



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 8th January 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

Matthew chapter 16:1-12

What to look out for

For the next few weeks we are looking at three chapters from the middle of Matthew's account of the life of Christ (Matthew 16-18)—a few brief scenes from the most wonderful life ever lived. I have to say my heart lifted on Monday when I started work on these passages, and realised this is what I am going to be studying until late February.

It is a wonderful story: The God, Who made the universe, walked on the surface of this planet. But He was not what men expected. In fact, they struggled to recognise Him. Imagine you are about to have the most important meeting of your life (perhaps it is with the person you hope to marry), but there is a very real danger that you might not recognise them...that you might just walk past each other and never meet! Imagine the poignancy of that!

In that great film of Dr Zhivago, there is a closing scene where Zhivago (Omar Sharif) having been swept apart by the events of the Russian Revolution for decades, from the love of his life, Lara (played by Julie Christie), as an elderly man, catches a glimpse of her again in a Moscow square. He tries to run to catch her, but a heart attack strikes him down before he can reach her. Do you remember it? The camera looks down on the square from high above and it seems that every one in the square has noticed Dr Zhivago collapse and are converging on his prostrate body...except for one figure on the periphery of the crowd, who has not noticed, and continues to walk away. And so they never meet. What a poignant moment with which that film ends!

Well, there is the same poignancy about these passages from Matthew: God was walking on earth, and men and women were in real danger of not identifying Him. Think about it! What poignancy for you or me, if we walked away from God never recognising Him!

1) Recognising God

Our passage tells us of two different groups who struggled to identify Jesus

(a) The illogical failure to acknowledge Jesus

(vv 1-4)

The Pharisees and Sadducees in verse 1: *The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.*

The fact that these two parties in 1st century Judaism were acting together to test Jesus would have surprised Matthew's contemporaries. Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed about almost everything, and were normally bitterly opposed to one another. But they were united in their uncertainty about Jesus' credentials. *The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven* (v 1).

Now, for the context, we need to glance back to 15:30-31: *Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind*

seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. And that was immediately followed by Jesus feeding 4,000 men *besides women and children* (v 38) from 7 loaves and a few small fish. Then these religious leaders come and ask for a *sign from heaven!* Their perverse, illogical blindness is obvious.

It was not the first time that they'd asked for a sign. It had happened before, back in chapter 12, where Jesus had given exactly the same sort of answer as He does here. Even earlier than that, John the Baptist had sent to ask, "*Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*" Jesus replied, "*Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me*" (11:3-6).

There was no shortage of signs—nor even of explanation for the signs: "*if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God,*" Jesus had said, "*then the kingdom of God has come upon you*" (12:28). Everywhere Jesus went and whatever He did, there was evidence that He was Who He said He was: supernatural evidence, such as there has never been at any other moment in world history, of His divine nature and His true identity.

So note His reply: *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.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times"* (vv 2-3). Actually, here in the UK the weather is notoriously hard to predict: which of us, who are old enough to remember it, have forgotten Michael Fish's south west wind back in October 1987, which proved to be a hurricane that turned 5 million trees upside down overnight across the South of England?

But the point of that bit of doggerel,

'Red sky at night, Shepherd's delight;
Red sky in the morning, Shepherd's warning.'

is not so much that the sky can be an accurate meteorological prophecy about what is going to happen, as that it serves as a simple indicator of what is already happening. The weather system is already in place. And interestingly, the Greek of the original text does not have the "*It will be*" that our English translators have added: *He replied, "When evening comes, you say, '...fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today...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"* (vv 2-3). Jesus is saying, "You can look up into the sky, and tell what the weather is like. Why can't you see what is happening all around you?" It was not a prediction about the future. It was an indication of the present. And their search for a sign was an evasion: "*A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.*" *Jesus then left them and went away* (v 4).

An encounter with God is always in the present.

He meets us now; and we must respond now. "*Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your heart*". The Pharisees and Sadducees would not look Jesus in the face, as it were, and make their minds up about what was happening right in front of their eyes at that moment. They had enough evidence, but they would not accept where it pointed: "*A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah*" (v 4a,b).

Jesus had explained that *sign of Jonah* on the previous occasion (12:38-42). Jonah was a prophet who preached repentance to Nineveh, after being raised up from a watery grave inside a huge fish. And the full impact of the preaching about Jesus would only come after He similarly had died on the cross and been raised again from death on the 3rd day. His suffering, death and resurrection would achieve more than all His healings, miracles and preaching achieved. But it was going to take the cross and the empty tomb.

But the Pharisees and the Sadducees were in grave danger (forgive the pun), because they were ignoring what was before their eyes, for the sake of making Jesus jump through a hoop of their own devising. We'll return to that idea in a moment. First, we must consider His intriguing conversation with His disciples as they crossed the lake.

(b)The faithless failure to understand Jesus

(vv 5-12)

When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. “Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (vv 5-6). Jesus was still preoccupied with the exchange He had just had with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and their determination not to accept the evidence about Him. The disciples were preoccupied with food: *They discussed this among themselves and said, “It is because we didn’t bring any bread”* (v 7). It was an almost comic misunderstanding, a bit like that joke about the British Ambassador and the crystallised fruit for Christmas. But Jesus saw more in it than a merely funny incident.

Notice the unnerving way Jesus knew what people were thinking or saying: *Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread?”* (v 8). He had known exactly what lay behind the Pharisees and Sadducees’ request, and now He knew exactly what was preoccupying His disciples. It is never worth having a ‘pretend’ conversation with God. He knows exactly what is going on inside us, and He speaks to our hearts. He addresses our real self.

As some of you know, on the Monday before Christmas I heard that my mum had died, and so I got into the car and drove straight down that night to say my last farewell to her body. As I sped round the M25 and down the M3, I thought it would be appropriate to pray. So I switched off the CD player in the car, and I tried to pray. But I had no sense of real communication with God at all,...until I heeded a little voice inside me, which was saying, “If you want to talk to God, you better drive within the speed limit.” There was quite a tussle, actually. But only when I cut my speed back to 70mph, did I manage to hold a real conversation with God. You can’t have a pretend conversation with God. He knows every detail of our hearts and lives. He knows the speed we’re driving at. He knows our secret desires and longings.

There can be no hypocrisy, no pretence, no deceit, if we want to talk with God. Is that why for some of us prayer is such a struggle? We fill it with pretence. We won’t be honest. Is that your problem? Too much of our prayer is pretence. We need to get real with God. There is no other way to talk to Him.

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread?” (v 8). *“You of little faith”*—notice that the way their lack of faith expressed itself was in worry, worry over material things. For the believer, the enemy of faith is not so much doubt, as worry: Worries about the material world: am I doing all right? Have I got the right thing to wear? Do I look right? Will I be able to make ends meet? Have I got enough money? Have we got something to eat? Will I be able to afford a holiday?

I have got to that stage in life where you start worrying, not so much about yourself, but about your children: Have they got enough money? Will they be able to afford somewhere to live? And I need to remind myself what is worth worrying about, and what is not worth worrying about: *“You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?”* (vv 8b-10). God knows: more money may do my children damage. He knows what we need—and He knows what we really need, as opposed to what we want.

“How is it you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vv 11-12). You see there are spiritual issues that are worth worrying about (and that are even worth worrying for my children about), and that is what faith is—to be concerned about those issues. But the disciples’ materialistic mindset brought them close to the same attitude as that of the Pharisees and Sadducees—the failure to recognise (or at a least understand) Jesus because of a preoccupation with the human world where we can be in control.

2) Teaching to guard against

(16:6, 11b-12)

“Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”...“But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they

understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vv 6,11b-12).

Now that is a bit of a puzzle because the Pharisees and the Sadducees did not teach the same things. They taught some contradictory things. And in His teaching, Jesus actually sometimes agreed with the Pharisees and sometimes with the Sadducees.

To generalise, the Pharisees tended to add to the word of God, with all sorts of human traditions rather like the High Church tend to do today (like observing Lent). They went beyond the Bible. You might call it ‘the addition of tradition’. The Sadducees tended to remove the supernatural and the miraculous from their religion, rather as the liberals do today. They wanted to remove bits from God’s Word (like the miracles). You might call it the ‘subtraction of the supernatural’. Both of those tendencies will eventually put me back in control: either because I can justify myself by my own rule-keeping and by observing man-made rituals and traditions, like the High Church Pharisees; or because I decide for myself what I will believe and what I will reject from God’s revelation, like the liberal Sadducees.

So, Jesus warned His disciples (and He warns us) against that tendency to create a religious system centred on ourselves, that actually rejects Him, because we retain control; just as those Pharisees and Sadducees demanded a sign from Him to convince them: They wanted Jesus to jump through their hoop—and, if He did, they might choose to believe in Him; refusing to acknowledge the fact that, if He was God, then it was they who must jump through His hoops; and any other way of trying to relate to Him must be false. The only way I can have a true relationship with Jesus is to give Him control of my life. Do we realise that? If I come to Jesus, I lose control. He must rule. I must submit. Beware of any other teaching.

Years ago a fellow clergyman here in Cambridge invited me to accompany him to London to attend a ‘signs and wonders’ meeting at a big London church. I asked him why I should go. And he replied that it would be a blessing to me, and so I refused. I had already resolved that, if he had said to me, “Because it will humble you, Mark”, I would have gone. If it was going to teach me to move out of the centre of my life a little more, and to put Jesus in the centre, then I needed it. But if it was just about making my spiritual life nicer for me, then I did not need it. The Bible tells us, *“Blessed are those who seek after righteousness”*, not ‘Righteous are those who seek after blessings.’

I do not know what 2006 may hold for us as a fellowship, nor for myself as an individual. But I do know that the true Jesus wants to be more at the centre of my life, and more at the centre of our life in 2006. And I need to ask myself, “Am I up for that? To go His way this year?”

Because, if not, then I too may fail to recognise Him. I may walk on by, missing the greatest person on earth, or in heaven.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)