

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 32”**  
*Matthew 12:38-45*

Well, we're back in Matthew's Gospel after the summer break, back looking at this wonderful portrait of the Kingly Messiah. Matthew, a leader of one of the first churches to be established around the Eastern Mediterranean in the first century, is trying to help his congregation of Jewish believers to discover a bit more about the figure whose teachings they are following, and trying to reassure them that it's OK to recognise this man as their leader, as their Messiah. After all, he is not calling them to give up their previous beliefs, but to realise that this is what they had been looking for all along. Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecies and predictions of the Old Testament: he is the one to whom all those Hebrew poets and preachers were pointing, the one who was to come and make real the person and the plans of their God, the One True God.

And Matthew has shown how the birth of Jesus fits in with all the predictions of the prophets. He has written about his teaching and preaching – which Matthew, as one of Jesus' disciples had seen at first hand – and about the ways in which he told stories and answered questions, how he spoke of the ways to get the very best out of life, how he discussed and re-interpreted the great Law of Moses. He has described Jesus' healings and miracles, the amazing things he has done to restore life and dignity to those who were on the margins, those who had lost hope, those who had had the hope squeezed out of them, those who had had hope denied them by the powerful and the privileged.

There has been an awful lot about Jesus' life and ministry that has pointed to his being the true Messiah, the one who would come and put things to rights for the people of Israel – and, shockingly, for the Gentile world too. His prophetic ministry, the authority with which he speaks, his directness, and his apparent closeness to God have all added to this authentication of his credentials. And he has shown, too, his kingly credentials as he has given glimpses of the coming Kingdom of God, that sovereign rule which will finally restore all things to the state that God had originally intended before sin somehow got in and messed it all up. Time and time again he has spoken of this Kingdom without telling people exactly what it will be. He's told them often enough what it will be *like*, but hasn't been able to describe it fully. As one writer puts it:

*“When he talks about it, it skips from analogy to analogy, keeping all its power as heart's desire and humiliation's remedy ... The Kingdom, he seems to be saying, is something that can only be glimpsed in comparisons, because the world contains no actual example of it. And yet the world glints and winks everywhere with the possibility of it.”* (Francis Spufford: *Unapologetic* pp124/5)

The trouble is, of course, this kind of talk attracts opponents. And Jesus has come up against the gatekeepers of The Law, the guardians of tradition, those who have spent time and energy assuming power and now see their vested interests being threatened. The Pharisees, the holier-than-thou – indeed, holier-than-everyone – custodians of the religion of the Jewish people, and their side-kicks, the teachers of the Law, who seemingly spend their time making the Law more and more difficult to keep, have crossed metaphorical swords with Jesus on several occasions and here once again they come up to Jesus setting him tests of soundness and purity.

If you can remember back to the last time we looked at Matthew's Gospel (and if you can't just look back a few verses in this chapter 12), you'll notice that Jesus has just been talking about how you can really know what a person is like by the way in which they live their lives and, particularly, by the things they say when their guard is down. If you are truly in tune with God, truly a citizen of the Kingdom, then you will speak good things and your character will be easily recognised. If you're not in tune with God, if your attitudes are not shaped by the values of the Kingdom, then you'll always be betraying that by your hasty words and inconsistent actions.

“Fair enough,” say the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, “so give us a sign that you are who you say you are. Go on: do something special that will satisfy our demand for authentication.” And Jesus, mindful

that the Kingdom and everything that it will eventually include cannot really be fully demonstrated until his mission is complete, replies, “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

He starts off, in a way which it doesn’t seem to me is intended to endear himself to them, by calling them “*a wicked and adulterous generation*”. Well, every generation is wicked – that’s part of the universal legacy of human sinfulness. You can’t really get away from that. And though the Pharisees would, deep down, have had to acknowledge that even they were tainted by that human tendency to get it all wrong – which is what they were trying to guard against by putting up the fences of the Law – they wouldn’t have been too keen on being called “*adulterous*”. Of course, we have to see the use of that word in its context here. Jesus wasn’t necessarily accusing them of any kind of sexual infidelity. He was just using an image that their own prophets had used time and time again to describe a people who were covenantally pledged to God, but who had betrayed him left, right and centre by having flings with other gods. Read through the Old Testament and you’ll lose count of the times the preachers use this kind of language to harangue the people of Israel about their dalliances with Baal and Moloch and Astarte and all the other gods worshipped by the pagan tribes who surrounded them. What Jesus is accusing these people of is their lack of loyalty and commitment to the One True God – because if they had really been loyal and committed they would have spotted the signs already.

You see, there’s nothing necessarily wrong with wanting a sign. It’s part of the nature of our enquiring human minds that we want to see stuff authenticated, we want our trust vindicated. We want hard evidence. They’re really just saying that they’d like Jesus to prove who he says he is, to back up what he’s been saying about this Kingdom with some proof, some signs, that it’s all true. That’s fine in itself. But they’ve had all kinds of signs already. They’ve had centuries of signs from prophets, poets, preachers – true men and women of God who have been calling them back to God’s ways – and they’ve ignored them all. And Jesus himself has give them plenty to be going on with too – miracles, healings, life-changing and hope-restoring words and actions. He’s given them so many signs already – why should he turn it on again just for them? What’s going to be different this time? And anyway, they’ve already misinterpreted some of them and tried to turn them against him. Remember how they accused him of doing it all by the power of Beelzebub earlier in this chapter 12 (12:24)?

And to really rub it in, he tells them about some of those ancient pagans who were prepared to believe the signs, prepared to see God at work. Firstly, there were the people of Nineveh, the proud citizens at the heart of the Assyrian Empire who were constantly causing trouble for God’s people and whose policies and actions were a contemporary byword for cruelty and wickedness. Jonah came along – eventually – and, having spent a couple of days in the belly of a fish, was vomited up and started preaching God’s word to them. If you know the story, you’ll remember that the entire city repented of their evil ways and recognised God at work – both in the way Jonah was apparently brought back from the dead and, as Jesus explicitly says here, in the preaching of the prophet himself.

So how will you cope on Judgement day, asks Jesus, when these out and out pagans stand up and say “We spotted God was at work. Why can’t you?” Because what these Pharisees were failing to spot because of their prejudices and their pre-packed, tightly controlled theology, was that Jesus was even greater than Jonah. Even “*the sign of the prophet Jonah*” – the way in which Jesus will come back, not from the belly of a fish but from the very depths of death itself – won’t convince them. “You ain’t seen nothing yet!” And when you do, you’ll remain sadly unconvinced.

And what about the Queen of Sheba? Another example of an ancient pagan who managed to spot something special that God was doing. She travelled up to Israel from what seemed to be the very edge of the world because she’d heard about King Solomon’s God-given wisdom. She came looking for something more and she found it as she talked with the anointed representative of the One True God in his palace. Once again, Jesus says that these argumentative Pharisees will have to face her on Judgement Day as she points out to them that she was able to identify the hand of God at work and asks what on earth they think they’re doing if they can’t see it. And, adds Jesus, you’re actually looking at someone who is even greater than Solomon, whose wisdom is proverbial to you. “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

And when you do, you'll be so bewitched by your own apparent wisdom that you can't see what's staring you in the face.

St Paul, the one-time archetypal Pharisee – the man who could have won prizes for Pharisee-ness – realised this when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth that “*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks [or Gentiles] look for wisdom*” (1 Corinthians 1:22). But you don't need to go chasing after all that, says Paul, because the true signpost pointing to the Kingdom of God is the death and resurrection and glorification of Jesus the Christ, the Kingly Messiah. In the end, that's all you need.

As we look into this wonderful story of Jesus, of God coming into our world to draw us back to himself, it's true that there are all kinds of amazing things going on (and we can see so much more than these Pharisees with the benefit of hindsight and two thousand years of teaching and interpretation) – miracles, healings, words of authority, glimpses of a fulfilled Kingdom, of lives restored and situations transformed – but even if they hadn't happened, even if all we had was the last couple of chapters of each of these Gospels, the crucial sign that makes sense of it all is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

It's easy for us to ask for signs. And we do – and people have done down through the centuries – and God sometimes responds very graciously to our need to get things buttoned down and sewn up. “Lord, get me out of this mess and I'll follow you. Lord, do something miraculous and I'll believe it all. Lord, show yourself in a way that can't be explained by any other means and I'll go wherever you want me to.” God sometimes works in response to that, but often he doesn't. And even when he does, there's still that sense of “You ain't seen nothing yet” until you realise that God came into this world and willingly subjected himself to humiliation, torture, pain and death simply because he loves you. What greater sign can there be than that? What more do you need? What more do **YOU** need?

If you can't recognise that sign of God's commitment to you and your eternal future, if you can't recognise that sign of what lies at the very heart of the Kingdom, if you can't recognise the lengths to which the Kingly Messiah would go to demonstrate his love for all humanity in general – and you in particular – then you'll have to face the people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba asking you, “How on earth could you miss that?” We worship and follow a Kingly Messiah who is far greater than anything or anyone this world has ever seen. And he loves you. Don't miss the signs!

**"FOLLOWING THE KING – 32"**  
***Matthew 12:38-45***

There has been an awful lot about Jesus' life and ministry that has pointed to his being the true Messiah. His prophetic ministry, the authority with which he speaks, his directness, and his apparent closeness to God have all added to this authentication of his credentials. And he has shown, too, his kingly credentials as he has given glimpses of the coming Kingdom of God.

The trouble is, of course, this kind of talk attracts opponents. And Jesus has come up against the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, who ask for a "sign", something to authenticate his words and his claims. Jesus replies by calling them "*a wicked and adulterous generation*", using an image that their own prophets had used time and time again to describe a people who were covenantally pledged to God, but who had betrayed him left, right and centre by having flings with other gods. What Jesus is accusing these people of is their lack of loyalty and commitment to the One True God – because if they had really been loyal and committed they would have spotted the signs already.

There's nothing necessarily wrong with wanting a sign, but they've had all kinds of signs already. They've had centuries of signs from prophets, poets, preachers and they've ignored them all. And Jesus himself has give so many signs already – why should he turn it on again just for them? What's going to be different this time? They've already misinterpreted some of them and tried to turn them against him (Look at *12:24*).

Jesus tells them about some of those ancient pagans who were prepared to believe the signs, prepared to see God at work. Firstly, there were the people of Nineveh, who repented of their evil ways and recognised God at work – both in the way Jonah was apparently brought back from the dead and, as Jesus explicitly says here, in the preaching of the prophet himself. And secondly the Queen of Sheba, who travelled up to Israel because she'd heard about King Solomon's God-given wisdom. She came looking for something more and she found it as she talked with the anointed representative of the One True God in his palace.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth that "*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks [or Gentiles] look for wisdom*" (*1 Corinthians 1:22*). But you don't need to go chasing after all that, says Paul, because the true signpost pointing to the Kingdom of God is the death and resurrection and glorification of Jesus the Christ, the Kingly Messiah. In the end, that's all you need. Even if all we had was the last couple of chapters of each of these Gospels, the crucial sign that makes sense of it all is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. If you can't recognise that sign of God's commitment to you and your eternal future, if you can't recognise that sign of what lies at the very heart of the Kingdom, if you can't recognise the lengths to which the Kingly Messiah would go to demonstrate his love for all humanity in general – and you in particular – then you'll have to face the people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba asking you, "How on earth could you miss that?" We worship and follow a Kingly Messiah who is far greater than anything or anyone this world has ever seen.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why do you think the Pharisees ask for a sign? Why have they not spotted the signs Jesus has already given them?
2. What is "*the sign of the prophet Jonah*"?
3. In what ways is Jesus greater than Jonah and Solomon?
4. Jesus calls these people "*a wicked generation*"? Aren't all generations "*wicked*"?
5. If someone asked you for evidence of what you believe, what would you say?