



Matthew 16:1–4

16 The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. 2 He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ 3 and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. 4 A

wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” Jesus then left them and went away.

Reflection

If you enjoyed Matthew chapter 15 then you're going to love Matthew 16. it's a pivotal chapter in the whole gospel and it starts with a bang. Jesus has just returned from Gentile lands where his gospel has been so positively received. In contrast, Israel's religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who would never step foot in Gentile territory, have been waiting for Jesus' return in order to confront him. And something important is up because our passage begins with both the Pharisees and Sadducees coming together to

confront Jesus. When enemies join forces it's a sign that trouble is brewing and that is exactly what is happening here.

The Pharisees and Sadducees represented two opposing sects of Judaism. They were rivals, a bit like political parties, who struggled against each other on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, each vying for outright religious leadership of Israel. The Pharisees, whose very name means 'separated', had 'separated' themselves by strict observance to the law and traditions of Israel. They were the most spiritual people of their time with Jesus finding, in some of them, much to be commended. However most of them as we've seen, despite their zeal, had become sadly pre-occupied with the minutia, at the expense of the fundamentals of the faith.

Nevertheless, the Pharisees did believe in the Old Testament prophecies, miracles, the coming of the Messiah, resurrection and a final judgement at the end of time. The Sadducees however were modernists and political expedients. They didn't believe in miracles, or the resurrection, and while they were looking for a Messiah, all they were looking for in him was an effective political leader. In the meantime, they were only too happy to cosy up to the Romans, seeking political advantage. And so as you can imagine, there was no love lost between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

But in a sign of the trouble that Jesus was in, these two bitter enemies combine forces, probably as an official delegation sent by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling coun-

cil. They've been sent to try and discredit Jesus at best, or more likely to bait him into a trap of some kind. And so in verse 16 of our passage they test him by asking for a sign.

Now it takes a special kind of unbelief to make this request of Jesus. Just think about it for a moment. The whole country is afire with news of Jesus' miracles, even Herod himself has heard of them. Tens of thousands of people have witnessed them, Jesus has healed countless sick, cast out demons left-right-and -centre, the blind now see, the deaf now hear, the mute can't stop praising God with their new-found voices. Jesus has calmed storms, walked on water, he's raised the dead, and just fed upwards of 20,000 people by the simple breaking of a few loaves of bread,

twice in fact. And here they are asking him for a sign! If they haven't believed after all that, then how could they possibly ever believe? No, something else is up here and Jesus is having no part of it.

Jesus' response to them is as ominous as a thundercloud. He replies,

2 ... “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ 3 and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. 4 A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.”

‘Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.’ Like so many of Jesus’ words these have become an idiom in the English language. Or as we say in Australia, ‘red sky at night, shepherd’s delight, red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning.’ Either way, Jesus’ reply is as clear as day, and as ominous as a coming storm.

‘You’re asking me for a sign after all of the signs I’ve given you in two years of public ministry? How is it that you can interpret the signs of nature well enough, you can predict the weather, but you who would call yourselves experts in God’s word, and leaders of God’s people, how is it that you can’t interpret the signs that I’ve given you time and time again that the kingdom

of God is here. You can read the signs of nature, and yet I've turned nature on its head for you, performed miracle after miracle that prove that I'm the Messiah, in fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures you profess to hold so dearly. Even the Gentiles are worshipping the God of Israel because of me, yet you blind guides, you refuse to see. Wicked and adulterous generation that you are I have but one sign left for you, the sign of Jonah, after which you will stand eternally condemned.

As we saw in Matthew chapter 12, in speaking of the sign of Jonah Jesus is talking about his death and resurrection. His last and greatest sign. Jonah was as good as dead in the belly of a whale for three days and three nights only to be brought back to life by God to preach to the Ninevites.

Jesus' death and resurrection not only proves that he has ultimate power over death but also provides the only way for humankind to enter into eternal life. Yet for the Sadducees who don't even believe in resurrection, and the Pharisees who have Jesus killed for breaking with their traditions, the prospect of Jesus' final miracle having any effect on them at all seems dim. Almost to punctuate this prospect, our passage ends with these foreboding words:

Jesus then left them and went away.

Think

How about you? Jesus could well level similar charges towards our own generation as he did towards the generation so

influenced by the Pharisees and Sadducees. What is he saying to us if not the same thing? ‘You know how to forecast the weather, there’s apps for that and news reports that you check every day – but you can’t interpret the very times in which you live. In those same news reports the whole world that surrounds you is wracked by sin. Terrorist attacks, environmental disasters, racism, domestic violence and the sexual abuse of children. Isn’t it obvious that something is very, very wrong? Even within your own conscience, if you’re honest with yourself, some days, if not often, you’re more part of the problem than part of the solution, or at the very least you’re content to sit on the sidelines and simply look after number one. I came, I died for sin, I have been raised from the dead, and all that means nothing to most of you. You

worry about whether it is going to rain tomorrow, but you don't give a single serious thought as to where you will spend eternity. What will it take to get through to such a wicked and adulterous generation as your own? If you don't believe after witnessing the greatest of all signs, my death and resurrection, then what is left?'

Pray

If you are a Christian, the bleakness of today's passage should strike you with double force. But there is also great hope. Nothing is impossible with God. And the foolishness of the gospel that we proclaim has seen billions of people bend their knees in worship of Christ. Countless times every single day right across our globe Jesus still performs miracles in

the hardest of hearts, bringing unbelievers from death to life through faith in his name. Please pray for the spread of the gospel this morning. Pray urgently and desperately and with great persistence for your friends, family, neighbours work colleagues and anyone that Jesus puts in your path. Pray that by the power of his Holy Spirit they might miraculously enter the kingdom of God, against all the odds and in direct response to your prayer offered up for them this morning in faith.