

Luke 11:14-32 – The Sign of Jonah

Luke 11:14-32 (English Standard Version)

Jesus and Beelzebul

¹⁴Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marvelled. ¹⁵But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons," ¹⁶while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. ¹⁷But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. ¹⁸And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. ¹⁹And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁰But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²¹When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; ²²but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his spoil. ²³Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Return of an Unclean Spirit

²⁴ "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. ²⁶Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first."

True Blessedness

²⁷As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" ²⁸But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

The Sign of Jonah

²⁹When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. ³¹The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. ³²The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Jesus heals a man who is without speech

Jesus had healed a man who was possessed by a demon that made him unable to speak. Jesus cast out the demon and the man could speak – perhaps enabling him to speak again, or perhaps enabling him to speak for the very first time.

Imagine the change in this man. Imagine the change that others witnessed as one who had been silent or at best had made incomprehensible sounds was now able to speak clearly – perhaps able to answer their questions but most likely busy in using his new-found voice in praise of God.

Imagine the change for the man himself, so long unable to communicate – his thoughts imprisoned within him by the demon that possessed him. Imagine the frustration that must have fermented inside him.

We have a six-month-old granddaughter, Emi. We were entrusted with her care this weekend as her parents went off to a wedding in Surrey. Emi can get quite frustrated at times, maybe over something as simple as the loss of her dummy. She cannot communicate what she wants in words; her frustration just boils over in yelling and flailing about. This grown man must have experienced the same kind of frustration.

But now he is freed. He is able to make himself understood. Able to express his thoughts and feelings – of thankfulness, appreciation, love and friendship... He is able to communicate. He is able to cultivate real relationships with others rather than being locked away in a world of his own. What a transformation! What an extraordinary blessing.

But there were some in the crowd who said that Jesus was casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of the demons. Jesus could do this because he had superior demonic power – the demons recognised the voice of their boss.

Who were those who said such a thing?

Matthew tells us that it was the Pharisees. They responded to the wonder of the crowd by saying the "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" (Matthew 12:24). This was the tactic by which they sought to undermine Jesus' influence over the people.

Jesus knew what they were saying. He pointed to the ridiculous nature of their accusation, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?" (Luke 11:17-18). They are right in suggesting that he has superior power to the demons, but his power is not demonic, it is from God. Jesus acts with power not to cripple or to imprison but to bless and to set the captives free.

The Request for a sign

But it is not this conversation I want to focus on but the extraordinary conversation that follows.

Again, let me bring in Matthew to fill out the story at this point. We are told in Matthew 12:38 that, "some of the scribes and Pharisees responded to Jesus, saying, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you'."

These were the very people who had seen him cast out the demon from the man without a voice, freeing him to communicate and relate to others. They had seen what Jesus had done and had accused him of making use of demonic powers; now they wanted another sign from him! Were they seriously suggesting that another sign might help them to change their minds? Or did they simply want more reasons to accuse Jesus?

Jesus can see right into their hearts and motives, and as the crowds surge around eager to see how he will respond he says, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation

and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Luke 11:29b-32).

Jonah a sign to the Ninevites

Now I want to ask, in what way was Jonah a sign to the Ninevites?

Jonah had been a rebel against God. God had told Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). And what had Jonah done? He had arisen all right; he had got up and fled in the opposite direction (for though we do not know where Tarshish was, it clearly involved going off to sea rather than travelling inland).

Jonah had rebelled against God at he had suffered the consequences of his rebellion. He had run away to sea, but he could not outrun the hand of God. God had pursued him in judgment and sent a great storm upon the sea that threatened the life of all of those in the boat. The sailors had cast lots to find out the cause of this extraordinary storm, and the lot had fallen on Jonah. Jonah confessed that he was a servant of the living God, the one who had made the heavens and the earth – and the sea – but that he was fleeing from God's command. Reluctantly, and at Jonah's insistence, they had thrown him overboard so that he might be delivered into the wrath of God and they would be saved.

Jonah sank down into the sea. Could anyone be more aware of the consequences of rebellion against God than Jonah was at this moment? He knew through bitter experience that you cannot escape the hand of God – you cannot run away and hide from him. Rebellion brings certain judgment.

But God had prepared a great fish that swallowed up Jonah. The Hebrew here in the book of Jonah is wonderful. Before Jonah is swallowed by the great fish it is masculine (a *dagh gathol* – a great fish), after it has swallowed him it is feminine (a *daghah gatholah*). The fish is pregnant with Jonah!

From inside the great fish, Jonah cried out to God;

I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me. (Jonah 2:2-3)

What a place for prayer! I'm not sure what the fish made of this prayer, but we do know that it reached the ear and heart of God. On the third day, God caused the great fish to spew Jonah out safe and sound on the seashore.

And then the command of the Lord came again to Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you" (Jonah 3:2). The same command, but now a very different response. Jonah obeyed. He walked the 500 miles to the city of Nineveh and for three days he preached in the city, calling out "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4).

Now Jesus says that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites. In what way was Jonah a sign to them?

Some have suggested that Jonah may have been bleached and disfigured by his stay in the stomach of the great fish; I don't know about that. Maybe he smelt awful; again I just don't know.

But however he looked and smelled, the Ninevites must surely have asked him what he was doing in their city. Here he was, a foreigner, walking around their city telling them that they were doomed. Surely, since they did not lynch him, they must have asked what on earth possessed him to come with to them with such a message.

And Jonah would have told them his story: the story of what happens to rebels against God; but the story also of the goodness of God – the God who answers those who cry out to him. As Jonah had prayed in the stomach of the great fish:

Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love. (Jonah 2:8)

To trust in the living God is to experience his loving and saving mercy.

This testimony, surely, rather than the rather stark message, "You're doomed" was what persuaded the Ninevites to repent and turn to God. Listen to response of the king of Nineveh and note its echo of Jonah's prayer:

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." (Jonah 3:6-9)

Jonah was a *sign* to the Ninevites. He was a sign of the reality and certainty of God's judgment – you cannot escape the reach of the living God, whoever you may be – whether one of his prophets or even the King of Nineveh. Jonah was a sign of the grace and saving power of God – there is life for all who will call out to him.

There is great power in personal testimony – let's not forget that.

The sign of Jonah

But again, its not Jonah I want to focus on this evening, but rather, I want to focus on the *use* Jesus makes of the sign of Jonah. And just in case we may have missed his meaning in Luke's Gospel, let me again bring in Matthew as joint witness to Jesus' words.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:38-40)

Jesus tells the crowd that *he* is *the* sign that should bring this generation to repentance; *he* is 'The sign of Jonah'. In particular, his death and resurrection is the supreme sign which God has given to draw this generation – our present world – back to him.

For here, in the death of the Lord Jesus we see the reality of God's judgment upon rebels. Not that Jesus was a rebel against God; he was always obedient to the Father's will. But he identified himself with rebels. He came and took *our* place; he took *our* sin and rebellion upon himself:

But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)

If God did not spare his own Son when our sin was laid on him, do we think we shall be spared if we refuse to have him as our Saviour?

Here is evidence of God's judgment – the sign by which we can know beyond all doubt that God does not overlook sin. God is a God of judgment, a God of wrath, just as much as he is a God of love.

Listen to the words that Jesus spoke just before he was crucified. Many women, looking at the pitiful sight of him carrying his cross out of the city to the place of execution wept at the sight. But Jesus responded:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry? (Luke 23:28-31)

If this is the fate that befell the holy and righteous one, what will happen to sinners? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

But Jesus' death is not the end of the story. On the third day he rose again from the dead, and his resurrection from the dead is equally part of the sign of Jonah of which Jesus is speaking. God heard the cry of his own Son. God raised him from the dead. And here is the sign that God gives life to *all* who call upon him; for Jesus was raised from the dead that he might give life to all who come to God through him. He is the resurrection and the life; he gives eternal life, resurrection life, to all who call upon him.

Next week it will be Easter. There is, of course, nothing special about that day. But its annual celebration helps us to remember in a particular way those things which should be at the forefront of our minds whenever we meet on the first day of the week:

Christ has died;
Christ is risen.

And this is the supreme sign which God has given us – which Jesus himself has given. This sign is the foundation of the good news – the gospel – and is at the same time its most powerful visual aid. Judgment is not some tale made up to frighten children into obedience – behave or the bogey man will get you. Judgment is an awful reality the proof of which is to be seen in the cross of Jesus.

Nor is the grace of God some vague wish or maybe; it is grounded in and guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He lives to save all who come to God through him. He is the author of resurrection life, life that shall last.

Jesus is the sign of Jonah: the supreme and only sign that God has given for this generation.

Following the sign

Never tire of telling this old, old story. The message of the cross, the message of the judgment of God, is also the message the message of the resurrection, the message concerning the salvation of our God. This is the message that can bring a rebellious people back to the living God.

And what of you? How do you respond to this sign? The Ninevites, much to Jonah's dismay, understood the sign sent to them and turned to God in repentance. Reading the sign they escaped the judgment that was their due and found life. Many today remain unmoved by the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Some, like Richard Dawkins, even turn the message of God's judgment into the cause of mockery and derision. Others turn hastily away with the suggestion that perhaps they will consider these things on another occasion.

Come to the cross in faith.

Come to the risen Christ and have life.

Do not ignore the sign of Jonah.

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