

New Year's Day - Matthew 16:1-4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2019

Preacher: Alex MacDonald

[0 : 00] Could you turn with me now to some words that we'll find in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 16 and verse 3. Matthew 16, verse 3. To get the sense, we'll read from verse 2.

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.

And especially those last words. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. At New Year, we're perhaps more acutely aware of the passing of time than other times, except perhaps our own birthdays when we remember that we've got a year older.

And the older you get, the faster that time seems to fly past. But as we reflect on the passing of time, many thoughts crowd into our minds. From the year that has gone, and maybe the years that have gone.

The events of family, and of work, and of society at large. The joys, successes, the encouragements, but also the hurts, the shames, and the griefs.

[1 : 21] They say that time is a great healer. But that's not so. The pain can come back just as sharp as it was 50 years or more ago.

Unless some new force or influence has brought healing in your life. But here, Jesus isn't speaking about the mere passing of time, of chronology, of history.

Because there are two words in Greek for time. One is *chronos*, from which we get chronology. Or *chronic*, when we think about a disease or illness that is going on and on.

It's about the continuity of time, that word *chronos*. *Chronos*. But there's another word called *kairos*. Which means an opportune time, or a crisis time.

When decisions have to be made. And it's the latter that Jesus uses here. We're living in critical times, Jesus says. He says that the people living at that time, particularly, were faced with opportunities that demanded decision.

[2 : 32] I'm reminded of Frodo's conversation with Gandalf in the Fellowship of the Ring. Gandalf has just told Frodo about the growth of a great evil power in the world.

I wish it need not have happened in my time, said Frodo. So do I, said Gandalf. And so do all who live to see such times.

But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us. Jesus here is encouraging us to decide what we're going to do with the time given to us.

At this particular juncture of history. But he also says that there were clear signs to observe. Signs of the times.

That should be known or understood or interpreted aright. And this leads us to the main point in this, or sorry, the first main point in this short passage.

[3 : 34] And that is interpreting the evidence. Give us some proof. That seemed to be the constant cry of Jesus' opponents.

They asked for a sign. This isn't the only time that they asked for it. Here they're asking for a sign from heaven. Maybe the idea was that he should do something like Moses or Elijah.

You know, like Moses who brought down manna from heaven. Or Elijah who called down fire from heaven. Something dramatic like that.

It's interesting, isn't it, that it's the Pharisees and Sadducees who here combine for a sign. Because they disagreed about so much.

The Sadducees were what we might call the liberals of the day. And the Pharisees were the legalists of the day. But here they were united in their opposition to Jesus.

[4 : 31] They were trying to test him maliciously. To see if he'd put a foot wrong. That's the kind of idea of the language here. To see him fail. Prove to our satisfaction that you are the Christ.

And of course it's still the cry of many today. Prove to us that the Bible is true. That God exists. That there's only one way to God. And so on. And sometimes, of course, that can be a perfectly genuine and acceptable kind of question or challenge.

Because Jesus says, seek and you will find. And if those kind of questions are being raised in the sense of seeking an answer, that's well and good. But so often it can be in a hostile way.

And more an accusation than a real question. Because the idea is, well, you can't prove any of this. Just as they were saying here to Jesus, you can't give a sign from heaven.

And this raises the interesting question as to what proof you will accept. What evidence will you acknowledge? It reminds me of a line in the Leonard Cohen song that says, Ah, they'll never ever reach the moon.

[5 : 40] At least not the one that we're after. In other words, you define the question in such a way that you're never ever going to get the proof that you're looking for. And also there's the question of what kind of method you use to gain proof from the evidence.

Here, Jesus speaks about two types of evidence and two kinds of method. What we may call the scientific method and the historical method. Although there are certain similarities between both of these.

First of all, there's what we may call the scientific evidence. Here, Jesus talks about interpreting the appearance of the sky. The evidence is the way that things look or appear.

And the method is observation. And he gives an example, of course, a famous example of this.

Interpreting the appearance of the sky to predict the weather. And this is a general observation that has been noted in many areas of the world.

Where the prevailing winds are from the west. As they were in Israel and as they are here in Britain. Because our weather comes from the west.

[6 : 51] So when there are clouds that are coming from the west and they have kind of passed. The sun shines on them and cause a red sky at night.

But if it happens in the morning. Which is the opposite side of the sky in the east. That shows that the clouds are just coming over us. So it's quite a reliable way of predicting what the day is going to do.

It's based on good science, we might say. And Jesus doesn't criticize them for this method of observation. Because that's something that we're encouraged to do.

And using our minds to study the world that God has created. God has created a universe that has a face or an appearance that can be interpreted by us.

And he's created us in our own image so that we have minds to interpret or to judge. And he has made a correspondence between the two. That is one of the great amazing things, isn't it?

[7 : 50] Between the universe and us. The reasoning of our minds, including mathematics, actually correspond to the nature of the universe. That's not by accident.

It's by God's design. It's been said that God is the great mathematician, the greatest mathematician. Or we could say he is also the greatest scientist, the greatest designer.

It's no wonder, therefore, that Christians were at the forefront of the development of modern science. People like Isaac Newton and James Clark Maxwell and all these great men were people who trusted in what God said in his word.

And look to that correspondence between the universe and our minds. James Clark Maxwell prayed, Almighty God, who has created man in thine own image and made him a living soul that he might seek after thee and have dominion over thy creatures, teach us to study the works of thy hands, that we may subdue the earth to our use and strengthen the reason for thy service, so to receive thy blessed word, that we may believe on him whom thou hast sent, to give us the knowledge of salvation and the remission of our sins, all of which we ask in the name of the same Jesus Christ, our Lord.

So scientific observation is important, but it's not enough if we want to know all that God has for us. We also need what I call historical evidence, and we need that for two reasons.

[9 : 25] Scientific proof is relative, relative to our knowledge. For instance, the weather. We may perhaps be able to predict today or even up to five days, but after that it gets more and more unlikely that we're able to predict exactly, even with all the modern tools at our disposal.

And also, there is a revelation of God in the creation. We're told that in scriptures. His existence, his wisdom and power is shown there, but it is limited.

It doesn't tell us all that we need to know about God. God revealed himself more fully in history, and particularly at particular times in history that are revealed in the Bible.

And that leads us to the next point, the historical evidence. Here Jesus says, you can interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Jesus saying that just as the face of the sky is not meaningless, neither is history. History is not a jumble of unconnected and meaningless events, but there are particular times.

[10:43] We used this word *kairos* earlier. Opportun times where God is at work in history, particularly in these events recorded in the Bible, especially in the life of Jesus. There was something special going on at that time.

And there are signs, significance, meaning in those events. There's evidence that can be adduced, conclusions to be drawn, and interpretations to be made.

So what were the signs of the times that Jesus was talking about then? There are various things. There's a whole host of things we could mention. I'll mention one or two. Something that's mentioned way back in Genesis chapter 49, verse 10.

We're told there that the scepter would not depart from Judah until he comes to whom it belongs or until Shiloh comes. And what we have in this period of history was that the scepter had departed from Judah because it wasn't a Jewish person who was, it wasn't somebody descended from the tribe of Judah who was ruling.

It was Herod and his descendants. The scepter had departed. So people should have been expecting the one to whom the scepter really belonged, the kingship really belonged.

[11:58] And there was the whole, all the events that we're thinking about in past weeks about the birth of the Messiah. As Paul put it, when the time had fully come, God sent forth his son born of a woman born under the law.

And all those events connected, say, with the wise men when they came from the east and all Jerusalem was in a turmoil. These were signs. And as we noticed in recent weeks, nobody was paying attention to, or very few were paying attention to.

And then there was Jesus' life, Jesus' miracles. Here in chapter 15, we read about the healing of the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute. We read about him showing compassion and feeding those who are hungry.

But supremely, we have the sign of Jesus' death and resurrection. Because here, in this passage, he says that no sign will be given to this generation but the sign of Jonah.

Now, what was the sign of Jonah? It's explained earlier in chapter 12, where it says that the sign of Jonah was just as he was three days and three nights in the belly of the earth, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth.

[13:18] Jonah was in the belly of the whale, or the great fish, Jesus in the belly of the earth. In other words, Jesus would be buried, but he would rise again. And we have, therefore, this great sign of Jesus' death and rising again, the greatest piece of evidence that is given to us.

Because you know this, I think most reputable historians will say it is an indisputed fact of history that the tomb of Jesus was empty on the third day.

They don't say necessarily that he was raised again from the dead, but they will say to explain all the events that took place after that, it must have been empty. Now, we know that various explanations were put forward, but all those explanations fall down in one way or another.

They don't really explain, for instance, the birth of the church. They don't explain how disciples who were totally demoralized by what had happened suddenly started preaching publicly that Jesus had risen from the dead, and nobody was able to contradict them.

And so we have this great piece of evidence, along with all the other pieces of evidence, of who Jesus is and what he has come to do and what his death means in paying the price of our sin.

[14:34] So although we may be very good at interpreting nature, just as they were in those days, and we're especially good at it today, we are so poor at interpreting history, particularly the history in which God has revealed himself.

The Pharisees and so on, they saw the evidence of Jesus' miracles. They saw it with their own eyes, but they explained it away. They said it was the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that he did this.

And Jesus demolishes that theory when he shows that a kingdom divided against itself could not stand. And so also with the resurrection itself, the chief priest devised a plan to explain away the empty tomb, to say that his disciples had come and smuggled away the body, even although there were guards there, even although the stone was such a weighty thing that it could not have been removed without some great struggle and some great noise.

All these things devised did not make sense. And so we've got this great evidence that's put before us that the Lord Jesus Christ is whom he claimed to be.

But you know, this passage is not just talking about the evidence, the evidence that can lead to showing who Jesus is and what he's done, but also he speaks about the signs of the times.

[16:06] Now, those were some of the signs of the times when he was speaking there. And in one sense, these signs of the times are the same as they were then.

The life, the miracles, the death, the rising again of Jesus and the impact that they made on people's lives and continue to make on people's lives.

And that's because we are still living in what the New Testament calls the last times or the last days. From Pentecost on, Peter spoke on the day of Pentecost and quoting from the Old Testament, says these are the last days.

But in another sense, the particular times we're living in are different from the times in which Jesus and the apostles lived. As, of course, Dylan famously sang, the times, they are a-changing.

And that's the problem with times. They keep on changing. And so the challenges that we may face yesterday are not the same challenges as we may face tomorrow. So what are the signs of the times today?

[17:07] And how are we to relate the signs of Jesus' life, death, and rising again to our times today? I want to mention one or two things that appear to be happening in the history of our world today.

One, of course, is this whole great movement towards atheism and secularism. And one of the fundamentals of that movement seems to be the idea that has crept in and been given credence by a whole lot of people that religion is based on something called faith and secularism is based on evidence.

So the idea of faith there is faith without evidence. In other words, blind faith. That's what religion is based on, secularism and evidence.

So faith is belief without evidence. Secularism is firmly based on what can be scientifically proven. But there are huge problems with that view because one of the basic ideas that has led to this kind of secular view is this principle.

We should not believe something unless we can prove it empirically. That means by observation and scientific method. There's one great problem with that right away. That principle does not meet its own standard.

[18:32] It can't be proved empirically. It's a statement that's taken on trust or on faith. So right away, the root of it is cut.

Also, we can prove physical or chemical reactions in that kind of way, but we can't prove beliefs about justice, human rights or equality in that way.

We take them on faith in some way or other. And reason depends on our faith that our senses are not tricking us or that the world is not some kind of illusion like in the film *The Matrix*.

You know, that it's all unreal somehow. And as a philosopher Stephen Evans says, science by its very nature is not fit to investigate whether there is more to reality than the natural world.

What's that saying? It's basically saying science is investigating the natural world. That's the rules according to which it operates. Therefore, it cannot say anything about whether there's a reality more than the natural world.

[19:41] Therefore, we must refuse to be taken in by this religion equals blind faith. Secularism is evidence-based. We must refuse to be taken in by that and to expose it.

Because, of course, there are other types of proof apart from scientific proof. There's legal proof beyond reasonable doubt or on the balance of probabilities or historical proof, such as the kind of things we've been looking at, looking at what actually happened in the past.

So we must remember that as we talk to people and as we hear these arguments are put forward. Second thing is something that Andrew McKeever actually mentioned this Sunday evening past about a recently published book, *That Hideous Strength, How the West Was Lost*.

This whole idea of cultural Marxism, as it's called. I read this book a few weeks ago. And, of course, the title is based on a more famous work by C.S. Lewis called *That Hideous Strength*.

And also I'd recommend, as well as reading those books, I'd recommend reading another book of C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, which really was predicting the kind of things that we've seen happening in the world today.

[20 : 53] Without sort of boring you too much, cultural Marxism is a blending of the thinking of Marx, Darwin, and Freud, who are regarded as the three wise men of the modern world.

Now, you'll not hear the expression cultural Marxism or neo-Marxism in any popular media. You'll perhaps come across in academic circles. And that is because any mention of Marxism conjures up pictures of the communist despotism of Stalin or Mao Zedong or Pol Pot and all the millions that were killed by them.

Nonetheless, the influence of such thinkers as Herbert Marcuse and others continues to be huge. Their emphasis is that the necessary revolution to overthrow capitalism and bourgeois values is not primarily an economic one, but a cultural one.

Therefore, this involves the destruction of all social institutions that are regarded as upholding the status quo, the family, the church, and any other social institutions which are deemed to be counter-revolutionary or fascist.

And you'll see this growing fashion of using the word fascist to describe anything that those people disagree with. And a key element in that was sexual liberation.

[22 : 19] As far back as the 1930s, Eric Fromm, one of these philosophers, was arguing that sexual orientation is merely a social construct. Sexuality and gender are socially determined.

Where have we heard that before? That is all the rage at the present time. Sometimes these seeds that are sown take a long time to germinate and grow. Another key element is the destabilization of language.

Words are mere tools to be used to mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean. It's a bit reminiscent of George Orwell's *1984* and *Doublethink* and so on.

Particularly of interest was their view of tolerance. Certain things cannot be said, Marcuse said.

Certain ideas cannot be expressed. Certain policies cannot be promoted.

Certain behavior cannot be permitted. That's the kind of tolerance that we begin to see creeping in in our world today. In our universities today.

[23 : 25] Many students will not tolerate hearing an opinion that they disagree with. It's the end of real investigation and research into reality.

So we must see that this is just as much a revolution as a violent revolution. And we must point out it's destructive of meaning, value, and reality.

As Christians, we must also see ourselves as true revolutionaries, as rebels against this monolithic influence that's eating up the brains and imaginations of rising generations.

The third area I want to focus on is the area of identity. And here I'm indebted to Tim Keller in his book *Making Sense of God*. Our identity, our idea of who we are as people, is composed of a sense of self and a sense of worth.

You know, who we are, what our life is worth, what it's about, what it means. In pre-modern times, and in still areas of the world where the modern world has not impinged too much, the idea is, I am what my community makes me.

[24 : 40] And Tim Keller gives an example of a warrior in the 10th century Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Battle of Malden*. He knows that they've lost the battle with the Danes, but instead of saving his own skin, he believes that the glory of his people would be better served by taking a last stand.

And this is what he says, Here lies our Lord, all hewn down, good man on the ground. From here I will not turn, but by my Lord's side, by the man I loved, I intend to lie.

Now, of course, the strength of that kind of view is in the idea of community and family and self-sacrifice, sacrificing your own interests for the good of others or even for the glory of others.

The weakness, of course, is in that kind of way of thinking that it could become a rigid hierarchical system where everyone had to know their place. The modern view of identity is very different from that.

Instead of, I am what the community makes me or tells me, I am what I am. Strangely enough, Shirley MacLaine, an actress famous for her New Age views, took that, those words from Scripture, which is the very name of God, I am that I am, but applied it to herself and said, I am that I am.

[26 : 03] I make myself. And we see this in all kinds of ways, even in the Disney movie Frozen. Elsa sings, It's time to see what I can do to test the limits and break through.

No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free. That expresses very clearly the idea people have of identity today. Reminded of the words of the band Queen, I want to break free.

Keller sums it up like this, I find myself not by self-giving to something outside, but through self-expression of something inside. Now, of course, there are certain strengths in this kind of individualism.

It's sometimes played a part in freeing people from oppressive systems. It played a part in the civil rights movement in the USA, although, as Keller points out, the main part of that was played by the African-American church using biblical terminology and thinking.

But the weaknesses of this point of view are great. One problem is when we look within for our meaning and purpose, we find many conflicting thoughts and ideas.

[27 : 14] For instance, you could take the classic conflict between someone who has a desire to leave his wife and family for someone else and the desire to remain a good father and mother.

Those are contradictory, and we can think of so many other examples. So you can't just be guided by what is within. Another is that it just can't be done.

People who reject the perceived restraints of one group of people, family or church or whatever, they then embrace the values of another group perceived to be more progressive. They're not really just expressing from what is in.

They get their sense of self and their self-worth from belonging to this new group. It is also very crushing. For example, if we seek our identity and self-worth in love and romance, we're doomed to failure.

We're elevating the love partner to the very position of God himself to give us meaning and self-worth. We will crush both them and ourselves. And of course, finally, it destroys community.

[28 : 18] And we see that in our world today, our modern world, the breakup of marriage, of families, also society becoming more fractured, no idea of the common good.

In contrast to that, there's the Christian attitude to identity. And that's best illustrated by the Apostle Paul. He doesn't say, I am what I am.

He says, by the grace of God, I am what I am. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 10. He's saying, I'm made in the image of God.

I know who I am because God has made me. And I've got worth and abilities because of that likeness to God. He's also saying, I'm a sinner saved by grace.

John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace, said on his deathbed, I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior. He knew who he was. He knew his identity. This deals with the problems of the traditional and modern views of identity because I'm part of a community of persons made in God's image because part of that image is community because God himself is a community of persons.

[29 : 28] So our identity, yes, it is partly as part of a community. But I derive my ultimate meaning and worth not from others but from God and Christ.

He tells me who I am and he tells me what I am. I have gifts and abilities and ideas and dreams but I don't need to derive my identity from them because I know that they're all tainted with sin and they all need to be transformed by the grace of God in Christ.

Bob Dylan said in one of his songs, people are crazy and times are strange. I'm locked in tight, I'm out of range. I used to care but things have changed.

It's very easy to slip into that way of thinking, isn't it? People are crazy and times are changed. I used to care but things have changed. Is that our kind of attitude?

Things are just too crazy out there, too strange. We've just used up all our care and compassion. Surely that's not the way in which the Christians should respond.

[30 : 38] Desmond Tutu from South Africa said, a time of crisis is not just a time of anxiety and worry. It gives a chance and opportunity to choose well or to choose badly.

You see, he's talking there about the kairos time, the crisis time, time to choose well or to choose badly. That's the kind of time we're living in today. Are we going to choose just to go with the flow, all these influences that are washing around us, or are we going to go with Jesus?

The singer and author Sheila Walsh, who came from Scotland but has lived in the USA for many years, she struggled with deep depression, but she says, in these uncertain times, I know 100% that I can stake my life on the unshakable, unchanging promises of God.

Is that your unshakable belief at the beginning of this new year, that you can stake your life on the unshakable, unchanging promises of God?
I pray that it's so.