

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Sign Seeking

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Mark 8:1-21

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

About two years ago the *Daily Telegraph* ran the headline, "World Cup final, Paul the Psychic Octopus predicts Spain will beat Holland." It wasn't the only paper to run with this story, which, if you remember had been building in the weeks of the tournament. Paul was an octopus in a German zoo who was offered mussels in jars bearing the flags of the various teams playing in the World Cup. Each time he was offered two jars, two mussels, and, so they say, each time he "predicted" the correct result. Certainly he was right about the final. This year for Euro 2012 there was a so-called psychic elephant in Krakow zoo who was being asked to make predictions, and a sea lion in a zoo in Bangkok, a dragon fish in Singapore, and both a ferret and a pig in the Ukraine. It's all a bit silly but harmless, isn't it? I certainly hope that no one was counting too much on these animals being right.

But there are other kinds of sign-seeking in our society. What about the daily or weekly horoscopes which appear in so many newspapers and magazines? People read them for a laugh, but then they begin to think, well, yes, such and such could be what that was talking about, and so they begin to look in their lives for things which could be made to fit the astrologer's predictions, and there you are, seeking signs.

Or what of the fortune tellers who go around fairgrounds in their caravans? They make a living at it, you may be sure, or they wouldn't do it. What of pubs and clubs which host "Psychic evenings"? We live in a culture of sign-seeking. Seeking for signs can be done in fun, but too often it is an indication of desperation, and, like all superstition, a mark of dead religion. People seek for signs, signs sent from they know not where, or even signs sent from God, instead of seeking for God himself.

"Jews demand signs," said St. Paul, "And Greeks desire wisdom." His society, as he moved in and out of the Greek and Jewish worlds, held both these competing ideas of what was most important. Many of us would see the same division between signs and wisdom as these two ancient cultures. I am sure that the Greeks who desired wisdom would look down on Jews who sought signs, things natural or unnatural which would point to times being right for this and that. I expect too that the Jews who sought signs would look down on Greeks who were too earth-bound, thought too highly of their own abilities, the power of their own minds to work out truth.

When the Pharisees came to Jesus seeking a sign, we are not told, it seems they did not say, a sign of what. They simply asked for a sign from heaven, and Mark tells us it was to test him. What they wanted was for Jesus to provide a proof that he was himself from heaven, from God. And Jesus simply refused. He had come to proclaim the kingdom of God, not to prove things about himself. Living in the world and the times and the culture that he did, he would know that the trouble with signs is that what is definitive for one person is questionable for another, and that you can make almost anything out to be a sign or not a sign of something if that is what you want to do. That is why there were so many different groups and factions in the Jewish nation at the time: they

saw God's hand at work in different ways; they interpreted Scripture in diverse manners. When Jesus did give a sign, when, for example, he entered Jerusalem sitting on a donkey, it was open to all sorts of different interpretation, so that people could think it was a call to arms against the Romans, or that it was a challenge to the religious establishment.

The Jews sought signs. They were people desperate to see God redeem them from their current situation and they looked for signs in the heavens, or in the scriptures, or in the events of their world to tell them that God had not forgotten them. So they came to Jesus and asked him for a sign: was he part of God's working for his people or not? And Jesus refused to give a sign on demand.

I wonder how often you have wished that God would make himself more obvious, would show people in less ambiguous ways that he is who he is, so that people will find it easier to make an appropriate response, so that people will have no sensible choice but to make the response of worship? If you have never thought that, you may well be in a minority. Maybe people have said it to you, have asked if there is a God, why does he not show it by doing this or that, stopping war, maybe, or making sure that illness was less unfair. It would make our lives as Christians much easier if everyone could see that what we believe and therefore how we live is obviously right. But that is not how God operates and it is not how faith works.

The Jews demanded signs, and the Greeks desired wisdom. The part of our society which does not seek signs, desires wisdom. We call it being rational, and often it is set against having faith or being religious. In some ways it is easier for us as Christians to relate to the sign-seekers than to those who pride themselves on their wisdom. At least the sign-seekers acknowledge that there is something or someone beyond themselves. Those who demand that we operate only on the level of human wisdom find it very hard to hear us speak about God, even a God of love and compassion, even a God whose presence can help fill the gaps left where human wisdom cannot cope. The wisdom seekers expect a common-sense approach to make sense of the world.

The disciples showed lack of wisdom when they set out in the boat without enough bread for the whole group. You can imagine the party, out on the lake sailing before a gentle breeze and someone says "Isn't it about time for tea? Who's got the bread? Pass it round." and then only one small flat loaf is produced, and there is no more. Faces fall and there is the unspoken question of who is going to get the bread that there is?

And Jesus says "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod." What is he getting at? He is certainly not worried about the bread shortage. As he points out, he had dealt with that before and he can do so again. But maybe that is what the disciples had banked on? There had been seven baskets of leftovers and they hadn't bothered to bring more than one small loaf. Maybe they had grown careless, shown lack of wisdom, because they hoped that Jesus would always get them out of difficulties. They had reason to be sure that he was able to: he had fed two crowds, he had calmed a storm, he had faced down his critics. But he wasn't going to do these things on demand. This was the same man who had faced down the temptation to turn stones into bread when he was famished after fasting. This was the man who had told the tempter that we do not live by bread alone, and that we should not put the Lord our God to the test. What Jesus was saying, to his disciples as much as to the Pharisees, was that he did not do signs on demand; he was not a travelling wonder-worker. He was not a performing predictive octopus.

What Jesus did was to proclaim the coming kingdom of God in word and in deed. So where the people were hungry because they had been listening to him, he fed them. Where the people were sick, in a culture that equated illness with sinfulness, he healed and forgave them. (Sometimes he spoke the words of forgiveness, and other times he let the inference be drawn.) Where the people were lacking in direction, he taught them and guided them. Where the vision was too narrow, he sought to enlarge it. Everything he did was a sign, a sign of God's presence, a sign of what what

was important to him and to his Father: and if people could not see that, then they were looking in the wrong place or in the wrong way or for the wrong thing.

Everything Jesus did was a sign, and the greatest sign of all, as well as the most incredible instance of God's wisdom, was the way in which he died for us. "We proclaim Christ crucified," said St. Paul, "A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor 1:23-24)

When we want a sign, when others come to us, as they did to Jesus, looking for a sign, when people want to know the common sense behind what we believe, we point to the cross. The cross shows God's love for us, so it is a sign, the greatest sign that there could be. As St. Paul put it when writing to the Romans: *God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* (Romans 5:8). There are other signs of God's love at work in the world. Most of us can tell of things in our own lives which have been evidence of God's love for us. We can tell of prayers answered, coincidences which were just too strange, love given us by friends and strangers, all of which talks of God's love. But the ultimate sign is the cross. That is why most Christian churches will have a cross or crucifix on display somewhere, so that the sign of the cross can speak to all who come of God's love.

If people cannot accept the cross as a sign of God's love, God's presence, the values of God's kingdom, then they are unlikely to accept any other sign that might be offered them. And if people are looking to live simply by human wisdom, then the apparent waste and futility of the cross will seem to be the ultimate in folly. But if they can bring themselves to admit the possibility that there might be someone beyond humanity, that there might even be God; and that the crucifixion of his Son says something about him, then possibly, gradually they will begin to see that someone who is beyond us will operate on a level of wisdom that unseats all our careful assumptions, and that the wisdom of generous, sacrificial loving is greater than all the understanding and planning in our human minds.

I wonder who ate the small loaf of bread that the disciples had brought? I wonder what happened to the baskets of leftovers when the four thousand were fed? These are things we don't need to know. I wonder if we are looking at the world in the right way to see God at work in it? I wonder if we have learned to look for God's transforming presence just where life is hardest? And I wonder if we have then learned to live so that others will see the presence of God and feel the influence of his kingdom? May we not be distracted seeking for signs and religious experiences. Let us get on with following Jesus, and all that we need in terms of reassurance and God's presence will be ours every day.

Amen