

# Signs that point to truths about Jesus, God and ourselves

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Pentecost + 9b – 2 Sam 11 1-15, Ps 145 10-18, Eph 3 14-21, Jn 6 1-21

**Kids** – Do you remember the story of David and Goliath? David was a little kid when King Saul and his army faced a giant problem; a giant soldier called Goliath. David offered to face Goliath with only a few stones and a leather slingshot. He was brave because he believed God would help him. And he was right. God gave him what he needed to beat that giant. I wonder if there are giant problems you kids will have to beat.

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Today we hear a sad part of David's story; it's when David had grown up. Now *he's* the king. Being king sometimes made David forget about God and think '*I'm king, so I can do anything I like.*' Today we hear that he did three horrible things. He didn't go out to battle with his army like he should've. Instead, he let them go out and fight while he stayed safe at home. And then, while he was lazing about, he saw a soldier's wife that he liked, and he took her for himself. Then worst of all, instead of being sorry for what he'd done, he arranged for that loyal soldier to get killed in the war, just so he wouldn't look bad stealing his wife.

Terrible things! Do you wonder what God will do with him?

Later on in the story, God *will* deal with David and David will realize how bad he's been. Then David's really sorry, and God helps him change, so he manages to become a good king again and act the way he should.

We all do bad things sometimes. But that doesn't have to make us bad forever. If we listen to God and stop doing bad things, God will help us change back to being good and brave and trusting, like that little kid David was.

Speaking of little kids, in the Gospel today, we'll meet another kid who also helps adults with another giant problem. So let's listen to the readings and see what happens.

**Adults** – We just heard about a little boy whose lunch went out to feed a vast crowd, and he saw it make all the difference in the world. I don't know whether he started off by thinking, *My lunch will be enough for everyone*, or, *Well, there goes my lunch*, but after what he saw happen with it, I'm pretty sure he'd have kept on being a generous person from then on. Jesus helped him learn that whatever he could offer was enough because he had Jesus with him.

Would he have grown up into a very different person just because of what happened that day? Maybe; maybe not. Maybe, over the years, he'd believe the people who would tell him he'd only imagined it; after all, he was only a kid at the time. I think it's possible that he'd forget the miracle. But he'd never forget Jesus, and he'd never stop thinking, *Who is that Jesus?*

John's gospel doesn't use the word *miracle*. None of the Gospels does. John calls it a sign. This sign points to who Jesus is, just as the next sign does; Jesus walking on water. If you see a sign and think it's *just a miraculous act*, your vision is limited. But see it as a sign, and you ask what it points to. Then you're liable to grow.

If we simply respect Jesus as a miracle worker, then all we'd say about him from that perspective is, *Look what he can do*. But see his action as a sign, not just a miracle, and what we say about Jesus is, *Look at who who is*. He's the giver of abundant gifts <sup>(Jn 2:1-11)</sup>; the giver of life <sup>(Jn 4:46-54)</sup>, the giver of

abundant life <sup>( 10:10)</sup> .

Then it dawns on us that Jesus points to who God is, and what God is like. This is trustworthy ground for faith. We might have the gift of faith, but it'll only grow in the deep soil of a relationship with a God we can know. There's no future for a deep, life-long faith in the propagator-tray of a few miracles. We need a sign. We need to know where to look to know God.

John's Gospel points to Jesus as *the way to God*. <sup>(14:6)</sup> But there isn't just one approach to Jesus. We can meet him as the Holy One of God <sup>(6:69)</sup> and as the bread of life <sup>(6:35)</sup>; as the presence of God who walks upon the water <sup>(6:20)</sup> and as the only one who's ever seen God <sup>(6:46)</sup>; all sorts of signs point to who Jesus is: they point to him as *the way to God*. And that happens in all cultures, and wonderfully, it's done so among people who've never even encountered the written Gospels.

All these signs of Jesus' power show what *God's* power is about. God's power is about grace and loving-kindness; the very opposite of the corrupted, cruel, coercive, selfish power we met in the story of David today. Feeding the 5,000; walking on water – these are signs which reveal God's grace and glory in Jesus. And astonishing as they are, do you notice that they are offered to meet basic human needs – the need for food, the need for safety, for rescue from danger? They are signs of God's love and care for us. That is deep soil for lifelong faith.

John reminds us that the God who Jesus points to has always been a protector and provider. He puts a special signpost early in today's reading. Before he tells the two sign-stories – the feeding of the 5,000 and the walking on water – there's a big signpost in verse four that we might easily overlook. <sup>4</sup> *Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.*

For those with ears to hear, John wants this to make them think of hungry people in the wilderness, of manna from heaven, of crossing dangerous water safely on foot and of a prophet like Moses to lead them. <sup>(Dt 18.15)</sup>

John tells us that the people Jesus fed made this connection as well as others from the Hebrew Scriptures <sup>(eg, 2 Kgs 4:42-44)</sup>: <sup>14</sup> *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'* Jesus could hear them thinking, God got Moses to set us free from Pharaoh; let's get Jesus to free us from Rome.

But that would have been a mistake. <sup>15</sup> *When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

Jesus came to connect the whole world with the freedom of entrusting ourselves to God; the whole world, not just his own Jewish people. John warns us again not to see a sign that points to God's glory, and then try to confine that glory to the service of our own interests: that is a mistake. There is no growth in that sort of vision.

For the next four weeks, we'll keep reading this chapter in John's gospel. The theme of this whole chapter is *Jesus, the bread from heaven – the bread of life*. We are not to see the sign of the feeding of the 5,000 and decide for ourselves what it might mean. If that's where we stop, we won't move; we won't be changed; we won't grow – there'll be no journey.

It's central to John's Gospel that a sign by itself is not enough to sustain faith; the sign points to truths about Jesus – truths about God – and truths about ourselves – truths that we need to open ourselves up to. As we read the rest of this chapter over the coming weeks, John will challenge us to open ourselves to two questions about Jesus, and three truths about you and me.

The questions about Jesus are: *Who is Jesus?* and *What does he ask of us?*

The truths about us are:

1 *He loves us, body and soul;*

2 *He calls us to follow him;*

3 *When we turn and follow him, we'll grow into abundant life.*

Today's signs call us as a church and as a nation to be generous; to take risks with what we have so that people living with hunger or fear might be set free from their suffering. The signs we have seen today point us in this direction. Do we want to believe that is our direction; will we accept the gift of *this* faith? If so, our work continues from right now. Amen