

## Reminiscere 12 March 2017 St Peters Pretoria Matthew 12

38 Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”

39 He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

41 The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

42 The Queen of the South (Sheba) will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

Do you really mean it?

Dear sisters and brothers, and especially, dear parents of toddlers and teenagers!

Psychologists say that it is important to do what you say, to follow up on your promise that you make to your children - be it good or bad. If you say: I will play with you this evening, don’t say it to keep them off your back, but only say it if you really intend doing it. And if you say: If you don’t finish your homework you don’t get ice cream tonight, then don’t break that promise. No homework, no ice cream.

It is these little things that teach our children about integrity, about the value of promises, the reliability of parents and of fellow human beings.

If your word is your promise, your children will never ask you: “Do you really mean it” - because they know you do. If, however, you make empty promises, then they will ask you quite often: Do you really mean it? Really, really? Promise to God?

But even if you are a parent of your word, if your children know that you keep what you promise, they will sometimes ask “Do you really mean it?”. When you tell the teenagers: If all of you pass your exams with distinction,

we will take you on a trip to Disneyland! They will most surely ask: Do you really mean it? For the promise seems to be way beyond the usual (unless you regularly take such trips- which I believe most of us don’t!)

When you threaten them: “If any one fails your exam, I will not pay for a repeat - you will have to pay school fees, rent, wash your own clothes and work for your food!”

Your children might not ask you “Do you really mean it”, but surely they will debate amongst each other whether Dad or Mom is really going to follow through on this threat.

Some child will say: Why bother - just work hard, and you will never have to find out! Another will say: I’ll play it safe, and make sure that I don’t fail. Then there might be that child who says: It’s an empty threat. They won’t do it anyway!

In Chapters 11 and 12 of Matthew there is a mixture of promises and threats that Jesus utters. There are wonderful invites: Come to me, all who are burdened and heavy laden, I will give you rest, I will strengthen you! (11,28) He heals sick, drives out demons, sets people free.

On the other hand there are also quite a few threats. He scolds some Galilean towns that had rejected him, saying that Sodom and Gomorrah are better off than they (11,20ff) He scolds the people for not listening, neither to John the Baptist, nor to him. He threatens eternal damnation for those who push away the Son of Man. (12, 31ff)

One can only imagine the discussions that took place amongst the Scribes and Pharisees. Who is this man? Does he really mean it? Who gives him the authority to speak like that, to make promises of salvation and threats of hell? Some say: Ignore him - he is a false prophet! Others say: What he says is true. Let us listen to him.

Finally, a group of them decide to go to Jesus himself, to ask him “Do you really mean it?” Actually, they do not put it into these words, but rather come with a request: Give us a sign! A sign that indeed you have the authority to say, promise and threaten as you do, a sign from heaven that shows that we should listen to you.

At face value it sounds reasonable. Jesus was not the only preacher walking about, claiming to be sent by God. Why should he be believed rather than the others? A sign from heaven would confirm his credentials.

The response from Jesus is surprising. “Wicked and adulterous people

request a sign” he says. And then he refers to Jonah, Nineveh and the queen of Sheba.

The sign of Jonah - in the fish for three days, and then spat out again. So the Son of Man will be dead for three days and then live again.

Yet Jesus does not say: This is your sign. Rather he says: Despite this, you will not listen!

You do not need a sign to be convinced of the truth of what I am saying. You know that it is true - the scriptures confirm it, the prophets said so - but you refuse to believe! The people of Nineveh repented when they heard Jonah, the Queen of Sheba took a long journey to meet Salomon after hearing of his wisdom.

You have seen what I do, you have heard me preaching - and still you resist, because you are evil! You do not want to listen! Deep down you know it is true - but you don't want to hear it!

It reminds me of some of the current cases that feature in our news. When the public protector showed wrongdoings concerning the house of the president, or matters at SABC, or other institution, time and again the reaction was: Does she have the right, the authority, to speak like this? Yes, she meant it - but do we have to listen?

If I don't like what she says, the question no longer is: Is she correct in her findings, but: Does she have the authority to come to such findings?

Do you see how the really important question is side stepped? “Am I wrong?” is replaced with “who gives you the right to criticise me?”

This is precisely what the Pharisees and Scribes in our story did. That, says Jesus, is the sign of a wicked and adulterous nation. They do not want to hear the truth, but rather want to discuss and discredit the bearer of the truth.

The time of lent is a time of introspection and repentance. It is not a time to ask: Who has the right to criticise me? but to ask: How does God view me? Where have I gone wrong? Where should I, like the people of Nineveh, repent and turn around? Where should I, like the queen of Sheba, seek wisdom and answers from God, rather than to rely on my own wisdom, wealth and life skills?

Our country is in rough times. Daily people are killed, through malicious

planning, recklessness or carelessness. We have grown used to it.

On a much less serious note, traffic rules and regulations are ignored, even by the traffic police. Why should we bother? No-one does!

Our nation is slipping into a state of disrespect, non-accountability, dis-integrity. Who can stop this? What can stop this?

Would a sign from heaven not do the trick? Imagine if, today after Church, there is huge thunder and lightning, and a mighty voice roaring from heaven, saying: “Repent, stop your wrongdoings, become honest citizens!” - would that not help? Would that not stop the rot?

Jesus is clear on this: No, it would not. Wicked and adulterous people ask for a sign and then find an explanation, argue it away, just to carry on with their wickedness. On the other hand, people like those of Nineveh or the queen of Sheba do not need a thundering voice from heaven. They are open to be shown their wrongs.

The parable that we heard as gospel reading (Mark 12,1-12) drives this to the extreme: Jesus speaks about the wicket tenants who slide from one evil deed to the next, each time trying to cover up their previous evil with greater evil. In the end they will not succeed!

The epistle reading (Rom 5, 1-11) on the other hand then speaks about what happens when we hear the Word and are set free by Christ. This is no sign from heaven, but an invitation, a promise: Christ died for us while we were sinners, evil, adulterous. Through him we have peace with God!

“Do you really mean it?” we can ask Jesus when he speaks about condemnation and salvation.

Of course we can ignore him and carry on as is. Or we can listen to him, repent, receive his forgiveness and live a life to his glory. Do we need a sign from heaven? No. We need to hear the truth - hard and uncompromising, showing us our wrongs. And we need to hear the promise: Turn around, repent and live with Christ. We don't need a sign, because we know: This indeed is the way to go!

Amen

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