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Give us a sign?

Bible Reading: Matthew 12:38-42

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.' But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation asks 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 sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!'

Reflection

At any mention of Jonah, I revert to being about 10 years old, learning *Jonah-Man Jazz* off by heart at school for a concert. I loved the music of it, and the story made me laugh. It was a bit of light relief. You might consider yourselves blessed that I haven't recorded a bit of my singing and embedded it in this newsletter. Jonah was a prophet, who did his best to avoid God, and got swallowed by a whale. Or a big fish. Which vomited him up on the beach of the city he was trying to avoid in the first place. It may be the Bible, but it's a funny story.

When the scribes and Pharisees addressed Jesus as 'Teacher', 'Rabbi', they were trying to be funny too. Maybe a bit sarcastic, trying to get a rise out of him. They didn't think much of Jesus as a teacher, and they probably made it obvious. 'Hey, teacher, give us a sign!' As if to say, 'you're so clever, show us something special'. The odd thing is that if they'd actually opened their eyes and hearts a little, they'd have seen so very much.

Jesus responds in a manner far from 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'. He accuses them of being part of an evil, adulterous crowd, corrupt and far from God. Instead of a sign, he points them to scripture – but what a piece of scripture. All about that misbelieving, frightened, got-swallowed-by-a-whale-but-ended-up-in-Ninevah-anyway comic prophet Jonah.

Then, with a twist obvious to us with the benefit of hindsight but mysterious to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus draws a parallel which makes the story of Jonah a lot less funny. Suddenly those three days inside a sea monster become a metaphor for what Jesus will go through at his death. And those riotous, godless, sinful people of Ninevah will rise up and judge the oh-so-very-righteous

and law-abiding Pharisees and scribes and the people they lead. The world is being turned upside down.

'Something greater than Jonah is here' says Jesus, and I can practically hear one of the scribes muttering, 'that's not difficult'. Jesus shifts suddenly to remember the Queen of the South, the Queen of Sheba, whom we think of as fantastically rich and very beautiful. She came to learn from Solomon, whose wisdom was renowned through his world: 'See, something greater than Solomon is here!' Greater than Solomon the Wise? Now that would be something...

Jesus is asked for a sign, and he points to scripture, and through that to himself and the Kingdom of God. I wonder if that's the kind of sign the scribes and Pharisees expected? Were they hoping for a miracle? And did they ever realise that what they saw that day was not a miracle but the Messiah?

It's all too easy at the moment to scan the news for signs: signs that the peak of Covid-19 is here, that it's passed, that it's yet to come, that lockdown will ease, that schools will reopen for all. We listen to politicians and medical experts, and to our neighbours and friends, to rumour and speculation. This is not an easy time, whether we live alone or with others. The restrictions may weight more heavily as we long for real company and touch or, conversely, for just half an hour away from the other members of our household.

What kind of a sign do you long for? Whatever it is, I encourage you to look for signs of the Kingdom of God, and of the risen Christ, Redeemer of humanity.

Prayer

Jesus, as I look for you today, reveal yourself to me: sit with me, walk with me, laugh with me, weep with me.

Help me to recognise you. Help me to recognise the signs of your Kingdom.

Give me gestures, words and opportunities to share your signs with others, so that the whole world may know you, love you, follow you and worship you.

Amen.

Response

We are blessed with so many opportunities to see the signs of the Kingdom of God in rural places. We see huge trees grown from tiny seeds. We see lambs to remind us of new life and the Lamb of God. We see the passing of the seasons to remind us of Jesus' death, and resurrection. What sign do you see, and who will you share it with?

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Together Apart:
A rural church response
to coronavirus