

Signs of Glory

Studies in John's Gospel

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Study 9

The Eighth Sign (John 21:1-25)

Fish, Forgiveness and the Future

Introduction

The first sign Jesus did at the wedding in Cana showed the glory of the Father's provision in the person of His Son the Messiah. In the place of corrupted religion the new wine of God's Kingdom would be freely and prodigiously given. The powerful love and joy of the Kingdom would replace what had become heartless duty and form. This love produced joy was and is at the basis of what truly glorifies God. The final sign in John showed the glory of Christ's ongoing provision, apart from which His disciples would toil in vain. So these two signs form book-ends of God's glory, His provision of joy and sustenance that would glorify Him forever.

From Cana forward Israel on the whole hardened itself in the presence of these signs of glory. So with each sign done there was a mounting judgement upon the nation and its leaders. Not to receive the signs, that is read, understand and be transformed by them was to stay within the dead things of a failed Judaism. Worse than that it meant to be cut off from the only source of life and resurrection to life that God had always planned for His ancient people in Messiah. To reject the divine 'must' "*You must be born again*" (3:7) was to reject the only way back from being dead in sin to the glorious life of God. But the imperative 'must' was not followed by throwing Israel back on themselves with another approach to law keeping. The 'must' was only possible by the sovereign grace of the gift of regeneration present through Christ (3:14, 15).

After the raising of Lazarus the Leaders directly plotted to kill Jesus. The events of His entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, His consequent betrayal, arrest, trial crucifixion, and resurrection had been an incredible roller coaster experience for the Disciples. Added to this Peter's betrayal and their own offence and flight from the crucifixion scene, they were all in need of pastoral 'repair'. The significance of the Lord's resurrection still hadn't dawned upon them in all its glory. They had been filled with joy at having the Lord back with them but the universal ramifications of that joy going to the nations in the gospel under His Lordship, was still absent from their thinking.

Let's Go Fishing!

"I am going fishing" (Vs. 3) Whether this cry of Peters (endorsed by the others), represents the disciples reverting back to their old ways or something far less dramatic has been much debated. The miracle that followed does expose an aimless fruitlessness amongst the inner group of disciples. Jesus had indicated before His death that the disciples would be scattered and return to their own homes (16:32). That prophecy, along with the re-establishment of Peter as preacher, teacher and pastor rather than Peter the fisherman after this miracle suggests that going fishing was an alternative to the work of Christ's Kingdom. We may all return quickly to familiar ground when confronted by things that deeply shake our world. It is possible

to hide from our calling amongst the things we feel comfortable doing or in which we feel some illusion of control.

Christ Comes Fishing for Men

They caught nothing (Vs 3). These poignant words of John lead us to the action of the Lord's provision. We don't know whether they experienced *déjà vu* (Luke 5:1-11)? However, in the mercy of God they were fishless after toiling all night with their nets. This seemed both a judgement and a mercy. Were the strivings of our flesh able to produce Kingdom love, life and joy then we would never submit to grace. As incorrigible 'fishermen' we would move from one achievement to the next with the pride of religious satisfaction growing at a pace. The failure of the disciples at the thing they felt most confident doing went to highlight the utter dependence of humanity upon the miracle to follow.

So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No."(Vs.5). The Lord addressed the disciples in familiar terms, 'lads'. His words were not cynical, rubbing their noses in their failure, but direct so that their fruitless night could be clearly confessed (acknowledged). As yet the disciples did not recognize that it was Jesus speaking to them (Vs.4). Despite not knowing who was telling them to put the net in on the right side of the boat, the disciples obeyed and the miracle was immediate; one hundred and fifty three big fish.

Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. (Vs.7). John recognised immediately that the one who had commanded them was the Lord. In usual form Peter was the one who exuberantly threw himself into the water and went to Jesus. There was a beautiful and Godly passion in Peter to always be drawn to the Lord, the centre of His need. Like many great saints to follow, Peter's flaws in no way impeded the expression of the Lord's love for Him and through him. Augustine said, "Who is not aghast at the sudden crevasses that might open in the life of a dedicated man". It has become common to elevate the faith and goodness of God's saints into hero status. This takes them beyond us and subtly seems to provide us an excuse never to be like them. We revert to being impressed and interpret that as motivational whilst missing entirely that their lives were for the glorification of God's grace not to impress another sinner. It is possible to smirk at Peter's impulsiveness in a kind of relieved way that somehow sees him as like us, whilst missing the testimony of God through him.

So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught" (Vs. 9). Several things stand out here. The miracle of the great catch seems to join seamlessly into the whole scene (a pattern in most of the signs). Jesus made no further mention of it, presumably because it spoke for itself and achieved His desired response in the disciples. They must trust that the risen Lord was indeed Lord and was with them for their sustaining and their joy. The scene they met on the beach was a simple but loving service. Here was the Lord ministering to their needs with premeditated grace and purpose. He had said that He was amongst them as one who served (13:1-17, see too Luke 22:27). The resurrection had not changed that. Humanity was to have a Lord whose heart was to serve them. Here was the unknown glory of how the Father had always been, shining through clearly. The relationship between the disciples and the risen Lord was familial and fitted without grating into the simplicity of table fellowship. No reprimand or criticism was meted out. He knew that as the Spirit flooded them at Pentecost the enormity of the love and mercy of His

cross, resurrection and ascension would constrain their hearts to love for eternity. This was a grace meal, in which those who had been so confused and weak were greeted as true brothers and served as if they had been perfectly true to Him through the crisis. However, there seemed to be a strange reserve as they came ashore. ***Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise*** (Vs.12, 13). Here were men quietly in awe coming to grips with what the resurrection meant. No longer could they simply know Jesus according to the flesh. He was still flesh and blood but things were different. Here was One who was like no other yet was with them in more than a token way. "In awestruck silence they eat. They dare not ask, "Who are you?" for the answer could only be "I AM" So they eat what the Lord gives them and the sharing of the meal is the unveiling of His presence" (L Newbigen). ***This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead*** (Vs. 14). The word manifest has the sense of not simply appearing but self disclosure.

His presence was honouring and inclusive. He invited them to bring some of the fish they had caught. This cannot be construed as Jesus saying that by their labour they had brought 'their part' into the equation of Kingdom ministry because all the fish caught were provided by Him. But He did include them and their labour in His action, a principle they acknowledged after Pentecost. ***"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."*** ***And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness*** (Acts 4:29-31).

At the last great catch of fish Jesus prophesied that Peter would become a fisher of men. Peter's reinstatement and commissioning as Pastor caught up that promise. It was likely that the miraculous catch of fish would be a reminder to Peter during his ministry that men could and would only ever be correctly 'caught' by the Lord. They may be snared and controlled by any number of mechanisms known to man, but only Christ could change their hearts to love the Father.

Conclusion: Signs are For Seeing

Our Study title, Signs of Glory could be falsely seen to imply that the presence of Jesus left mysterious clues as to His true nature and purpose: Clues only accessible by clever spiritualists with cryptic skills. But each sign had a prodigality about it that simple hearts open to faith found irresistible. To relegate these signs to history and examine them as curios is to misread them all. The lust to do this may well come from the desire to try to control the revelation of God's glory; thus keeping the lid on God in a domestic kind of way. To demand that the Lord repeat these signs as a proof of His Lordship today would also indicate a failure to read the signs John recorded for us. The passage from Acts 4 (above) seems to reveal the heart we should have. The Church trusted that the risen Lord still extended His hand in signs and wonders as they proclaimed His Word in confidence. As in the days of John the signs Jesus does will never guarantee automatic faith. They may be rejected. Then the judgement of not seeing the fullness of all that the Father has given us in Him will be upon our every thought.

Sufficient to say, after our brief studies, the Father and His Lord revealed in the signs of glory transports dead hearts into a Kingdom of breathtaking beauty and life.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom (Luke 13:22).