

SIGNS FOR OUR GENERATION

Matthew 16v1-4

Over recent decades different generations have been given labels which try to summarize their defining features. e.g. values, experiences, attitudes to work, priorities and preferences. They are generalizations but they still capture something of the flavor of the times.

Matures: If you are 65+ then you experienced the trauma of World War and the hardships of the aftermath. Duty, loyalty and respect are characteristics of this generation. In the USA those born between 1925 and 1942 are called 'The Silent Generation' – characterized as conventional and by lack of protest or call for change.

Baby Boomers: I belong to the generation of those born after the Second World War, between 1943 and 1960. My teens were spent watching the first Moon Landing, England winning the world Cup and negotiating the "Swinging Sixties". It was a time of optimism, hard work and experiment - and the generation of "sex, drugs and rock and roll". It was characterized by protest and throwing off conventions. One faith study showed 42% of Baby Boomers to be drop outs from formal religion; those who did turn to faith in Christ tended to be less tied to tradition.

Generation X: This description was used of youth born between 1961-1981. It saw the erosion of marriage, an explosion in pornography and the appearance of AIDS. They are described as a generation who *"sleep together before they get married, don't believe in God, dislike the Queen, and don't respect their parents."* So, independence, challenge, nonconformity – and insisting on having a choice: *"I am in control."*

Generation Y: the Millennial Generation those born between 1982 and 2001. (The "ME" generation") They don't live to work, they work to live. They are not so interested in status and money, because they have other priorities. They want a better work-life balance. They are also technology savvy. In the US 94% own a computer, 94% have a cell phone, 76% use social networking sites and 60% have an iPod (or an equivalent). Until now this is a generation that believed that they could have it all – with no experience of hardship, recession or unemployment. Until now!

Jesus made frequent reference to His own generation, but it was not flattering. In our text He called them **a wicked and adulterous generation**. In Matthew 11v6: *"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market place...."* In Luke 11v29: *"This is a wicked generation."* In Matthew 17v17: *"O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"* Why was Jesus so hard on His generation? Our text helps us understand.

v1: The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him. The Pharisees were the successors to a group who guarded Israel's purity against the tide of Greek culture and customs. They were very zealous, strict and exclusive. The Sadducees were the priestly party, but far from holy. They were worldly-wise compromisers who protected their vested interests. These two groups "tested" Jesus, not for the first time. On the surface they were investigating Jesus' Messianic credentials. But their real agenda was to undermine and trick him

They **tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.** There had been no shortage of miracles in Jesus' ministry. In John 3v2 Nicodemus, a Pharisee, remarked on them and in Matthew 11v2-6 Jesus Himself lists a variety of signs for the imprisoned John the Baptist. Just before this very conversation Jesus had fed four thousand people with a few loaves and fishes. It was one of the most extraordinary miracles anyone could possibly imagine, yet they are still asking for a sign from heaven. Did they want an even greater miracle or something, literally, from the heavens above? Did they want the sun or moon to stand still as at Gibeon in Joshua's day or fire to fall from heaven as it did for Elijah? How would Jesus respond?

v2,3: He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' Jesus refers to a saying we know well. "Red Sky at night, shepherd's delight; red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. You are able to draw a correct conclusion from the sky concerning the weather, but you cannot see the significance of these days.

In just a few words Jesus refers to three different kinds of signs. This is the first of them. Let's see if they have any relevance for us and *our generation*.

1. The signs of the times.

What were these **signs of the times**? Bible scholar William Hendrikson says that the word "*times*" here refers to "*events that usher in epoch-making historical changes*" i.e. events that signal the beginning or end of an era. Jesus is talking about signs in their own time of the coming of the long awaited Messiah.

We have seen some epoch making historical changes in the last sixty years: advances in science and technology, the collapse of communism, an increase of nationalism and racial strife, the rise of militant Islam and the trauma of 9/11 and worldwide terrorism, while there has been a constant focus on the Middle East. And in the background, around the world, there has been unprecedented growth and increased persecution of the church. And now we have the greatest financial crisis for almost a century. What are we to make of all this? According to Jesus such events *do* have meaning. But they need to be interpreted. They need to be decoded. So how do we interpret these signs of the times?

Ask God-questions. What is God's purpose? How does this fit with what God has said in Scripture? The political commentators on Radio 4 will not be asking God-questions, but you and I should. How should I be praying? What is God saying at this time to the church at large? How do these events affect the advance of the gospel? In all this our assumption will be that Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God are the keys to understanding the signs of our times.

See events on a bigger canvas. God is in control of history. The world is not a runaway train, out of control. Events have their place in God's ultimate plan for the nations. Sometimes He is shaking weak foundations, raising up and bringing down proud nations and leaders and ideologies. God often speaks through His prophets about such things. We see this throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. It happens still. One example is David Wilkerson's remarkable prophecy in 1973. (See 'The Vision' 1974 Spire Books)

Respond with action. In 1 Chronicles 12v32 we read of the men of Issachar "*who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.*" i.e. they recognized that David was God's anointed man and intended as Israel's king; and so they threw their lot in with him. Signs are not primarily for the intellect or to satisfy curiosity. So, what adjustments should we be making to our lives? How does this give us opportunities of sharing our faith? How can we express the love and compassion of Christ in new ways at this time? This is the question the churches in Morpeth asked in September after the flood hit the town. Since then they have been in the forefront of the relief operation. e.g. New Life's drop in centre; their IT suite. We will be taking up an offering at our Christmas service for this.

2. Miraculous signs.

v4: A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign but none will be given it" This tells us several things about miracles. First, they are signs. Here Jesus is taking issue with those who approach miracles as proofs. i.e. "*Do this and we will believe you!*" That's what Herod Antipas was looking for during Jesus' trial. Jesus didn't respond to this approach. But when God does work in might supernatural ways they are "signs" which point beyond themselves to Jesus.

Second, faith is not automatic even after signs - as the Pharisees and Sadducees demonstrate. We may think, if only so-and-so were to be miraculously healed they would turn to Christ. This can and does happen, but not always. Ten lepers were healed but only one of them turned to Jesus. His generation saw many miracles but still shouted "crucify him!"

Third, when miracles are absent that is a sign too. A lack of miracles may be a sign of God's judgment. In his own hometown, Nazareth, Jesus "*did not do many miracles because of their unbelief*". **A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign but none will be given it**" I understand this to be a particular word of judgment for *that* generation because of their unbelief. Maybe this is why we see relatively few in the UK.

But this should not make us sit back with a sigh. We are called to be different. A people of faith!

But then Jesus mentions one more type of sign: **none (i.e. no sign) will be given it except the sign of Jonah.**" Jesus would give them one fresh sign. But what was this?

3. The sign of Jonah

Jonah had been commissioned by God to go to Nineveh and preach but he sailed off in the opposite direction! So God sent a storm and the frightened sailors throw him overboard. He was swallowed by a huge fish and remained there for three days calling out to God in his distress. Then the fish vomited him out and God gave him a second chance. Jonah then travelled to Nineveh where his message was heard and believed; the people of the city repented and God spared them. So then, what was **the sign of Jonah**?

Jonah *himself* was the sign. Assyrian culture and religion was fascinated by the sea. In their language - "Nina" the name of the goddess Ishtar was written with a sign depicting a fish inside a womb. Some authorities suggest that Ninevites believed that one day a messenger from "the great god" would come to them from the sea. And then Jonah arrived. He would have shouted his story everywhere and his appearance would have matched his tale. Soon everyone would have heard of this man who had come out of the sea, back from the dead. Jonah became a walking, talking, living sign pointing to the truth of the message he had for them. As a consequence the people repented and turned to God for mercy.

So, Jesus says the one sign left for His generation is **the sign of Jonah**. Jesus wouldn't be swallowed by a great fish but he would be swallowed up by death on a cross. He would be put in a dark tomb and lie there until the third day when He would rise from the dead. This is the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12vv38-41) and it is at the heart of the gospel message.

The Pharisees and Sadducees had started by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus was, Himself, the mightiest sign from heaven. Just as the people of Nineveh repented when they saw Jonah and heard his message, so today, when men and women understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, and turn from their sins and put their faith in Christ, they receive the mercy of God.

One last thing: you too are a sign for your generation. The change brought about in you by Jesus' death and resurrection is a sign to those around you – especially your peers. A change takes place in your lifestyle, your thinking, and your priorities – like a death and resurrection. Your life becomes a sign that Jesus and the gospel message is the truth. Is your life a sign pointing to the difference Jesus has made? Are others in your family, at school, college, or in the workplace trying to work you out – interpreting the sign?

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Discussion Questions

1. What experiences have affected and shaped the attitudes of your generation? How do you think this has affected your peers' attitude to God and the Gospel?
2. What were some of the characteristic features of Jesus' own generation? (See Matthew 11v6; Luke 11v29; Matthew 17v17 – and our text Matthew 16v11-4) How did these characteristics affect their response to Jesus?
3. What did Jesus mean by “**the signs of the times**”, at that time - and what might they be today? How might we go about “interpreting” the signs of the times?
4. Why did Jesus react negatively to the request for a “**miraculous sign**”? What might make Jesus react positively? (*Go round the group and talk about the different kind of miracles we might ask Him for today. This might be a time to pray together for these things.*)
5. What did Jesus mean by “**the sign of Jonah**”?
6. How can we be a sign for our generation – as individuals, families, and as a church?