

The Sign of Jonah

So why doesn't God just give us a sign?

Perhaps, like many people, you've been looking up to the heavens recently, and asking: God, if you're there – what is going on?

In this time of intense confusion and bewilderment about COVID 19, wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity for God to step forward? Shouldn't he come out from behind the cloak of his invisibility and do something? Life just feels too ambiguous and disconnected at the moment. We felt that things we were doing had purpose and meaning, but now that all seems to have been ripped away.

A sign, dear God, a sign: is that too much to ask? And I have a list of suggestions if it would help:

- A word written in the sky with his finger.
- A host of angels coming on a terrestrial concert tour.
- A miraculous cure for coronavirus so that no more people die and no-one loses their livelihood.

But what are we really asking for when we demand this sort of sign from God?

I think we want to see proof of God's power, but we want it on our terms. We don't just want a sign. We want a sign that affirms us, but doesn't confront us.

I've met a number of people who say they've experienced unmistakeable and direct signs from God over the years. Perhaps they've had a very vivid dream in which God spoke to them; or they've seen a direct and uncanny answer to their prayers; or they've experienced a miraculous healing.

What I've noticed is that having one of these experiences doesn't mean that the person becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ. That process is still to happen. Very often they may believe that the sign of God's power is proof not just of God's presence, but that God is pleased with them. They may be a fan, but it doesn't make them a follower.

Now, in Jesus' time no-one disputed that he was a miracle-worker. Even the non-Christian historian Josephus records this. But increasingly this is what attracted the crowds to Jesus, as we see in Luke 11:29. And it's clear that many of those who came to see what all the fuss was about were not really interested in the message, so much as in what they thought was the entertainment.

What they wanted was less talk and more magic tricks. You can imagine them saying 'come on Jesus, less of the 'blessed is this, blessed is that', less of the weird stories we don't understand, and more of the spectacular stuff - can you feed this crowd, maybe, or heal this lame man, or maybe go for a stroll on the lake? We'd pay good money for that.'

But Jesus is says to them:

This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.

Just as today, people were asking for a sign. It is not enough that the creation itself is a sign from God, shimmering with his glory. It's not enough that the whole history of Israel was a sign from God - that he made promises to Abraham, that he brought them out of Egypt, and that he gave them the law, and that he built his temple, and gave them a king, and that he sent them the prophets.

But the people were after a sign that they could not just read about, but see, with their own eyes.

And Jesus says: yes, there will be a sign. The sign of Jonah.

What? The sign of who?

You'll remember the story of Jonah the prophet who ran away from God, was swallowed by a fish, and then went off to do his job. And he went to a great pagan city, Nineveh, and preached there that God was about to destroy them for their wickedness.

But much to Jonah's surprise, Nineveh repented. They got the message! They heeded the warning, and they turned to the Lord.

We'll come back to the Ninevites in a moment; but for now, Jesus is comparing himself to Jonah, in vs 30:

For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.

What was Jonah a sign of, for the people of Nineveh? He was a sign of God's hatred of their way of living. He was a warning to them – the red light on the dashboard telling them that all is not well.

And Jesus says: I'll be the sign for you, but I'll be a warning sign.

Now, I am an optimist – which is mostly a great way to be, except sometimes you need to heed the warning signs. Like, when you are driving and there's a red light that says 'you don't have enough fuel'. I have to admit that I've read that sign as a kindly suggestion at times. And more than once, I've ran out of fuel. I had the whole family in the car just last year – coming home at 10.30 at night, and I ran out of petrol in Leichhardt. And not only did I cop it from my family, but there's the NRMA guy, who really looked at me like I was an idiot as if to say: did you want a personal phone call to tell you

there was nothing in the tank? Wasn't the red light on the fuel tank enough?

We have a sign from God, the sign of Jonah, the red light on the dashboard: it's Jesus himself. He's a warning to us that all is not well – and that God thinks that all is not well. We've trusted in our status, our education, our wealth, and our technology; and in that pride in ourselves, not listened to what God wants for us or for our world. And that's all going to be swept away.

So there IS a sign: what are we going to do?

Jesus gives us two Old Testament examples of the right way to go – the Queen of the South, and the people of Nineveh. And it's interesting that both of these are non-Israelite examples, just as the Good Samaritan was. And these pagan examples will show up the crowds of Israelites demanding a sign.

What was so good about the Queen of the South, or the Queen of Sheba? She made a huge journey to visit King Solomon and seek his wisdom. She'd heard about his reputation for wisdom and insight, and she came to sit at his feet. And the key to Solomon's wisdom? It all began with his relationship to God. He would always say: 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. After meeting Solomon the Queen said, as we read in 1 Kings 10:

Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.'

Like Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, the Queen is an example of how to respond to God's sign. She was a disciple of

Solomon's; and now, says Jesus, one greater than Solomon is here! Jesus' wisdom is deeper than even Solomon's.

So don't come seeking his miracles; come seeking his wisdom. We cannot accumulate Jesus like a possession, or have him as a hobby, or make a beautiful experience of him like a great holiday. The Queen put everything on hold to find true wisdom from God; and in Jesus, we have something she would have given everything to learn. This is the greater part: listen to, and live in, the wisdom of Jesus.

And there's no better time for you and me to be sitting at Jesus' feet. Not only do we have some enforced time to think about our dependence on God, but we also need to – since everything material we've trusted in has been exposed.

The second example of people getting it right is the people of Nineveh, who heard Jonah's preaching.

And what did they do?

They believed God and repented. In Jonah 3:5, we read:

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

And then we read:

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

The Ninevites were a model for us because when they heard the word of God they were cut to the quick and asked for mercy.

And now, one greater than Jonah has come!

Jesus' message is that God's judgement is coming, but also that his grace is available. God's love for us has not failed,

even though we have. He has not forgotten us, even when we have forgotten him. But this is a message that demands a response from us: will we repent? Will we seek his wisdom?

Is there a sign from God for these troubled days?

Yes there is. We have the sign of Jesus. But it's a sign which is a warning light.

The question is: how will you respond? Will you carry on ignoring it, like a driver hoping that the fumes in his tank will be enough to get him home?

Or will you be like the Queen and the Ninevites, who sought out true wisdom, and who turned to God?

Because in Jesus we have something greater than what they saw.

We can see it in that sign, that mark, that Christians have always used – the cross.

The cross confronts us. It reminds us of the depth of our problem. It's a warning to us that God is not pleased with us.

But it's also a picture of God's great love: that he should give his only Son to make a wretch his treasure.

And so the only right response to fall to our knees and seek God's mercy in Jesus.

This is how the Christian life begins, but it's also how it continues. It may be something you need to do for the first time; but it may be something you need to do for the hundredth time. The warning sign is never for ignoring. But how blessed are we to have this sign, that we can hear it, and turn to know the merciful love of God, again, and again, and again.

