

## **TJW, HT, 16.8.09, 9.15am & 11am, Matthew 16.1-12**

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I can still remember, at the age of eighteen, a few months before I became a Christian, saying to a Christian friend: “If this God you’re talking about is so real, why doesn’t he show himself to me?”

I reckon that most Christians have been asked that at one time or another: “Yes but can you prove that God is real? How can you show me that this Jesus is still alive - that he is who you say he is?”

People who are in love might give each other flowers as a sign of their love - but what sign is there that Jesus is who he claimed to be - who Christians says he is: the Messiah of Israel, the Saviour of the whole world, the Lord of everything in creation?

So the first thing we’re looking for this morning is this: **The signs that Jesus has given.**

That’s what God is telling us about in the part of Matthew’s Gospel that we’re coming onto this morning - and it’s the beginning of Matthew chapter 16.

It starts when two groups of people come up to Jesus to ask him for a sign to prove that he is the Messiah from God that he says he is - and I’ll read it from the beginning of chapter 16, at the bottom of the page in the church Bibles [READ verses 1-4].

Jesus is completely exasperated with these people. He says to them: “You know how to read the signs in the sky about the weather.”

And we’ve got exactly the same saying in English, haven’t we: “Red sky at night, shepherds delight - red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning.” (Or, as we like to say it in our house: “Red sky at night, shepherd’s house on fire.”)

“You can interpret the weather”, says Jesus, “but you can’t interpret (what he calls) ‘the signs of the times’.”

He’s talking about the things he was going around doing right there and then - his miracles, and especially the healings.

These were signs that Jesus had ushered in the time of the Messiah - that the kingdom of God was coming.

Now some people did understand very well that these miraculous signs told them who Jesus was. Turn back a page to chapter 15 verse 30, to see that [READ verses 30-31].

It’s not just that these healings made people say, “Wow, what a great trick.”

They meant more than that. For centuries God has said to his people, through the Old Testament, that they’d see these kinds of healings happen when the Messiah came.

That helps us to understand a key thing Jesus said about this 3 pages back, in chapter 11 - and I’ll read from the beginning of chapter 11 [READ verses 1-5].

These particular healings are a great sign that the Messiah has come, because they physically portray for us what Jesus has come to do spiritually for us.

He's come to open our blind spiritual eyes to see the truth about God and ourselves.

He's come to us who are lame in our relationship with God - unable to run to him in our own strength - to enable us to walk and run in our relationship with God.

He's come to open our deaf spiritual ears so that we can hear his message and respond.

He's come to us who unclean before God, and cut off from him - like people in Jesus' day with leprosy who were treated a unclean and shut off from the world - to wash us spiritually clean in God's sight.

He's come to us who are dead in our relationship with God, because of the sinful bias in us that takes us away from him, to make us alive again spiritually.

So the physical miracles are a sign that Jesus is the one who can do all these greater spiritual miracles for us.

If you're still searching for what Jesus means for you - it's this: he didn't come just to help you to be a bit less selfish and bit more loving. He came to bring about a spiritual revolution in your life.

But the Pharisees and Sadducees refuse to accept these miracles as a sign - and that's why they come to Jesus asking for another sign.

They're like people who go to watch Tiger Woods, the greatest golfer in the world, play golf. They see him drive the ball further and straighter than anyone else. They see him pitch the ball closer to hole than anyone else, and make a better score than anyone else. And at the end they go up and say to him: "Tiger, can you show us a sign that you're the best golfer in the world." How could Tiger respond to that? Just shrug his shoulders and walk away.

And so Jesus says to them - back now in Matt 16, verse 4 - he says: "If the miracles mean nothing to you, then you won't get a sign. Except, that is, for 'the sign of Jonah'." And he walks off.

What is he talking about? Jonah was a prophet in the OT, who famously was swallowed by a great fish, and then spat out alive again three days later.

And if we're wondering what this 'sign of Jonah' is that they're going to get - all we have to do is go back three pages is Matthew - because this is a repeat of a conversation that Jesus has already had with some Pharisees. So let's go back to chapter 12, verse 38 [READ verses 38-40].

Jesus is obviously talking there about his death, and the period he was dead before the resurrection. He's comparing it to the time that Jonah was in the fish, before being spat out alive again. Of course, unlike Jonah, Jesus didn't just face death, he actually experienced death.

So Jesus has already explained what ‘the sign of Jonah’ is - he’s talking about his death and resurrection - and back in Matthew 16, our verses for this morning, he doesn’t have to explain it again, because he’s already explained it in chapter 12.

Christ’s death and resurrection are the greatest sign that he is Messiah, and Saviour, and Lord.

His death makes no sense at all unless he’s dying in our place, bearing our sin - because in himself he doesn’t deserve to die. So his death is the sign that he’s the saviour.

And his resurrection is the sign that he is Messiah and Lord. Dead people don’t come back to life - but this man did. God gave him new life again as his vindication of Christ - to demonstrate that he is the Messiah of Israel, and Lord over everyone.

The truth about God, that the Christian clings to, is founded on Christ’s death and resurrection.

As a family we’ve been interested to walk past and see the old factories at the other end of Cleveland Road, just outside here, being demolished, and the ground cleared for new houses. Just last week the foundations were set in place. They dug down, and then the concrete was poured in.

If they’d missed that bit out, they could still have built fine-looking houses - but it wouldn’t have taken long for the cracks to appear.

Do you need a sign that Jesus is true and real? That he wants to be your Lord? That he demands to be your Lord? That you do have sins that need paying for, and that you can't pay for them yourself? That he has gladly paid for all of them, even for you? We can be committed Christians, and still at the end of the week need a renewed sign that all that is true, even for me. And the sign we have is the foundation we go back to: Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's good to pause here and ask: is it right for me to ask God to do other miraculous signs in my life now, and cling onto those as a sign that Jesus is true and real for me?

Last week a Christian told me of a miraculous thing that God had done in her life, giving her an image in her mind of someone she'd meet - and it turned out to be true - and it made her praise him. Mature Christian faith praises God for those things when he sends them - but it doesn't build too much on them. If you build the house of your faith on those things, then you'll feel that God isn't true and real until the next one comes along. Your Christian life might become an immature pursuit of the next miraculous high.

Those houses down the road will of course be made up of more than just the foundations. But if the brick-layer strays away from building on the foundations, the walls will collapse.

Mature Christian faith builds its confidence so solidly on Christ's death and resurrection that those things become the standing sign - the sign that never goes away - the sign that shines through even the blackest experiences of life - as our confidence to say: "Christ is real, and if I trust in him, then he is for me, and I am his."

And when someone who isn't a Christian asks you for a sign that it's all true? Tell them about the cross and the resurrection.

Now back in chapter 16, on p.930, we're into the next incident, from verse 5 - but the same themes are still running, because it's still about the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Here's what Jesus is saying to us here: **Beware of unbelief.**

So, reading from verse 5 [READ verses 5-12].

Twice Jesus says to the disciples: "be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees."

At first they don't get the point - and in case we don't get it either, Matthew explains it to us in verse 12 [READ].

You get the picture, don't you. When you bake bread, you put a little yeast in and it works its effect into the whole dough. So, says Jesus, beware the effect that the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees might have on you.

These two groups were sworn enemies. The Sadducees were well-to-do socially. They were high up in the Jewish religion. They were conservative socially and religiously. They didn't like anything to change, because that threatened their power.

The Pharisees were the opposite - they were radical, religiously. They were mostly from lower social classes. They thought that what God most wanted was for them to obey his word and expand his commands out into as many details as they could.

They normally hated each other. But they united to oppose Jesus. You see they had one thing in common. That was a refusal - an unbelieving refusal to see that God was at work in Jesus.

Deep down, they both agreed that good religion was about doing the right thing.

So both of them hated it when Jesus didn't congratulate them for all the right things they'd done. They hated him when he told them that they were just like everyone else - spiritually sick, needing him as a spiritual doctor to restore them to health before God.

You see, you can be a conservative, careful type, or a radical all-action type - and still refuse Jesus.

The signs that Jesus gives us - his healings, his death, his resurrection - they take away all our ability to do any 'point-scoring' with God.

We're helpless - like a blind man who can't see - like a crippled woman who can't walk.

We need God to restore our relationship with God.

And you can be conservative or radical, and refuse to accept that Jesus has come to do all that for you - because you still want to be able to say to God: “I met you half-way didn’t I, by going to church and praying, by being a good family-man?”.

That’s unbelief. It insists on offering to God what I’ve done, when all the time he’s done it all for me. It is still the most common form of unbelief - the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees is alive and well. You can believe in God and have this unbelief. You can be admirably selfless or religious and have this unbelief. If we’re going to follow Christ, we must beware of it.

But there’s also a kind of unbelief in the disciples - it’s not as serious as the refusal of the Pharisees and Sadducees, but it’s still a problem. It’s forgetfulness. They’ve forgotten to bring any bread with them, and they think that’s what Jesus is talking about, when he warns them against the ‘yeast’ of the Pharisees.

They’ve plain forgotten that lack of food isn’t a problem for Jesus - because they’ve just witnessed two miraculous feedings of big crowds.

Someone recently sent me an e-mail which said at the bottom: “Insanity is doing the same thing again and expecting a different outcome” - like someone who’s disappointed to see their team lose on the TV, so they watch the repeat the next morning to see if they might win this time.

Christians drive themselves ‘insane’, if you like, when we forget God’s faithfulness to us in the past - in our own lives, and supremely in the cross and resurrection.

Maybe there’s something in your life you’re so focused on right now that you’ve forgotten God’s great signs to you - Christ’s miracles, his death, his resurrection.

It is one of the great, loving pastoral things we can say to one another, when we’re not building on the foundation of Christ, and so the cracks are beginning to appear in our lives. We can say to each other: “Christ is real, isn’t he? He died for all your sins, didn’t he? He’s alive as your Lord who hasn’t abandoned you, isn’t he?”.

These things - the miracles, the cross, the empty tomb - they prove that he is faithful, and true, and real - and we need them because life so easily makes us forget them.

Back to my very first question: “Why doesn’t God show himself to me?”.

But of course, in Christ, he has done. The solid signs are there.

The only thing that will stop someone being drawn to Christ is their refusal to accept what these signs clearly show.

And one thing that can de-rail the Christian is our forgetfulness of the great foundation our faith has. Let’s be on our guard.