

When signs are insufficient

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[0 : 00] So the reading this morning is Luke chapter 11 verses 29 to 36 and if you have a Bible that looks like the Bible's in church it's on page 1048.

So Luke chapter 11 verses 29 to 36. When the crowds were increasing Jesus began to say this generation is an evil generation.

It seeks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. But as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh so will the son of man be to this generation.

The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them. For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

And behold something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold something greater than Jonah is here.

[1 : 23] No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket but on a stand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body.

When your eye is healthy your whole body is full of light. But when it is bad your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness.

If then your whole body is full of light having no part dark it will be wholly bright. As when a lamp with its rays gives you light.

Amen. Morning church family. Great. I'm told you can hear me. That's good news. Let's pray as we come to God's word.

Our Father in heaven we pray that in these uncertain days you would speak to us and give us certainty about what we've believed. Please do that this morning and every time we open your word together.

[2 : 30] Amen. Well imagine we don't think this virus is that serious. Sure we see the symptoms and the news and the scientist reports and the pleas from the NHS.

But we're just not convinced. So Chris Whitty the chief medical officer he knocks on your door and then stands back his two meters. He explains in the nitty gritty detail everything he knows about how the virus works, what the symptoms are, why it's so serious.

He presents us with charts and graphs and all the info. We've just had an audience with the expert. What more could we need?

Surely now we'll stay at home. The question is, will we listen to the expert or still think we know better? And this morning, what about with Jesus?

As he reveals God, as he speaks God's word, as he calls us to listen to and obey him? Will we listen to him?

[3 : 31] Or will we overlook him, thinking we know better? We've seen over the last couple of weeks, following Jesus means sitting at his feet, listening to him. It means praying to God as father with boldness and confidence.

And Jesus says in chapter 11, verse 28, just before our reading, true blessing comes as we listen to and obey his word. Last week, Jesus confronted a group of people in the crowd before him, those in verse 15.

They saw his miracles, his signs. They accepted they were real, but they attributed them to Satan. They refused to go where the signs led.

And Jesus exposed their flawed logic and rejection of him, despite the evidence. This week, he confronts the people of verse 16. Those who come not to listen to his word and engage with who he is, but to test him, asking him to endlessly prove himself with miracles, all the while unwilling to see what the signs actually point to.

And Luke puts all this together to encourage his readers, to encourage us to be certain that trusting Jesus and listening to his word is where the evidence follows, where the evidence leads.

[4 : 47] Hopefully, you've got a copy of the sermon outline. Looks a bit like this. It will give you a few markers of where we're going. Well, as Jesus turns his attention to the people of verse 16, he comes to test him.

His words might seem harsh. Have a look at verse 29. This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign.

Initially, it sounds like he's calling them evil for wanting evidence. Is Jesus encouraging people to just have blind faith? Well, we saw last week, Jesus' miracles are in themselves evidence to be engaged with, designed as visuals to point to Jesus' identity as God's king, bringing in God's kingdom.

And the very thing he confronted last week's group for was not following the evidence trail. He's not encouraging a leap in the dark. Quite the opposite.

So he calls this group evil because he knows their attitude. He knows what Luke tells us in verse 16, that they're just here to test him. They're not honest inquirers.

[5 : 56] They want everything on their terms. And they're unwilling to see Jesus is the ultimate sign of God's kingdom. They want Jesus to be a genie in a lamp.

Do another miracle, Jesus. But he won't bow to their pressure. He won't be their performing monkey. Instead, he says, end of verse 29, No sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.

For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the son of man be to this generation. Which raises questions like, who's Jonah? How was he a sign to the people of Nineveh?

And in what sense will Jesus, the son of man, be a sign like Jonah? Well, many of us will be familiar with Jonah, but you can read about him if you want to, towards the end of the Old Testament.

You'll find there the story of a reluctant prophet. God asks Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh, to call out against it for their deeply wicked ways.

[6 : 58] But he doesn't want to go, so he runs in the opposite direction, jumps on a boat to sail away. Which doesn't get very far. Ends up thrown into the sea. He's swallowed by a great fish and is spewed back on land and told by the Lord again, Go to Nineveh.

Call out, as I tell you, against the city. So this time Jonah goes, and the reluctant prophet, he preaches just a few words. He says, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

And we read in Jonah chapter three, how all the people of Nineveh, from the greatest to the least, including the king, believed God. They turned from their wickedness and honoured the Lord.

Jonah then was assigned to the people of Nineveh as he preached and pointed them to God's impending judgment. Jesus is a better sign than Jonah. He isn't a reluctant prophet simply pointing to judgment.

Rather, he is the willing son of man, God's anointed king, and he comes preaching, teaching, and demonstrating who he is. He does highlight the reality of judgment, and he offers concrete hope through his death on the cross.

[8 : 16] He is the ultimate sign of God's kingdom. He is the ultimate sign of God's kingdom. Now, last week, we thought about a journey to Chessington World of Adventures. We imagined the foolishness of stopping and declaring, We're here!

at one of those brown information signs that says Chessington World of Adventures, two miles. But how do you know when you've actually arrived? Is it when you see the big car park sign and turn off the main road?

Nearly, but not quite. No, we really know we've arrived when we pass through the ticket barrier and see the huge banner overhead. Welcome to Chessington World of Adventures. That's the proof.

That's the final piece of the puzzle. We're there. And Jesus is like the massive banner over the top of the Chessington entrance. No more arrows.

No more pointers. No need for more signs. This one sign in front of us is enough. It should leave us in no doubt that these people in Luke 11 they won't see it.

[9 : 19] They won't acknowledge Jesus for who he is. It's as if they've got blinkers on. They just want more signs. Jesus, do another one. Well, instead of indulging their passion, Jesus presents two case studies to highlight their hard-hearted foolishness.

Case study one comes in verse 31. Solomon, the Queen of the South, also known as the Queen of Sheba. We read about her in the Old Testament back in 1 Kings chapter 10.

The Queen, she hears about God's King Solomon. And as Jesus puts it, she comes from the ends of the earth to hear his wisdom. We read in 1 Kings that she arrives and Solomon answers every question she can think of.

Nothing is hidden from the King that he could not explain to her. And it takes her breath away. And she says, Blessed be the Lord your God.

The Queen hears the wisdom of Solomon and she honours the Lord because of him. Then case study two comes in. Luke chapter 11, verse 32. We are introduced again to the men of Nineveh who repent at the preaching of Jonah despite his reluctance and brevity.

[10:34] And the picture Jesus gives in both cases is of the Queen and the men of Nineveh rising up at the Day of Judgment and condemning the generation Jesus is speaking to.

The Queen believed on hearing the wisdom of Solomon. The men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of an unwilling prophet. But these people in Luke 11, they won't believe and they have something greater right in front of them.

Picture the scene. The generation Jesus is talking to in our passage are brought into the dock for trial. They're pleading innocence. We didn't realise, they say.

It wasn't clear, they plead. Well, the prosecution just presents two witnesses. In comes the Queen of the South and in come the people of Nineveh.

And together they look at the men of this generation before Jesus that he's speaking to and they say, you fools. Why didn't you open your eyes and see?

[11:36] We believed at Solomon and we believed at Jonah. You had Jesus before you, far greater. What more could you have asked for or wanted? See, Solomon was a signpost for the Queen to trust the true God.

Jonah was a signpost for Nineveh to turn from their wickedness or face judgment. Jesus is the ultimate sign God's kingdom is coming and he's standing right in front of this crowd but they won't see it.

Imagine if we were at Chessington again standing under the huge welcome to Chessington sign with the theme park laid out in front of us. Imagine if we then were like, no, we're not here.

This isn't it. Well, that would be foolish and it would be sad because we'd miss out on all of the joys and with Jesus the same but also deeply serious.

Judgment is coming, Jesus tells them. Trust me for safety, he says. There's no need for more signs. Jesus is the ultimate sign of God's kingdom but they won't see it.

[12:48] They won't listen. Now, if we're following Jesus in these uncertain times, we can easily doubt our convictions and doubt him but Luke writes to give us certainty, confidence, we've come to the right conclusion.

The evidence that's presented is with Jesus and with all who follow him and he may not be in front of us now like he was those in the passage but being there clearly didn't guarantee anything.

And in some sense, we are more privileged. We have on-tap access to Jesus preaching in front of us today. Most obviously, in the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, they contain eyewitness testimony of Jesus' life and preaching.

The same kind of testimony used in courts up and down the country. So we believe because of the evidence. our faith rests on the person and work of Jesus Christ, the man in history, crucified and raised and reigning over all and we can listen to him anytime, anywhere.

Perhaps some of us listening in have been exploring the Christian faith or have been meaning to. Maybe we've never really thought about it. Maybe we're intrigued. If you're an honest inquirer, Jesus isn't asking us to jump in blindly.

[14:14] He wants us to explore with open eyes, to investigate, to push our questions to Christian friends. He wants us to engage with the evidence and see where it leads. So why not use these uncertain times to explore for yourself?

As a next step, you could get hold of a copy of Luke's Gospel or print one off the internet and read it through. See what you make of Jesus' claims.

Is he really who he says he is? Well, there might be loads of questions though that you want answering first. Call a Christian friend, put them, put your questions to them or maybe put your questions in an email to me or someone else on a staff team.

We'd love to help you and point you in the right direction or explore it together. Some of us though might be like those Jesus is really focusing on in the passage.

Listening in but overlooking, dismissing, perhaps even scoffing at the evidence for the Christian faith. Maybe we're waiting for a message in the sky or some piece of evidence that fits our way of thinking.

[15:20] But the fact is the clearest, brightest, best evidence for the Christian faith is not the church or Christians or messages written in the clouds.

It's the man at the heart of it all in history, Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate sign from God and so our thinking about Christianity, about who God is needs to be based on an honest look at who Jesus is. Don't miss him. It matters too much. Well, the evidence is clear. Jesus is clear. The problem then is with our eyes and our ears.

So out of his heart of love and compassion, Jesus wants to warn us to take care how we hear him. You see, with Jesus, hearing and seeing go together.

His miracles, his signs, are always accompanied by his teaching. His words and his works are a package because he is the word of God in flesh.

[16:27] So of course, how we see him and how we hear him matters. Notice in verse 28, true blessing comes not simply by seeing but to those who hear the word of God and obey.

Have a look at verse 31. The queen of Sheba came to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And in verse 32, the men of Nineveh repent when they hear Jonah preaching.

Seeing Jesus for who he really is and listening to him go together. It's like when a friend explains something complex that we just don't understand. Finally, the penny drops and we exclaim, oh, now I see, now I understand.

It's all a question of perception. Will we see Jesus rightly? Actually hear him and act on it because that's the route to true blessing.

In verse 33, Jesus is highlighting the foolishness of the crowd. No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket but on a stand so that those who enter may see the light.

[17:36] And it's a fair statement. Obviously, Lizzie and I are working from home at the moment. We share a desk which is mostly great. When the sun begins to set, I need some more light.

So I grab my lamp and I flick it on. Useful. Imagine what Lizzie would say then, if I grab this bucket and put it on top.

Maybe she'd say, is this what you do when I'm not here? But more likely she'd give me her, what on earth are you doing? Look, which, let's be honest, I've seen before.

It would be a pretty weird thing to do. And Jesus agrees. You see, his words and works, they reveal. His preaching illuminates.

It shines out. Jesus is the ultimate sign. He's the lamp of God's kingdom. He is clear and bright. We don't put a bucket on a lamp.

[18:40] Why would we chuck a rug over Jesus? See, these guys in Luke 11, they say they want more signs, but they're ignoring and won't listen to the one that's right in front of them.

It's a bit like if we scrub our Bibles, hide them under the bed and then say, God hasn't spoken, hasn't said anything. And so the question isn't, is there enough evidence that God's kingdom is coming?

The question is, do we see it? Do we hear Jesus? Are we looking and listening carefully? Jesus highlights it in a shift of the metaphor in verse 34.

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light. But when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Jesus says, how we see things, how we hear and perceive things, that's what counts.

If we've healthy eyes, our body, our whole life will be full of light. But if we've bad eyes, blinkered or blurred or just held shut, all is dark.

[19:57] Seeing Jesus with healthy eyes will lead us to see him for who he really is. And it will lead us to hearing him properly. It will lead to obeying his word and to a bright life full of light.

And in contrast, looking at Jesus with bad eyes, missing the signs, overlooking or being unwilling to engage with the evidence, leaves us in darkness, ultimately in the darkness of God's judgment, which is where his warning comes in in verse 35.

Therefore, be careful, lest the light in you be darkness. Be careful how you see me. Be careful how you hear me.

Be careful you're not looking with bad eyes and left in the dark. Jesus warns because he loves. He wants people to open their eyes, to take their fingers out of their ears.

And many he's speaking to in these verses will have ignored his warning. But some will have heard it, really heard it, and come to him for life, life that is full of light with no part dark, wholly bright, as in verse 36.

[21 : 13] This is life with God, forgiven of sin, adopted into God's family, life listening to Jesus, life obeying his word and calling out to him, calling out to God as father.

So how do we see Jesus? Are we listening to him? Because true blessing comes as we grasp Jesus, all that he is, and all that he says.

I've been wondering where I might be in danger of hearing only what I want from Jesus. In the passages of Luke's gospel still to come in our series, Jesus is going to say some wonderful things about salvation and grace, and some really hard to hear things about hell and about judgment. But Luke says we can have certainty about who Jesus is and trust what he says, whether we find it comfortable or not. God will we let our eyes and ears fill our lives with light or ignore him and be left in darkness?

if we're leaning towards ignoring him, we need to hear the warning from Jesus, from the Queen of the South and from the men of Nineveh. Judgment is coming.

[22 : 37] They say don't miss Jesus, don't dismiss him. The sign that he really is God's king is evidenced in history. At the cross he dies to bring forgiveness for all who trust him, and in his resurrection is the sure promise of eternal life.

he is a banner overhead calling us to respond. So please let's look again with open eyes, let's listen carefully to Jesus' word, and engage with him on his terms.

He's the light we need in this dark and uncertain world. Let's pray together. Our Father, we praise you so much for the Lord Jesus who died to save blind sinners.

Please help us to see him and help us to hear him carefully. Today, this morning, all our days. Do it for your glory and for our good.

In his name we pray. Amen.