

MATTHEW 27:11-54
ST JAMES'; 9.4.17; 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION: JESUS THE SON OF GOD

When I first prepared this talk, the thing which caught my eye from that Bible passage was the last verse: *When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*

The centurion and his companions used the title, 'Son of God'. They used it in awe and respect, as it came home to them precisely who'd just died on that Cross. But earlier in the passage, others had used the same title in ridicule: *He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'* (v 43). Ironically, it was the leaders of God's people who mocked Jesus, but a Gentile, a Roman centurion, and his companions, who belatedly gave him respect. Briefly this morning, I want to look at the different ways people applied the title 'Son of God' to Jesus that day.

RIDICULE

As Jesus was dying on the Cross, the passers-by, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, the thieves crucified with him, all ridiculed him: *Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!* (v 40). Clearly, they didn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus is being tempted - tempted to do as they suggest, and come down from the cross; tempted to pray to his Father, who would respond by giving him more than twelve legions of angels, as he himself put it when he was

arrested in Gethsemane; tempted as Satan had once tempted him in the wilderness: *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'* (Matthew 4:6).

Jesus *could* have done as his tempters suggested, and come down from the cross. For the irony is that he *is* the Son of God. Not only were his tempters wrong about who he was; they were wrong about why he remained on the cross. Its *because* he's the Son of God, that he remained where he was; *because* he's the Son of God that he continues to accept his Father's will. As Michael Card puts it in one of his songs: "Why did they nail his feet and hands? His love would have held him there."¹ It was Jesus' love, for those who mocked and tempted him; Jesus' love for Mary Magdalene and his other supporters, watching from a distance; Jesus' love for you and for me; and Jesus' submission to his Father's will, that kept him where he was, enduring the agonies of the cross.

RESPECT

Eventually, after Jesus had died, the Roman centurion and his companions realised what the Jewish leaders had failed to realise - that this truly was the Son of God. The truth dawned on them when they witnessed the earthquake which happened as Jesus died. It was no ordinary earthquake. Earthquakes don't usually rip heavy curtains in two, or shake the dead back to life. The centurion and his companions

realised that the power of God was at work, and it frightened them into realising that, *Surely he was the Son of God!*

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, the disciples had a similar experience, and a similar reaction to it. They were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, in a storm. Jesus came to them, walking on the water, and when he got into the boat with them, the wind died down. Like the centurion who witnessed Jesus' death, they realised that the power of God was at work, and they were afraid. They *worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."* (Matthew 14:33)

CONCLUSION

Today, we can respond to Jesus, the Son of God, in one of three ways. We can join the passers-by, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, the thieves crucified with Jesus, and many, many people today, and we can sneer at him: *call yourself the Son of God, do you?* We can join the centurion and his companions, and acknowledge that Jesus really is the Son of God, whose life and death has had profound consequences, which still rock the world today, nearly 2,000 years later. Or we can go one step further still, and join Jesus' disciples in worshipping him, bowing down before him and offering him our all, acknowledging that without Jesus, the Son of God, we are nothing and we possess nothing.

The question is, which group do you belong to this Easter time? The centurion and his companions acknowledged Jesus after seeing how he died. The majority of those who sneered weren't even convinced by Jesus' resurrection three days' later. And yet, here we are, nearly 2,000 years later, gathered to worship the Son of God. In your heart, are you worshipping the Son of God? Are you simply acknowledging the Son of God, without bowing down in worship? Or are you inwardly sneering at the one who loves you enough to resist the temptation to come down from the cross in response to the sneers of those like you?

¹ *Why?* written by Michael Card, copyright © 1984 Mole End Music