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Discerning Signs – Matthew 16.1-4

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‘Dear God, I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what you want me to do. Should I apply for this job? Should I end this relationship? Should we give our money to this cause, or entrust this person with leadership, or disappoint these expectations? Please show us the way. Please give me a sign’.

When we are discerning the big questions of our lives, we long for reassurance that we are doing the ‘right’ thing, or at least that we are not in the process of getting spiritually lost. We long to know where God is in it all, and it would be so helpful sometimes if God would only give us a *sign*, something nice and unambiguous, something that points clearly to the direction we must take. Something, maybe, like the dove that descended upon Jesus at his baptism, or the overwhelming light that blinded Saul and made him fall off his horse. That would do the trick.

Yet things are usually not that straightforward. Not only is there often no clear sign forthcoming; the scriptures themselves seem to be ambivalent about their value. ‘An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah’, says Jesus. Except even that teaching seems ambiguous since, as well as the aforementioned dove and blinding light, the New Testament is full of signs of God’s presence in the form of healings and feedings and visions sending people about God’s work. So what are we to make of all this? What is the relationship between signs and God’s presence and our discernment?

Let's start with our gospel reading. The Pharisees and Sadducees are trying to discern Jesus, to 'test him', to know whether he is truly from God – and what they are looking for is a 'sign from heaven'. It seems they have a picture of what God's presence in the world will look like (connected perhaps with heavenly portents – lightning and thunder and earthquakes), and they are looking for proof – do this, look like this, and you will conform to *our* expectations of Messianic appearance. Jesus's response is to call them 'evil and adulterous' – that is impure and faithless. The question they ask is not given to them from God, but arises out of their own religious imaginations, their smug assurance that they know already and in advance what a sign from God would look like (and they're pretty sure it doesn't look like Jesus). And to this assurance of theirs, Jesus says – the only sign will be the sign of Jonah, that is a sign of death and failure, of new life being given hiddenly and as gift to someone trapped in the tomb, the belly of the whale – that is how God is showing up in the world, and it will not be recognisable to a generation looking for God in lightning bolts or a darkening sky.

So, here is one lesson about signs. When you are asking for one, do you think you know in advance what a sign from God would look like? Are you requiring that God conform to some predetermined vision of how God's presence should manifest itself? Because if you are, then maybe you are going to attribute to God something that has nothing to do with God, and you are going to miss seeing where God really is altogether. If we are asking God for a sign, the first thing we need to do is to give up our expectations and attachments about what that sign must look like. Another way of expressing all that is to say that if we are truly seeking to discern where God is, if we are seeking to 'read the signs of the times' or the signs of our lives, then the place to start is in poverty of spirit and unknowing.

Yet despite all this, it seems to me, we cannot help but ask for particular signs in times of struggle and doubt and questioning. Indeed, this prayer arises directly out of

our poverty of spirit. We know we do not see the whole of reality, we know we do not see as God sees. We may be acutely aware of the dangers of self-deception in particular cases, so we fear to trust wholly to our sense of things. *And* we want to make space for God – for God’s will to be made known to us, so that we may pray as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, ‘not what I want but what you want’, not my will but yours. In my own life, I remember being deeply fearful that my sense of being called to ordained ministry was simply something I was making up – maybe it flattered my religious ego, maybe it was a desire for security (little did I know!!). So although I had a strong inner sense of its rightness, I also looked for outside confirmation – and received it (at least, as I interpreted it) in the striking form of several conversations and invitations from unexpected quarters.

How will we recognise a sign, as a sign? This is a question about both form and interpretation: let’s take the question of ‘form’ first. What form might be taken by the signs we are seeking? That’s up to God. Sometimes they do take the form of visions or dreams or words from Scripture leaping off the page. More often, perhaps, they take the form of the still, small voice – a growing and deep inner conviction that my life is being called into a new form, a new direction, or at least that an old form of life is asking to be let go. And sometimes God’s signs take shape in the world around us – the Quakers speak of attending to whether ‘way’ is opening or closing, opportunities arising or doors shutting behind us, meetings or conversations in which new possibilities spring into life.

But now for the question of interpretation. How do I know any of these things really are signs given by God, and (most especially) that they mean what I think they mean? Am I still just reading into them my own agenda, and missing what God is up to? Any sign is given meaning by its context. That is why a road sign planted on the beach is a kind of joke – there it can signify nothing. In the same way, the passage of Scripture

that today leaps off the page might be one I have heard hundreds of times before, but now, because of the question I am asking, the prayer I am praying, it occurs as a living Word, God speaking to my situation. But still, how do I know I am not just reading my own agenda into it? I don't. Discernment never comes with absolute certainty. But I am less likely to be deceived and self-deceived, if my whole work of discernment is held inside its true and life-giving context. And that context is the one Jesus has told us is given under the sign of Jonah.

For what does that sign tell us but that God's true desire for us is to transform our lives, to bring us into union with God and with our own deepest selves, so that we in turn may contribute life to others? What does it tell us but that our way to this transformation is through conformity to the pattern of Jonah and Jesus, dying to death-dealing ways of being and being brought into new life? Any sign that God gives us will be in service of our making this journey of death and resurrection, of being drawn more fully and whole-heartedly into God's work in the world. So our being on this journey, entrusting ourselves to this movement of God in and through us, is the absolutely necessary context for our recognising and truthfully discerning God's meaning in the signs we are given. And it is being on this journey that also allows us to keep faith with ourselves and with God even in the times of no sign, even when our prayers for guidance and sure direction by means of dramatic confirmation seem met with silence. Growing in discernment means becoming more and more attuned to this underlying pattern of God's life and work in the world which is given to us daily in the pattern of our prayer, in Scripture and under the sign of bread and wine, and in the long run this may mean sitting more and more lightly to the desire for particular signs. Luke's gospel puts it this way: 'Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you, the kingdom of God is within you.'" (Luke 17.20-21).