

The Signs That We Fail to Discern

Sermon · 21 August 2022

God reveals His saving purpose through the signs which He sends

Luke 11:27-32: "And it came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked. But he said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it. And when the people were gathered thick together, he began to say, This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation. The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation, and condemn them: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineve shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here."

As I began my preparations for this sermon, I noticed Jonah. I said in my heart to the Lord, 'Not again Jonah, Lord.' You see, Jonah puts the preacher on the spot. Sunday school children know the narrative about Jonah by heart, and for the adults, when we connect Jonah's experience to the sign Jesus gave, we know very well that Jonah being in the belly of a huge fish for three days is a foreshadowing of Jesus dying and rising again on the third day. But I heard an inner voice say to me, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8). I read and re-read the Gospel passage, which spoke of nothing about Jonah and the fish. The passage was not about Jonah, but about us. Let us begin with a question: do we hear and keep God's word?

A woman is brought before us in this passage, of whose name and history we know nothing. We read that, as our Lord spoke, "A certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked" (Luke 11:27). At once our Lord founds on her remark a great lesson; as ever, His perfect wisdom turned every incident within His reach to instruct us.

We should observe, first, in these verses, how greatly privileged are those who hear and keep God's word (this reflection follows the exposition of Bishop J.C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke, 1858, at several points below). They are regarded by Christ with as much honour as if they were His nearest kin. It is more blessed to be a believer in the Lord Jesus than it would have been to be one of the family into which He was born in His incarnation as a man. It was a greater honour to the Virgin Mary herself to have Christ dwelling in her heart by faith than to have been the mother of Christ, and to have nursed Him on her bosom.

We are generally very slow to receive so profound a truth. We are apt to fancy that to have seen Christ, and heard Christ, and lived near Christ, and been a relative of Christ according to the flesh, would have had some mighty effect upon our souls. Many a time we wonder what it would have been like to have been born when Christ walked this earth. We are all naturally inclined to attach great importance to a religion of sight, and sense, and touch, and eye, and ear. We love a physical, tangible, material Christianity far better than one of faith. Perhaps we find upholding our faith difficult, and we need reminding that seeing does not always mean believing. Thousands saw Christ continually for three years while He was on earth, and yet clung to their sins and their broken faith. Even His own brethren, at one time, "did not believe in him" (John 7:5). A mere fleshly knowledge of Christ saves no one. The words of Paul are very instructive: "Though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more" (2 Corinthians 5:16).

Let us learn from our Lord's words before us that the highest privileges our souls can desire are close at hand, and within our reach, if only we believe. We need not idly wish that we had read the Bible from cover to cover, or discharged every one of our Christian responsibilities, or visited the Holy Land and walked where Jesus walked, and so felt ourselves closer to Him. Nor need we dream of a deeper love and a more thorough devotion had we really pressed Christ's hand, or heard Christ's voice, or been numbered among Christ's friends. All this could have done nothing more for us than simple faith can do now. Do we hear Christ's voice and follow Him? Do we take

Him for our only Saviour and our only Friend, and, forsaking all other hopes, cleave only unto Him? If this be so, all things are ours. We need no other imagined higher privilege. No man can be nearer and dearer to Jesus than the man who simply believes, and who does not need a sign or a physical manifestation of the divine.

I am sure you recall the conversation between the centurion and Jesus Christ. The centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." When Jesus heard it, He marvelled, and said to them that followed, "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Matthew 8:8, 10). Compare this with the account of Nathanael: "Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these" (John 1:49-50).

We should observe, next, the desperate unbelief of the Jews in our Lord's time. We are told that though they "gathered thick together" to hear Christ preach, they still professed to be waiting for a sign. They pretended to need more evidence before they believed. Our Lord declares that the Queen of Sheba and the men of Nineveh would put the Jews to shame at the last day. The Queen of Sheba had such faith that she travelled a vast distance in order to hear the wisdom of Solomon; yet Solomon, with all his wisdom, was an erring and imperfect king. The Ninevites had such faith that they believed the message which Jonah brought from God, and repented; yet even Jonah was a weak and unstable prophet. The Jews of our Lord's time had far higher light and infinitely clearer teaching than either Solomon or Jonah could supply; they had among them the King of kings, the One greater than Moses. Yet the Jews neither repented nor believed!

Let it never surprise us to see unbelief abounding, both in the Church and in the world, especially in our own time. So far from marvelling that the vast majority of professing Christians remain unaffected and unmoved by the preaching of the Gospel, we ought rather to wonder if any around us truly believe at all. Why should we wonder to see that the old disease which began with Adam and Eve still infects all their children? Why should we expect to see more faith among men and women now than was seen in our Lord's time? The vast amount of unbelief and hardness on every side may well grieve and pain us. But it ought not to cause us surprise or despair.

Let us thank God if we have received the gift of faith. It is a great thing to believe all that is written in the Bible. We do not sufficiently realise the corruption of human nature, nor the full virulence of the disease by which all Adam's children are infected, nor the small number of those who are saved. Have we faith, however weak and small? Let us praise God for the privilege. Who are we, that God should have made us to differ?

Let us watch against unbelief. Its root often lies within us even after the tree has been cut down. Let us guard our faith with a godly jealousy; it is the shield of the soul, the grace above all others which Satan labours to overthrow. Let us hold it fast. Blessed are those who believe!

We should observe, lastly, in these verses, how our Lord Jesus Christ testifies to the truth of a resurrection, and a life to come. He speaks of the queen of the south, whose name and dwelling-place are alike unknown to us; He says, "she shall rise up in the judgment." He speaks of the men of Nineveh, a people who have long passed away from the face of the earth; He says of them also, "they shall rise up." We recall how they repented at the preaching of Jonah, from the king down to the cattle.

There is something very solemn and instructive in the language our Lord uses here. It reminds us that this world is not everything, and that the life which man lives in the body on this earth is not the only life of which we ought to think. The kings and queens, the presidents and the political leaders of every age are all to live again one day, and to stand before the judgment-seat of God. The vast multitudes who once thronged the palaces of Nineveh are all to come forth from their graves, and to give an account of their works. To our eyes they seem to have passed away for ever; we read with wonder of their empty halls, and speak of them as a people who have completely perished. Their dwelling-places are a desolation, and their very bones are dust. But in the sight of God they all live still. The queen of the south and the men of Nineveh will all rise again. We shall see them face to face.

Let the truth of the resurrection be often before our minds. Let the life to come be frequently before our thoughts. All is not over when the grave receives its tenant, and man goes to his long home. Others may dwell in our houses, and spend our money; our very names may soon be forgotten. But still, all is not over! Yet a little time, and we shall all live again. "The earth shall

cast out the dead” (Isaiah 26:19). Finally, those who live by faith in the Son of God, like Paul, should lift up their heads and rejoice. Let us stop wasting our time looking for signs; the signs are all there before us. We need only learn to discern them. Amen.