips a great hole in history. A hole the size and shape of the resurrection.' And then he asks, and 'What does the secular historian plan to stop [that hole] up with?' Because, he said, you cannot simply say that resurrection is impossible, you have to come up with an alternative hypothesis to explain the origin and spread of early Christianity. And in his words, there is none. The sceptic cannot simply say, well, I don't believe in resurrection, that can't happen. Well, the church appeared out of nowhere, Moule argued, so explain it, come up with an alternative explanation. What fills that resurrection shaped hole ripped in history? What explains why Jewish people, of all people, would start worshipping a man as God? What explains why Jewish people would swap their day of worship from the Sabbath, Saturday, to Sunday? What explains why these early disciples would die claiming they had seen Jesus alive again, if all along they knew it was a lie they had made up? What explains why they would say that women found the tomb empty when everyone knew the evidence of women counted for nothing. Why would you make that up?

And what can explain the fact that here we see Jesus' family standing outside, thinking he's out of his mind, and yet, within days of his death his own brothers started worshipping him as God. Now, if you've got a brother, you might love him, you might think he's great – some of the time – but you certainly don't think he's God, do you?! So what could persuade James, and Jesus' other brothers, that he was God? What explains why here in Matthew 12 they are standing outside, but by Acts 2 and the day of Pentecost they are inside, in the upper room, praying with everyone else? What persuaded them? What made them change their minds? Was it simply Jesus' death at the hands of the Romans? No! That would have been the ultimate shame to a Jew, that was evidence not that Jesus was God, but that he was cursed by God. No. Something must have happened after his death that persuaded them he was the Son of God, that he was who he claimed to be.

What was that? It was the sign of Jonah. That just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so Jesus was three days and three nights, by Jewish reckoning, in the heart of the earth. That he was dead. And they watched him die. But that wasn't where he stayed. That they saw him alive again. So alive

that they were so thoroughly convinced, that their scepticism was so overturned, that they went out into the world and turned the world upside down. And it's his resurrection, the empty tomb, this one disconcerting fact, that should turn everyone of us from sceptics to believers.

In fact, Jesus says his resurrection should do two things. Firstly, it should lead us to repentance. Look at v41, 'The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold something greater than Jonah is here.' So Jesus' life, his death, and ultimately his resurrection, should stop is in our tracks. That instead of pursuing anything else as our ultimate, like our freedom to decide for ourselves what is right or wrong, we turn around and start walking his way. And if he really has risen from the dead, it's him, not us, who gets to decide what's right and wrong.

But secondly it should make us listen. Verse 42, "The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here." So the Queen of Sheba came with hard questions for Solomon, but she went home satisfied. And Jesus is saying that in him, and in his resurrection, you have something far greater than Solomon to satisfy your questions.

In fact, if you remember back to v6, Jesus said he is greater than the temple. Now here in v41 and 42 he says he's greater than the prophet Jonah and king Solomon. And in ancient Israel there were three great offices – prophet – represented here by Jonah, priest – represented here by the temple, and king – represented here by Solomon, and Jesus says he is greater than them all. But how can you know that he is? How can your scepticism be answered? Because of that one disconcerting fact, the hole ripped in history, the size and shape of the resurrection.

But if one danger is that of the perpetual sceptic, Jesus warns us of another. And this time it's not someone who's always questioning but never listening, it's the person who thinks they can live an upstanding moral life on their own.

The Danger of the Moral Reformer

Because this argument with the leaders began with Jesus casting out an unclean spirit, Jesus tells them a parable in v43-45, a mini-story, about an unclean spirit leaving a person. And he travels round a desert looking for rest, but can't find any. So he decides to return to his old house, the person whose life he'd previously messed up. And, lo and behold, he finds that house, v44, 'empty, swept and put in order.' So, what does he do? He goes and gets his mates, seven other spirits worse than himself, and they all pile in. And Jesus says, v45, 'the last state of that person is worse than the first.' And who's he talking about? Verse 45, 'So also will it be with this evil generation.'

Now I know that some of you have pristine, tidy homes, but the Slacks are different! We do tidy up occassionally. And when Su and I tidy the lounge, just for a few minutes it looks lovely, and ordered, and we feel good about ourselves. And we tell ourselves, 'we're ok, we're not animals, we're cultured, intelligent human beings.' And then the girls come home and within seconds there are coats and shoes and bags everywhere. And you think, 'why did we bother?' Or imagine a nice house that's standing empty, but some squatters spy it out, and under cover of darkness, they move in, and within days the place is trashed.

And Jesus is saying, that is what it's like with these religious leaders and those who follow them. Jesus has been casting out demons, he's been pushing back the powers of darkness, he's been cleansing the house of Israel. But what next? He's been setting people free, but what if they stay neutral about him, what if they just go back to their lives as before. What if they think they can live their nice, tidy, moral, upstanding, religious lives on their own? What if they don't welcome him and invite him in as the new owner of the house? Then there's this vacuum, Jesus says, and evil will fill it.

You see, it's not just a state of perpetual scepticism that holds dangers. So too does a little bit of religion. A little cleaning up, a little sorting out of your life – and, strangely, you can end up worse off than before. Now why is that? Because religion can make you proud, it can make you think 'I'm not doing so badly' and it can feed your self-righteousness, because you think the house of your life is so much cleaner than her house. And you end up more alienated from God than before.

And so moral reform, getting your life sorted, but doing that without Jesus, is never enough. And the reason is that you will always be serving and worshipping something or someone. Something will inevitably fill the spiritual vacuum of your life. And whatever you serve and worship will control you. It will move in and take up residence. And it will start to own you, Jesus says. Now, that might be the personal freedom of the sceptic, and your life becomes controlled by your need to be free – and you can never make any long-term commitments because you don't want to be pinned down. Or it might be some relationship, and you think this will bring you life, but you make it an ultimate and now life would be empty without it, and so it slowly sucks the life out of you. It might be how others see you, it might be your career. But whatever it is, it's this that fills the empty spaces of your life. Your life is filled, but not with God.

So it's not that you're not worshiping, it's just not God you're worshiping. It's not that something doesn't dominate your life, it's just it's not God who dominates your life. On the outside your life is clean and tidy, you've done a good job of fixing yourself up, but the thing that takes the place of God as the ultimate in your life is the real house-owner.

And so Jesus is saying that for the sceptic and for the religious person, it's got to be him who fills the house of your life. You need to belong to another master.

The Joy of Belonging

And Matthew tells us that as Jesus was speaking, v46, 'His mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him.' Now we know from elsewhere that Jesus' family were concerned about him. Either they were worried for his sanity, or that taking on the Pharisees was not going to end well for him. So they're standing outside, wanting to have words. But it's a poignant picture, isn't it? In a society where family ties meant so much, Jesus' family, for the moment, are outsiders.

But they don't need to be. None of us need to be. It doesn't matter whether you're more sceptical or more religious, no one needs stay outside. Listen to what Jesus says, v49-50, 'Stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." In other words, Jesus offers you to come join his family. That instead of being ruled and controlled by these outside powers, you can know where and to whom you really belong. You can be part of his family. And so as you put your trust in Jesus, and not in your questions, and not in your moral goodness, you find a new home, and you become an insider, not an outsider. And he will come and fill your home. And you'll know the joy and the family love of belonging.