

Well good morning, we're continuing our study in the book of Matthew and today we come to Chapter 16 v1-4 which is all about Signs.

*Now Some signs are daft <plan ahead>*

*Some signs are irrelevant... until you read the small print <edges>*

*Some signs are crucially important <poison> and*

*Some signs are prophetic <no exit from burial>*

We all use signs all the time  
to guide our decisions,  
to work out what is going on,  
to help us find out where we are going

It is no different in our faith – (if we could have it)  
we'd all want signs/proof that Jesus is God because that would guide our decisions about him,  
we'd all want proof about our destiny so that we can plan for the future,  
we'd all want proof that everything is going to be OK - not only for now, but forever.  
Of course we would!

Well this is what Matthew 16 is all about...

Some people come to Jesus looking for signs.  
They came **Demanding** a sign about Jesus  
They were unable to **Discern** the signs all around them; and  
They needed to **Discover** the only sign that matter about their future.

So that's what I want to talk about this morning  
the **Demand** for a sign,  
the **Discernment** of what is going on,  
the need to **Discover** the only sign worth following...

And it would help me if you would turn to Matthew 16, p983 of your pew Bibles and we'll jump straight in with

### **1. The Demand for a Sign**

*vl The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus*

#### **Now who are these guys?**

Well the Sadducees were mainly from the aristocratic class,  
the elite of Jewish society,  
and they didn't believe in angels or the spiritual world or eternal life.  
They were liberal rationalists - guided only by what they could see and touch and verify themselves.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were often drawn from the less educated and they took everything in the Old Testament pretty much literally and they had no trouble believing *in almost anything* as long as it tied in with their own preconceptions about scripture.  
So they were more like MISguided religious fundamentalists

So we have Liberal Rationalists & Religious Fundamentalists -  
and the \$64,000 question is:  
what are they doing together!?

Because normally, they wouldn't be seen dead in each other's company!  
But here they are, appearing together, brothers in arms, united against a common cause, sharing the mantra "my enemies enemy is my friend"

And they came to Jesus...

*v2 And they tested him...*

Now why do you test something?

**Well, you test something: to see how good it is.**

So we test young people 'academically' to see how scholarly they are,  
we test gold 'chemically' to see how pure it is,  
we test 'athletes blood' to see how clean it is  
We test things to see how good they are.

But the Pharisees and Sadducees weren't testing Jesus to see how good he is!  
Because his goodness is self-evident from his teaching and his character!

His **teaching** is the greatest, most profound and most inspiring teaching that has ever fallen from the lips of any human at any time.

Bernard Ramm said *"Jesus' words are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken..."*

No one in 2,000 years has come even close to improving on them - they are that good!

His **character** is the most incorruptible, consistent, merciful and truthful that has ever been known – That's why orthodox Jews accepted he was God – because his life-style matched up to their view of who God is.

The **humanist** William Hazlitt said *"there is something about the character of Christ, leaving religious faith aside, of more sweetness and majesty, and more likely to work a change in the mind of a man than of any, to be found in history whether actual or fiction"*.

*When Gandhi was murdered, Prime Minister Nehru described him as "the most Christ like man I have ever known"*.

Here was one devout Hindu speaking to another and they looked to the person of Jesus as the pinnacle of human integrity.

No, they weren't testing Jesus to see how good he is.

**Neither were they testing him to check out his capabilities!**

*We test bridges to make sure they won't fall down,  
we test theories to see if they'll explain what we see,  
we test medicines to see if they are effective  
we test things to check out their capabilities  
But these people already knew what Jesus was capable of!*

They had seen the feeding of the 5,000,  
they had witnessed the countless healings of the lame and the blind and the lepers and  
they had probably heard about the calming of the Storm  
No they weren't asking for a sign to check out his capabilities

**They were testing him because they wanted MORE**

v2 They wanted a sign from heaven (note that-from heaven!)

They had already seen "earthly miracles", "mundane miracles"

No, they wanted something more spectacular, more incontrovertible, more divine, so to speak!

They wanted a miracle "from heaven" (whatever that is!)

Why?

Because they were **always** going to want more,

they were never going to be satisfied...

*Voltaire the French Enlightenment writer, historian and philosopher and **atheist** said "even if a miracle from heaven should be wrought in the open marketplace before 1000 sober witnesses, I would, rather mistrust my senses than admit to a miracle "*

Do you see - no proof was ever going to satisfy Voltaire

Richard Dawkins said much the same thing – he said of the resurrection "*it is far too small, far too parochial to be worthy of discussion*"

Not even Jesus rising from the dead will persuade Dawkins that its even worth talking about!

Why won't people be satisfied?

Why will people always want more?

Well maybe it's because some people will only ever place their faith in what they can see and verify themselves

Perhaps some people will only place their faith in something they can completely understand but this is crazy because -

- God's ways are far beyond our ways
- his ways are counter-intuitive to all our instincts
- He is **infinite** and we are very, very small and finite

we can't possibly hope to understand him,  
put him under our microscope or experiment on him!

Some people will never find God because they will only put their faith in what they can see and verify and understand themselves

- and that is delusional arrogance when we apply it to God

But Perhaps too – some people keep asking for more and more proof, more and more signs because actually it is just a stalling tactic to ever having to admit we are wrong; and ever having to place God at the centre of our life

The Pharisees and Sadducees weren't asking questions because they wanted **answers**  
They were asking questions because **they** wanted to **judge him** and because they didn't want to admit that they were wrong and they didn't want to follow him.

*And Voltaire and Dawkins prove by their own words:*

*"all the signs in the world aren't going to convince them of something they don't want to see"*

No, if you are looking for the truth in Jesus then

There are more than enough books, there are more than enough Alpha Courses, there are more than enough conversations available.

There are plenty of answers

if we look at the **teachings** of Jesus,

the **character** of Jesus, the **impact** of Jesus, the **experience** of Jesus

And I have never seen anyone disappointed, if they have honestly wanted to find the reality of a relationship with Jesus.

If you search you will find

If you humble yourself before God you will encounter him

If you listen he will speak truth that will change the way you look at everything.

The question is do you want to?

So these Pharisees and Sadducees they **Demanded** more, but would never be satisfied

## **2. Secondly, They were unable to Discern the signs all around them.**

They came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven and

*v2 he replied "when evening comes you say 'it will be fair weather for the sky is red' and in the morning you say 'today it will be stormy for the sky is red and overcast'*

*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sly but you cannot interpret the signs of the times"*

"Red sky at night, shepherds delight. Red sky in morning, shepherds warning. " we all know it.

Jesus' point is that we all seek to interpret 'the signs of the times' so as to know how to prepare ourselves.

After all, if we know what the future holds, then we can take steps to get ready for it.

The point is do we recognise what is going on?

*It was autumn, and the Indians on the remote reservation asked their **new** Chief if the winter was going to be cold.*

*Since, he was a new Indian Chief in a **modern** society,*

*he had never been taught the old ways,*

*so when he looked at the sky, he had no idea what the winter was going to be like!*

*So to be safe, he replied that the winter was indeed going to be cold and that the villagers should go and collect wood to be prepared.*

*But then several days later he had a brain-wave,*

*He called the local Weather Service and asked, "Is the coming winter going to be cold? "*

*It looks like this winter is going to be quite cold indeed," the weatherman responded.*

*So the Chief went back to his people and told them to collect even more wood to be even better prepared.*

*A week later he called the Weather Service again*

*"are you sure its going to be a cold winter? " he asked,*

*"Yes " the weatherman said "it looks like it is going to be a **very** cold this winter."*

*So the Chief went back to his people and ordered them to collect every scrap of wood they could find.*

*Two weeks later he called the National Weather Service again.*

*"Are you absolutely sure the winter is going to be very cold?"*

*"Absolutely, in fact it's going to be one of the coldest winters on record"*

*"How can you be so sure? " the Chief asked.*

*The weatherman replied, "Because the Indians are collecting wood like crazy!"*

If we know what the future holds, we can take steps to get ready for it.

If we can read the signs then we can prepare ourselves.

For the Pharisees and Sadducees the signs were all around them but they couldn't see it

The nation was on its knees .

The Roman empire had swallowed them whole

War was constantly in the air; and

Oppression was everywhere they turned...

And there was nothing they could do could save themselves from it.

For them:

They knew God had been silent for more than 400 years

They knew Scripture had foretold that the next event would be the coming of the Messiah

They knew John the Baptist had appeared preaching that "the Kingdom of God was near"

They knew miracles were being performed right in front of their very eyes

and they still couldn't see what was going on!!

For them their prejudice against Christ was so instinctive that they wouldn't even recognise God when he stood in front of them and had a conversation with them.

There are none so blind who will not see

For us, the signs are just as clear.

The reality is that we live in a world that is NOT getting better and better

for all our technical sophistication people are no happier

for all our economic development people feel no more secure

for all our understanding of nature species are going extinct, resources are running out and the climate is changing

for all our medical progress we still ALL die

for all our mastery of science we are impotent in the face of earthquakes, and Tsunami's and famine

If the desperate loss of life in Japan teaches us anything,

If the catastrophic destruction of the buildings in Christ Church teaches us anything

If the never-ending litany of war in Afghanistan and the atrocities in Libya and the genocide in The Ivory Coast teach us anything

It is that we cannot tame nature or human nature

For all our progress, we are still (to all intents and purposes) powerless.

The signs of the times tell us something loud and clear

There is something desperately wrong with our world

there is something desperately wrong with us.

And we still die

And we cannot save ourselves

Look around you

the ideal that we all strive for,

the peace that we all want,

the harmony and civilisation that you and I and every human being would grab with both hands

is no more attainable now than it was;

in Jesus' time.

By ourselves we cannot save ourselves

what we need is God

This is what the signs of the times says loud and clear to every generation

"our world is broken" ....

"we are broken"; and

"we can't save ourselves **in** this world, **from** this world or **from leaving** this world"

If we would DO that - we need to find God

Only he has the power over nature,

only he can heal us,

only he can rescue us from death,

only he can forgive our sins and mend our heart

And the challenge for us is this.

That Jesus says, if you would open your eyes and see who is speaking to you this morning through these verses

if you would take seriously what you see around you

then you would prepare yourself for the future

you would take every step available to you to get ready for it.

And the question is will you?

This passage shows us that although

1. They Demanded more, they weren't really looking for the answers;

And

2. All the signs were there – but they could not Discern them; and

**3. What they really needed was to Discover the only sign worth following.**

*v3 A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign*

*But none will be given it except the sign of Jonah*

Look, Jesus is not saying that asking questions, looking for answers, demanding a sign is wicked!

Gideon asked for a sign

Hezekiah asked for a sign?

Ahaz was rebuked for NOT asking for a sign

Asking for a sign does not make you faithless or sinful or wicked.

But what Jesus is saying is that

sinful people (like us) will always ask for a sign before they give themselves to God - of course they will!

We'll never just take someone's word for it!

So God in his grace gives us a sign, the best sign, the only sign worth following: The sign of Jonah.

**What is the sign of Jonah?**

It is this.

Jonah was a man who willingly sacrificed himself in the middle of a storm to save others from drowning

He was a man who took upon himself the "deadly consequences of rebellion" to save others

He was a man who was swallowed whole by a fish and taken down into the depths there to stay in its belly – presumably stone dead - for 3 nights

He was a man who was then, resurrected, brought out of death, to go and preach judgement and the need for repentance to a people who had rejected God and who lived for themselves

The parallels between Jonah - whose story was written 750BC, and Jesus are obvious.

Jesus is a man, he is God, who willingly sacrifices himself in the teeth of

the storms/the cruelty/the injustice of this life, so that you and I may be saved from them.

He is a man, he is God, who took upon himself the "deadly consequences of your rebellion/my rebellion/the world's rebellion" to

save you

He is a man, he is God swallowed whole by the grave, taken down into the depths, stone dead for 3 days and nights, resurrected by the

power of God

To prove to you and me—

that we **must see** the peril of our souls (we cannot save ourselves),

we must read the signs of the times

we will die, we will be held accountable, we will be judged

so we must repent and return to God.

This is the proof that God gives.

And we can ask for nothing more.

If you want God to prove how much he values you by doing something more than sending you his Son - you are going to be disappointed

If you want God to prove his love for you by doing more than being crucified – I don't think you understand what you ask

If you want God to prove that there is life after death by doing more than resurrecting Jesus (crucified, dead and buried) - you are just making excuses

This is the proof that God gives.  
This is the sign that all signs point to.  
His coming proves your value  
His death proves his love  
His resurrection proves God's power and your hope

He is all the signs and the only sign that you could ever want...

*In v4 Jesus then left them and went away*

He left them because there is nothing more to say,  
nothing more to add,  
in terms of knowledge they have it all.

But I want you to see this  
The actions of Jesus' life, death and resurrection are simply **the sign of** what you need.  
They are not in themselves what you need  
*Any more than seeing a sign means you have arrived at your destination.*

Recognising the miracle of Jesus birth,  
Understanding the profound sacrifice of his death and  
Seeing the hope his resurrection brings  
**is simply the sign**  
**It is not the destination.**

What you need to do is to follow these signs  
Follow them to the point where  
having seen  
God's value upon you – his love for you – his everlasting plans for you  
you arrive at the destination  
which is quietly humbly kneeling before him  
and saying  
I don't need miracles anymore I need you  
I don't signs anymore I need your forgiveness,  
I don't need proof anymore because I know your love  
and will gladly place you God in the centre of my life and follow you forever

Because the destination is not recognising the signs  
The destination is a living relationship with God through Jesus that begins now and goes on forever.

Because IN a living relationship with God, knowing God, following God you find all the answers, all the proof, all the evidence  
you will ever need.

Let us pray...