



Seagulls and the Sign of Jonah

Sermon – Aiden Sibrava – 27 Feb 2022 (Matthew 15:29 – 16:20)

Introduction

It's a big reading, but today there are two things I want you to see in the end. 1. Although signs are difficult, we want to focus on what matters. And 2. the sign that *really matters* is what Jesus calls, "the Sign of Jonah."

Seagulls don't seem to have a very rich thought life.

I don't know if you've had that experience of opening a nice fresh order of chips by the beach and suddenly being mobbed by a pack of glorified pigeons, but if you have, you might have noticed that they take a *while* to take the hint. Someone that I know quite well is a serious *ornithophobe*: afraid of birds. So I've had that trying to shoo away a pack of *just won't* get the picture. And shells and rocks at them, you stick at 'em, but it just doesn't sink in.



a person who's experience of seagulls that you can throw can swing a

It seems that they're driven by food, and they don't do a whole lot of reflecting. The seagull doesn't think, "Hey, they threw a rock at me - they might not want me here." Or if they do, it's obviously not that important to them. They're *driven* by instinct - "You've got food and I want food!" If they were smart, they might put it together. Like... *Hey!* These guys don't want me here: someone else is probably having fish and chips on another beach. I could

go there. Or maybe even get off my lazy butt and go fishing. But they don't. They're *thoughtless*.

Now as we read this section of Matthew's gospel, it looks as though *that* kind of **thinking** is going on in the *people*. Folks follow Jesus because of the outward miracles, without reflecting on the **wider significance** of what's happening. Pharisees ask for a sign from heaven, completely missing the heavenly signs that Jesus has performed right in front of their face.

And so they and us are called to a reorientation of our perspective - to see what's right in front of us... to truly notice the significance of the Lord Jesus.

You'll see it come out as we read, so...

Distracted by Food

Picking up at 15 verse 35, Matthew says:

36 *[Jesus] took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. 37 They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. (Matthew points out that they got back more than they gave out.) 38 The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan. 1 The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.*

And now hopefully already you can see where the Pharisees and Sadducees have done a bit of a dumb thing.

Jesus *just* fed the four thousand, and before that (in Ch. 14) he fed 5,000. All up, he fed 9,000 men on 12 loaves and 5 or so fish.

Now if that's not a heavenly sign, I don't know what is. Try it yourself. Get a loaf of bread and cut it into 750 pieces - that's how many people each loaf had to satisfy. 16:37 says they all ate and were satisfied. It says there were seven basketfuls of leftovers. That's no mean feat! It's a *heavenly* sign!

So in verse 1, the Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus and test him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. Now they might not all have been there, but if you read the gospels you get the hint pretty quickly; the bush telegraph means that news travels fast... especially news about Jesus. Yet here they are after those miraculous meals and they ask for a 'sign.' And you think, "*Are you guys for real?*" There's no *pleasing* some people. Jesus has given them so *many* signs in his ministry and they're still not convinced.

They ask for one more. That's seagull-dumb, isn't it? I know you've given me every indication you don't want to share your chips and you've thrown rocks at me but... *can I have a chip?* Jesus has proven himself over and over and they still don't get it!

And it's not just the Pharisees who miss the point; the disciples do too, in their own way. Reading from verse 5, it says...

*5 When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take **bread**. 6 "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 7 They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any **bread**."*

8 *Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? 9 Do you still not understand? (I'm talking about bread, but I'm not talking about bread.) Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 11 How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."*

The disciples miss the point too; they focus on **bread!** Although in fairness, Jesus kind of started it with the *bread* miracles. And then he talks about **leaven**, or yeast.

In ancient Israel, for their ceremonial bread, they used to eat flatbread. That was their *holy* bread. If you put in yeast (or *leaven*) then it wouldn't be flat and it wouldn't be holy anymore.

But the *point* isn't about bread. No, Jesus is warning his disciples that in the same way that 'yeast' makes bread un-holy, *people* can do that to other **people**. That is, if you take on their teaching and they lead you astray, then you won't be holy. Jesus is saying that *that's* the danger of the Pharisees. They're teachers who shouldn't teach.

So Jesus says in verse 6, *Be on your guard against the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*

But the disciples didn't get it until verse 12, when *"They [finally] understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."*

Signs can be difficult, but they're important. Jesus demonstrated his heavenly power by the *sign* of the feeding miracles. Jesus warns his disciples about the Pharisees, using the *sign* of bread and yeast.

And in the middle of it all, Jesus points to the most important sign of all:

The Sign of Jonah

In verse four, Jesus said, *"This evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."* And then Matthew tells us that he up and left them.

There's a few things to notice here...

The first is the way Jesus says that an "evil and adulterous" generation seeks for a sign. Why do you think *that* is? I mean, in your living memory there's been a significant Christian movement, which has been largely focussed on signs and wonders. So why is it "evil and adulterous" to seek for a sign?

Well I don't think it always is, but remember the context. These people have already seen *plenty* of signs. They're evil and adulterous because they ignore what's **clear**. It's always "just one more."

They have hard hearts that refuse to acknowledge the truth of who Jesus is, even when it's staring them in the face. So they keep seeking signs.

But we wouldn't do that! Would we?

I feel like it could be a risk. James says, "Take care that you stand, lest you fall."

So I wonder if there are times when we ask God for miracles, and he's like... *Did you not **see** that sunrise? Have you **heard** of the resurrection? Have you even **noticed** the stars in the sky?*

I sometimes wonder if it's the same with spiritual gifts. You know, we ask God for prophetic gifts or the gift of healing and it's like... well, what are you doing with the gifts you *already have*? The time and money and intellect you've already been given? If we want to be entrusted with more, it's worth asking if we're really being faithful with what we already have.

I wonder what God might say to us if we were to chase after signs and wonders as the be-all?

Well, anyway, we know he says to the Pharisees. He says they'll get no sign from him except *one*. The sign of Jonah.

Do you know the Jonah story?

Jonah was that prophet who was in the whale's belly for 3 days before he was spat out.

Jesus must be talking about his death, and how he'll be raised to life after 3 days just like Jonah.

That's all true. But I think there's more to it.

You see Jonah was sent to a gentile nation, called Nineveh. He didn't want to go. In fact, as a Jewish person, he hated the Ninevites.

But God said to "Go!" because he cared for their souls. So Jonah went, as a sign of God's care for those **outside** his kingdom. And that's who Jesus is to us - a sign of God's care for the outsider - *you and me*.

Just like Jonah, Jesus went through three days in the darkness of death for the sake of the outsider. *Unlike* Jonah, Jesus did it out of *love* for the outsider. And Jesus says to the Pharisees, *you want a sign? That's your sign!*

The sign of Jonah is not *just* a symbol of Jesus' resurrection... although it is that. You know the story - Jonah was cast into the ocean and "the bars of sheol, hades, death enclosed him."

For three days he was in the belly of the whale before it vomited him out onto land. I'm as convinced as I could be that that was a resurrection experience. Likewise Jesus died and was laid in the heart of the earth for three days, before it vomited him forth, for "the grave could not hold him."

And Jonah was also a preacher of **grace** to the Outsider. When he preached, Nineveh... the enemies of God... they repented and were saved. In the same way, Christ proclaims **grace** and **salvation** to those who are far off.

Do you see?

Application.

So what does it all mean for us? Well the drama of these verses is driven by people who just don't 'get' Jesus. So I think the takeaway is something along the lines of, let's make sure we 'get' Jesus.

Let's pay attention to the signs and what they mean... and most especially to the **big** sign, what Jesus calls "the Sign of Jonah."

The disciples got lost in the little stuff. They focussed on bread.

That could be us. We can focus on the things we ‘need,’ or the things other people need. We worry about food and water, our house and our jobs, family and friends, or what others think of us... our goals and our plans, achievements and money. But it’s bread! Ultimately, it’s bread! And Jesus teaches us to look to God, praying, *give us this day our daily bread.*

He calls us to “Seek first the kingdom of God, and these things will be added to you.” So don’t be a seagull.

Think about who you are in this world God has made under Jesus the King. Because he’s trying to teach us and grow us as disciples. If we focus on *bread*, we’ll miss it. Don’t miss out on Jesus. Listen to him.

And as you listen to him, realise that he proclaims **resurrection** and **grace to the outsider**. And go out and seek the ‘outsider,’ that they may *know* him and share in all that we have in him.

Are we asking for signs when Jesus is clear? Are we ever a little dense—seagull-like? I think he’d say, “Stop! Listen! Trust! Follow! *Understand!*”

So why don’t we pray that we will?

