

Signs of the times

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[0 : 00] This evening I'd like to think with you for a short time about some words that we read in Matthew chapter 16 verse 3, where we read the words of Jesus, You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Especially that last expression, the signs of the times. At New Year we're perhaps more acutely aware of the passing of time than at other times, except perhaps for birthdays. And the older you get, the faster time seems to fly. But as we reflect on the passing of time, many thoughts crowd into our minds, from the year that has gone, the years that have gone, the events of family and of work and of society at large.

The joys, the successes, the encouragements, but also the hurts, the shames, the griefs. They say that time is a great healer, but it isn't so.

The pain can come back just as sharp as it was fifty years ago, unless some new force or influence in your life has brought healing.

[1 : 22] But here Jesus isn't speaking of the mere passing of time, of chronology, of history. There are two words for time in Greek.

Kronos, which refers to the continuity of time. We get our word chronic from it. And kairos, the opportune time or the crisis time.

And it is this latter word that Jesus uses here. They were living in critical times, Jesus says. They were faced with opportunities that demanded decision.

Frodo's conversation with Gandalf in the Fellowship of the Ring reminds us of something important in this. Gandalf has just told Frodo about the growth of an evil power in the world.

I wish it need not have happened in my time, said Frodo. So do I, said Gandalf. And so do all who live to see such times.

[2 : 25] But that is not for them to decide. All we have to do is to decide what to do with the time that is given to us.

Jesus is encouraging us here to decide what we are going to do with the time given to us at this particular juncture of history.

But he also says that there were clear signs to observe. Signs of the times that should be known or understood or interpreted aright.

This leads us to the first main point in this short passage. And that is the importance of interpreting the evidence. Give us some proof.

This seemed to be the constant cry of Jesus' opponents. They ask for a sign, like here, a sign from heaven. Perhaps like Moses or Elijah performed.

[3 : 27] It is interesting that it is the Pharisees and Sadducees who combined to ask for a sign. They disagreed about so much. The Sadducees were the liberals of the day.

The Pharisees were the legalists. But they were united in their opposition to Jesus. They were trying to test him maliciously to see if he had put a foot wrong or to see him fail.

Prove to our satisfaction that you are the Christ. And it is still the cry of many today, of course. Prove to us that the Bible is true.

That God exists. That there is only one way to God. And so on. Prove to us that the Bible is true.

Now, sometimes these questions are perfectly genuine and perfectly acceptable.

Jesus, after all, said, seek and you will find. But these questions or statements can also be hostile and more an accusation than a real question.

[4 : 25] This raises the interesting question as to what proof you will accept. What evidence you will acknowledge. There is a line in a Leonard Cohen song.

Ah, they will never ever reach the moon. At least not the one that we are after. In other words, the goal posts keep on changing.

The horizon keeps on receding. And also there is the question of what kind of method you use to gain proof from the evidence. Jesus here speaks of two types of evidence and two kinds of method. What we may call scientific and historical. Although there are certain similarities between them. First, scientific evidence. Interpreting the appearance of the sky.

The evidence is the way things look or appear. And the method is observation. Jesus gives an example. Interpreting the appearance of the sky.

[5 : 25] To predict the weather. Now this is a general observation that has been made in many areas of the world. Particularly where the prevailing winds come from the west.

Red sky at night, shepherds delight. Red sky in the morning, shepherds warning. It is actually based on good science. The movement of clouds and wind and so on.

Jesus does not criticize them for this method or for this observation. God has created a universe that has a face or appearance that can be interpreted by us.

He has created us in his own image. So that we have minds to interpret or to judge. And he has made a correspondence between the two. Between the universe and ourselves.

The reasoning of our minds. Including mathematics. Corresponding to the nature of the universe. It has been said, of course, that God is the greatest mathematician.

[6 : 26] And of course, he is also the greatest scientist and the greatest designer. It is no wonder that committed Christians were at the forefront of the development of modern science. Isaac Newton, way back in the 17th and 18th centuries.

And James Clerk Maxwell, perhaps someone not so well known. But a Scottish scientist who laid the basis of modern physics. He prayed.

Almighty God, who has created man in thine own image. And made him a living soul that he might seek after thee. And have dominion over thy creatures. Teach us to study the work of thy hands.

That we may subdue the earth to our use. And strengthen the reason for thy service. So, to receive thy blessed word. That we may believe on him whom thou hast sent.

To give us the knowledge of salvation and the remission of our sins. All of which we ask in the name of the same Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[7 : 29] He was recognizing there that scientific observation is important. But it's not enough. We also need what I have called historical evidence.

And that for two reasons. First, scientific proof is relative. Relative to our knowledge. For instance, the weather.

We can't predict very far ahead. Even with all the modern technology we have. An interesting example of that is in something called chaos theory.

Where it was proposed that the fluttering of a butterfly's wings in South America. Might lead to a hurricane in North America. But also, secondly, there is a revelation of God in the creation.

His existence, his wisdom and his power. But it is limited. God has revealed himself more fully in history. And so I want to look secondly at historical evidence.

[8 : 35] Jesus said to them, you cannot interpret the signs of the times. They didn't properly understand history and what God was doing in it. Jesus is saying that just as the face of the sky is not meaningless, neither is history.

History is not a jumble of unconnected and meaningless events. But in particular, there are times. That kairos word again. Opportun times.

God is at work in history. Particularly in the events recorded in the Bible. Especially in the life of Jesus. There was something very special going on at that time.

And there are signs that indicate significance. The meaning of those events. There is evidence to be adduced. Conclusions to be drawn. And interpretations to be made.

What were the signs of the times that Jesus was referring to? Well, I suppose there are various things that spring to mind. As prophesied in Genesis chapter 49, the scepter had departed from Judah.

[9 : 47] In other words, there was no longer a king descended from David, descended from the tribe of Judah, ruling over the Jewish people. There was a foreign king, Herod.

And that was something that was prophesied concerning the coming of the Messiah. And then there was the birth of the Messiah himself.

When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law. And all the events relating to that, the fulfillment of prophecy.

And then there was Jesus' miracles. In chapter 15, verse 30, we read about his healing of the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute. And later in this passage, we read the feeding of the four thousand miraculously.

But supremely, there was his resurrection, which of course, he was referring on to here, still to come.

[10:48] But mentioned as the sign of Jonah in this passage. Elsewhere, he says that just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so he would be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth.

This remains the greatest piece of evidence to this day. The fact of the empty tomb and the growth of the early church. And the failure of all other explanations to do justice to that evidence as to why the tomb was empty.

Why the church grew and developed so phenomenally. It can't be explained other than that Jesus rose from the dead.

But although we are so good at interpreting nature, we are so poor at interpreting history.

Particularly the history in which God has revealed himself.

The Pharisees and others, they saw the evidence of Jesus' miracles with their own eyes. But they tried to explain it away. In chapter 12, earlier in this gospel, they said that it was by the power of Beelzebub that Jesus was performing these miracles.

[12:01] Beelzebub literally means the Lord of the flies. The title that William Golding took for his book about the presence of evil in the world.

But Jesus demolishes their theory. Because how can a kingdom divided against itself stand? If those demons come from Satan himself, why is Satan casting out those demons?

And then there was their response to the resurrection itself. In Matthew chapter 28 from verse 11, the chief priests devised a plan to explain the empty tomb.

That the disciples had come and stolen the body. But of course that in itself didn't make sense. It didn't explain why these men who obviously in that case would have performed something that they couldn't really believe was resurrection, went on to proclaim the resurrection and were prepared to die for the truth that they were proclaiming.

So, these were the signs of the times that Jesus was referring to then. But what are the signs of the times today?

[13:15] In one sense, they are the same as they were then. The life, miracles, death and rising again of Jesus. And the impact that he made on people's lives.

And that's because we are still living in what the New Testament calls the last times or the last days from Pentecost on. But in another sense, the particular times we are living in are different from the times in which Jesus and the apostles lived.

As Dylan famously sang, the times, they are a-changing. And that's the problem with times. They keep on changing. So what are the signs of the times today?

And how do we relate to the signs? And how do we relate the signs of Jesus, life, death and rising again to our times? Well, one of the characteristics of our age is the growth of atheism and secularism.

The whole idea that religion is based on faith, but secularism is based on evidence. They think that faith is belief without evidence.

[14:27] And secularism is firmly based on what can be scientifically proven. Now, there are huge problems with that view. One of the principles of those who think that way is we should not believe something unless we can prove it empirically.

That is, by observation and scientific method. Well, one of the very first problems with that is that that statement fails its own test. You cannot prove that statement by observation and scientific method.

But also, we can, of course, prove physical or chemical reactions in that way, but we cannot prove beliefs about justice, human rights or equality in that way.

Reason depends on faith that our senses are not tricking us, or that the world is not an illusion, as in the film The Matrix.

And as philosopher Stephen Evans says, science by its very nature is not fit to investigate whether there is more to reality than the natural world, because science investigates the natural world.

[15 : 39] Therefore, we must refuse to be taken in by this religion equals blind faith, and secularism is evidence-based.

One of the other characteristics of our age, one of the signs of our times, is what has been called cultural Marxism. Some books are helpful here. A book written not that long ago, *That Hideous Strength, How the West Was Lost* by Melvin Tinker, is helpful. And of course, the original from which he steals that title, *That Hideous Strength* by C.S. Lewis.

And also Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*. What's called cultural Marxism blended the thinking of Marx, Darwin and Freud, might be called the three wise men of the modern world.

Now you won't hear the expression cultural Marxism or neo-Marxism in any popular media. That's because any mention of Marxism conjures up pictures of the communist regimes and despotism of Stalin or Mao Zedong or Pol Pot.

Nonetheless, the influence of such thinkers as Herbert Marcuse and Antonio Gramsci continues to be huge. Their emphasis is that the necessary revolution to overthrow capitalism and bourgeois values is not primarily an economic one, but a cultural one.

[17 : 11] Therefore, this involves the destruction of all social institutions that are perceived to uphold the status quo. For instance, the family, the church and any other social institutions which are deemed to be counter-revolutionary or fascist.

A key element here is sexual liberation. As far back as the 1930s, Eric Fromm was arguing that sexual orientation is merely a social construct.

Sexuality and gender are socially determined. Now these ideas, promulgated so long ago, are reaching a harvest today. Another element is the destabilization of language.

Words are mere tools to be used to mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean. That, of course, is reminiscent of the warnings of George Orwell's 1984.

Particularly of interest is their view of tolerance. Marcuse said, Certain things cannot be said. Certain ideas cannot be expressed.

[18 : 21] Certain policies cannot be promoted. Certain behavior cannot be permitted. We see again the harvest of that working out today in our universities, where certain things are not allowed to be said or even debated.

We must see this as just as much a revolution as a violent one and point out its destructiveness of meaning, value and reality.

As Christians, we must also see ourselves as revolutionaries, the true revolutionaries, rebels against this monolithic influence that's eating up the brains and imaginations of rising generations. While at the same time, we as Christians must not identify with bourgeois values and all that may go along with it. We have a basis for our values in the love and law of the Lord Jesus Christ. The third and final area that illustrates the signs of the times in our present age is that of identity, personal identity.

[19 : 34] And here I'm indebted to Tim Keller in his book, *Making Sense of God*, in what I'm going to say. Our identity, of course, is composed of a sense of self and a sense of worth.

In the pre-modern world, the idea was that our identity derived from our community. I am what my community makes me.

A warrior in the 10th century Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Battle of Malden*, shows that he knows that they have lost the battle with the Danes.

But instead of saving his own skin, he believes that the glory of his people would be better served by taking a last stand. Here lies our Lord, all hewn down, good man on the ground.

From here I will not turn, but by my Lord's side, by the man I loved, I intend to lie. Now there's a great nobility in that.

[20 : 39] And one of its strengths in that kind of way of thinking is in community and family ties. The weakness of it, of course, is that it could become a rigid hierarchical system where everyone had to know their place.

The modern view is very different, perhaps illustrated quite well by something that Shirley MacLaine said, *I am what I am*. Taking the words of Scripture, which apply only to the Lord God, and applying it to the individual self.

The Disney movie Frozen, in it Elsa sings, It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through.

No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free. Timothy Keller says, this view is expressed in this way, I find myself not by self-giving to something outside, but through self-expression of something inside.

One of the strengths of this, of course, is freeing people from oppressive systems. Such thinking did play a part in the civil rights movement in the USA, although the main part there was played by the African American church using biblical teaching.

[22 : 06] But the weaknesses of this view are many. One problem is that when we look inside, inside ourselves, for meaning and purpose, we find many conflicting thoughts and ideas.

For instance, the classic conflict between the desire to leave wife and family for someone else, and the desire to remain a good father or a good mother.

Another problem is that it just can't be done. People who reject the perceived restraints of one group of people, family, church or so on, then embrace the values of another group perceived to be more progressive.

They get their sense of self and self-worth from belonging to this new group. It can also be crushing. For example, if we seek our identity and self-worth in love and romance, we are doomed to failure.

We're elevating the love partner to the position of God to give us meaning and self-worth. We will crush both them and ourselves. It destroys community also.

[23 : 16] And we see that in our modern world, the breakup of marriage, of families, also society itself becoming more fractured. No idea of the common good.

So what is the Christian attitude to identity? Perhaps best illustrated by something the Apostle Paul said, By the grace of God, I am what I am.

First Corinthians 15 verse 10. By the grace of God, I am what I am. He doesn't say what Shirley MacLaine tried to claim for herself, I am what I am.

Because it is only by the grace of God that we are what we are. In the Christian view, we know that we are made in the image of God, with worth and abilities because of that likeness.

Our self-worth derives from that. But also we know that we are sinners, but sinners saved by grace.

[24 : 17] John Newton, the author of the hymn Amazing Grace, said on his deathbed, I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.

This describes the identity of the Christian. We are made in the image of God, but fallen from that, we are redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

This deals with the problems of both the traditional and modern views of identity. I am part of a community of persons made in God's image.

Part of that image is community, because God himself is a community of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I am part of a community of persons, but I derive my ultimate meaning and worth not from others, but from God in Christ.

I may have gifts and abilities and ideas and dreams, but I don't derive my identity from them, because I know they are all tainted by sin, and they all need to be transformed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

[25 : 24] People are crazy and times are strange. I am locked in tight, I am out of range. I used to care, but things have changed.

Our Bishop Desmond Tutu said, A time of crisis is not just a time of anxiety and worry. A time of crisis is not just a time of anxiety and worry.

It gives a chance, an opportunity to choose well or to choose badly. At this opportune time, at this time of crisis, are we able to read the signs of the times aright and to choose well.

The Scottish-born singer and author Sheila Walsh, who has struggled with deep depression, says, In these uncertain times, I know a hundred percent that I can stake my life on the unshakable, unchanging promises of God.

Let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we pray that you would enable us to read aright the signs of the times, that we may understand the times in which we live, because we understand the wisdom of your Word.

[26 : 44] And we know the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and who is the wisdom of God. Lord, our gracious God, enable us to live for Him, to speak for Him, and to

think for Him in all that we do.
We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.