

Tuning In To God: Interpreting The Signs of the Times - Sunday 22nd October 2023

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[0 : 00] We're on this Tuning Into God Sunday series, our attempt really to think through and maybe learn more about the various ways in which God is speaking to us, but also how we might be open and receptive to God's voice in our lives.

And last week, Ruth was helping us think through perhaps some of the ways in which God guides us. And one thing she said in particular was that looking for signs from God, you know, almost seeking that kind of sat-nav, left-right, forward-back type of guidance from God where every turn of life is plotted out and clearly marked for us.

Well, that kind of specific guidance from God, as we've been covering a little bit over previous weeks, I think that can happen, but it's perhaps the exception rather than the rule.

And if we think about how we tune in to God, again, as Ruth was saying last week, it seems to be more about dwelling with God in the everyday, you know, spending time in prayer, sitting at Jesus' feet, if you like, as in that story of Mary and her sister Martha.

It's that old-fashioned word, but it's a good one. Abiding, abiding with God. That would seem to help us tune in to what God might be saying to us far more reliably, perhaps, than asking for God to kind of zap us out of nowhere with an instruction or a message or a revelation.

[1 : 30] Indeed, I suggest that looking for signs as a main way of tuning in to God's voice, it leaves us open to something which is known as confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias. You heard of this? Yes. Yes. The idea that we tend to notice the things that confirm what we already believe or want to see.

So, for example, if we think that a football referee is dodgy and against our team, you know, we're more likely to notice and remember the decisions that go against our team rather than against the opposition because we're looking out for those things which confirm what we already think.

Or if we read perhaps a horoscope which tells us something's going to happen that day. Those predictions in horoscopes, you know, they're usually so vague that pretty much everyone can find something in their day that confirms that horoscope if they choose to.

Why? Because subconsciously we might tend to look for what we want to see in things. Or then perhaps in terms of our faith.

[2 : 42] Say we've been lured perhaps into believing the end times are imminent because of maybe the growing number of natural disasters that we see happening in the world and that's meant to be a sign of the end times coming.

Now, confirmation bias means that we're more likely, therefore, to notice media coverage of these disasters because we already believe that they're increasing.

Whereas actually, perhaps surprisingly, this graph shows us the statistics reveal that the number of deaths from natural disasters has been an actual constant almost decline over the last century, which is even more remarkable given population growth.

That might go against what we think is happening. But again, we tend to look, in the media in particular, for what we want to see, even if the truth tells a somewhat different story.

Now, of course, in all this climate crisis, the human cause climate crisis means these figures are likely to rise in the future. But even then, I'd suggest that the complexity of that and the confirmation bias on offer in our media-saturated world, that can make tuning into God by looking for big signs from God, that can make it a tricky business at best.

[4 : 09] And yet, as I want to explore this morning, I still think there are lots and lots of signs around us, all sorts of signs around us that are hugely important for our ability to tune into God and to live out our faith.

So to spark our thinking on this this morning, I'm going to watch a little exchange that Jesus has with a bunch of Pharisees and Sadducees, those who were the religious leaders and teachers of the day.

So have a watch of this. It's from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 16. Just a few verses to get us going today. The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven.

He replied, Just a brief one there.

But these religious leaders, they asked Jesus to show them a sign from heaven. It's a request for Jesus to once and for all prove He is who He claims to be.

[5 : 40] And yet, as we know, Jesus is not some kind of circus performer who's there simply to impress people on demand. Now, Jesus' signs, His miracles were instead not done for show, but rooted in a desire to demonstrate and communicate God's love and to meet people's needs.

And so He calls out these Pharisees and Sadducees for simply wanting a ticket to the circus, if you like, rather than being willing to recognize the signs that Jesus was performing.

Miracles. Signs, perhaps, of inclusion, such as healing the lepers who would otherwise be barred from worshipping with others. He did signs of justice, such as healing the man who couldn't speak by giving him back his voice in society.

Signs of generosity, such as feeding the 5,000 or turning water into wine so that everyone, whoever comes, is catered for. Now, there are all sorts of signs that Jesus was doing, but these Sadducees and Pharisees, they choose to ignore those signs from heaven, if you like, even though they were clearly pointing to the priorities of inclusion and justice and generosity, which God would want us to live by.

And yet the interesting thing in those few verses that we just saw is that Jesus takes this talk of signs in quite a different direction because He highlights the need for us not just to follow His signs, you know, His miracles that point to God, but also to interpret what He calls the signs of the times.

[7 : 27] Now, to help illustrate what He means, Jesus, we would say this morning, He does a very British thing and He starts talking about the weather. So He quotes two popular sayings from His day about predicting the next day's weather conditions.

It's essentially the equivalent of our red sky at night, Shepard's Delight, red sky in the morning, Shepard's Warning kind of thing. As in we know, if there's a nice pinky sky the night before like there was last night, the next day is going to be decent and so on.

But going deeper than a weather forecast, that's just Jesus weighing, it seems, with talking about what He wants to talk about. Going deeper than that, Jesus then effectively says, Look, you know how to read the signs of the sky, you know, that's easy, bully for you if you like in that.

But considering you guys, you Pharisees and Sadducees, you're meant to be the religious leaders and teachers of our day. What you seem unable to do is interpret the signs of the times.

Now, what does Jesus mean by signs of the times? Well, it seems it's all about being aware of and interpreting what's happening in the world around us in order to discern what God might be calling us to do in response to that.

[8 : 47] It's all about being aware of and interpreting what's happening in the world around us in order to discern what God might be calling us to do.

So for Jesus, the signs of the times are deeper truths that reveal what's actually going on in people's lives.

Now, working out what's going on socially, politically, economically, spiritually, it's about noticing how people are feeling, why that might be the case, and then also seeing what can be done in order to ensure that life better reflects God's ways, God's priorities.

So what might have signs of the times have been that Jesus noticed in his day? Well, in terms of the big stuff, you know, the big social, political picture, here's a little sentence what Tom Wright, who's a leading biblical scholar, he reckons, saying that for Jesus in his time, there was a need for him to recognize the way in which corrupt leaders, false teachers, and people bent towards violence were leading the nation towards inevitable disaster from which only repentance and a fresh trust in God's kingdom could save them.

Now, Jesus would have identified in his time what we might call a crisis of national identity with corrupt leadership and lies and a passion for violence, always by which the last and the lost and the least in society would suffer the most, but all signs that Jesus constantly called people to reject in favor of his truth and love and justice.

[10 : 36] And those words describe what it's like perhaps in Jesus' time. But you don't need me to tell you that in parts of our world, even in the same lands in which Jesus walked, I'd say these same crises of national identity, corrupt leaders, lies, and violence, they're all sadly signs of our times and how much we still need to work for and protest for and vote and pray for people to embrace the truth and love and justice of Jesus' kingdom.

That's maybe the big picture signs of the times. But alongside these, this is where I want to focus probably today, Jesus is also adept at interpreting the much smaller, more local signs of the times, the personal stuff which people are wrestling with on a day-by-day basis.

And so time and again, as we read the Gospels, we see Jesus engaging with insight and compassion with people's everyday needs. You know, the stuff that keeps them awake at night is grief, poverty, illness, family disputes, shame, exclusion, fear, and so on.

Those are the smaller, more personal signs of the times that Jesus was fully aware of. And that for me, I think, is good news.

Because while we can't always do much as individuals or even as a church to influence the bigger picture stuff that causes so much pain in the world, I mean, we were praying in silence that the Holy Spirit would sort of groan with us in what's going on in the world.

[12 : 27] It feels a pretty helpless situation, that big picture stuff for us that we hand over to God. On the flip side, though, we can follow Jesus' lead in making a difference to the needs of one another and to our local community.

Indeed, by looking for these smaller, local signs of the times, I'd say that's how we'll be more able to tune in to the way God is calling us as a church to be his people in this place, in this time.

And then who knows what might ripple out from that. And so on this much smaller, hopefully manageable scale, what might the signs of our times be where we live?

What challenges might God be wanting us as a church to tune into in order to hear how he might be calling us to respond? Well, there are many. I imagine you can think of a number as we go through.

But for me, one pressing sign of our time that I'd say needs our attention is this, the issue of loneliness.

[13 : 39] Loneliness. Now, what is loneliness? Well, it's different to isolation. You know, we can be totally alone on our own and not feel lonely at all.

Equally, though, we can be in a room full of people and experience incredible loneliness. Indeed, we could say, therefore, loneliness happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the relationships that we have and those that we would want.

It's the mismatch between what we have in people and what we would want in people. In other words, I guess we could say it's a loss or a lack of proper companionship.

You know, people with whom we can do life in a meaningful way. Now, I don't know if you would say you've ever experienced loneliness.

I know I have. I have. Maybe if you're honest, you felt lonely pretty recently. And again, if so, I'm with you on that.

[14 : 53] Maybe you feel lonely today, even in a room full of people. Well, if any of that's true, you and I need to know that we're in good company.

We're in good company here. Because according to a survey from just last year, 50% of adults in the UK, that's 26 million people, they reported feeling lonely either occasionally, sometimes, often, or even always.

That's a lot of people experiencing loneliness. Which means that it's men and women, it's young and old, it's introverts and extroverts, those with a lot of friends, those with just a few.

All sorts of people live with loneliness in our time. And the sadness is that loneliness brings with it other pain too.

Again, the research tells us that experiencing loneliness is often associated with poorer mental health and depression, higher blood pressure and stress. You get disrupted sleep, lower educational grades, worse job prospects.

[16 : 02] And surprisingly, perhaps, it even increases the risk of an early death by up to 25%, they reckon. And so since loneliness is clearly, from all the stats and perhaps from our experience, such a significant and serious sign of our times, how might we do, as Jesus says, and interpret this sign?

In other words, how might we tune in to what God might have to say to us in response to this sign, this reality of life? Well, having brought us down with all those stats, let's wind up again a little bit.

Because the best place to start in all this is always with Jesus. Because, first of all, we see in him someone who I'd say can identify with our loneliness.

For example, there's a fascinating little bit in John's Gospel, where Jesus has been teaching his followers. But because what he said was so challenging to their way of life, we're told this, that from this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

You do not want to leave too, do you? Jesus asked the twelve. I don't know about you, but to me, you can detect a real sense of sadness, almost, in Jesus' voice here.

[17 : 34] You know, with so many having left him, we know his family basically disowned him at this point. He's obviously feeling hurt and disappointed. Fragile, maybe, we could say, which might be a surprising characteristic that we put together with Jesus.

And yet, I'd say that comes across in what he says to these twelve disciples, those he's invited and asked to be closest to him. You know, are you going to leave me too? You know, in this moment, perhaps elsewhere, whether it's times in the wilderness or the Garden of Gethsemane, you know, certainly on the cross, Jesus surely experiences the uncertainty and the pain of loneliness.

Now, if that sounds depressing, the good news is that Jesus therefore gets it. He gets it about us. And then we can therefore be honest with God and with each other about our own times of loneliness too.

Now, loneliness is hard to admit because it feels like a kind of social failure perhaps on our part. There must be something wrong with us. But there's no shame in loneliness.

There's no shame in wanting to connect with people in ways that matter. You see, if Jesus wanted to do that, if Jesus needed to do that, how much more is it right for us to crave that connection too?

[19 : 04] And so tuning into God, working out what God wants to say to us and our world, starts with being honest and open and vulnerable about our own situations, our own feelings.

What then? Well, knowing that connection matters. I think it's worth seeing how Jesus fosters the connections that he wants to make with his disciples.

Because again, what's fascinating is that as you read the Gospels, he makes these connections with his folks around him, with his friends, in all sorts of ways.

You know, way beyond just sitting in religious services with them. He loves them, so we see he eats with them, he talks with them, walks with them, drinks with them, he jokes with them, camps with them, prays with them, debates with them.

We see him cooking with them, sharing money with them, he fishes with them, he cries with them, he sails with them, washes with them, parties with them, climbs mountains with them.

[20 : 09] We're told he sings with them. He shares stories with them. He confides with them. he surprises them you know in other words throughout all the stories in the god we see jesus doing life in a proper sense with all those around him and why does he do that well because all those activities are mentioned and more are the foundations it seems on which friendships are built you know so much so that jesus ends up saying to his disciples towards the end of his life i no longer call you servants now i call you friends and so if that's jesus's approach to life you know his approach may be to combating loneliness and building friendships what can we draw from that sign of times you know what we draw from that as a church well one of the things that we've been aware of i think over the years here and particularly prior to the pandemic was a general kind of difficulty that a number of people said they were having with making friends here in our church you know acquaintances chit chat over coffee whatever that was that was okay but going beyond that it's proven to be tricky for some especially given the numbers and often perhaps the noise on a sunday morning as well and so following lockdown and getting back together and stuff over the last couple of years one of the sort of intentional things it's felt right to do has been to provide more midweek spaces in which people could simply meet up you know a range of ways in which people could hopefully find somewhere that they felt comfortable enough in activities or with people to build those connections to build those friendships and so over the last couple of years alongside groups like the drop-in and house groups and f and f1 and little friends which were going prior to the pandemic we've added a number of things which i'm pleased to say have sprung from the vision of all sorts of people as they they listen and tune in to what god might be prompting us to provide and put on as a church so for example that the monday service came from a conversation i had with joe and angie and leslie stanton talking point alongside the drop-in was kathy co's idea we've got book club which is an idea from ruth and with helen and sharon and pub club that was definitely ruth's idea all hail to ruth in that one we got f and f2 which came from chats that ruth and i had with jack and with ellen we got creating space which has been leslie bolton's inspiration we've got watercolour dabblers it's chris hills we got singing for well-being which has come from hazel we got curry club well that was originally steve taylor's idea back in the day and then the fellowship group for those who've moved here from hong kong you know kathy and others have had that idea and made it happen and if you've seen the newsletter this week there's a new games club starting next month which is ian mckeen's baby and looking at all that that's they're great that's great that's what i'd say being a community church is all about because these are the kind of soft edge groups where those from our wider community can almost dip their toes in to this place and see what being church and maybe connecting with god in community is all about now i know for some it might feel that we've moved a bit too far towards the kind of social side of things kind of focus on friendship over faith maybe

and i do understand that concern because we have more to offer than simply being a community center we have a lot more to offer than now i know and yet looking at the ways in which jesus shared his life with people and the way his friendships were fostered you know thinking through how we might ensure we're more single friendly as a church and perhaps most pressingly offering ways in which one of the dominant signs of our time this issue of loneliness might be addressed seems to me that these kind of groups and clubs are actually a vital part of what we can offer to one another and to our community alongside in tandem with the regular worship services and pastoral care and prayer and so on indeed i'd suggest that tuning into god in general is best done within community community which ideally enables people to connect more deeply both with god but also with each other you know those connections that's the cross-shaped nature of community the vertical if you like with god the horizontal between ourselves with god with those we live alongside and it's that cross shape and you can take that as deep as you want it's that which enriches our experience again with each other and i would say with god as well you know ultimately the reason we're here and the reason i do what i do is because we long for people to know the reality of the love of god in their lives you know we want people to know jesus and how much he loves them that's the the ultimate connection that even the best of friendships in this life can only hint at but we want people to know jesus not to make us feel better as a church or swell our numbers not to give us money or to keep the church going long after we're gone no that would treat people as projects to persuade not lives to love rather it's because above all in jesus through jesus with jesus we found the way the truth and the life and we simply want to share that good news with others you know when jesus said to his disciples you don't want to leave too do you it was peter who replied on behalf of them all with these words when he said lord to whom shall we go you have the words of eternal life and so as we continue to maybe tune in to those same words to tune in to god and to tune in to the signs of our times together may we be people who are willing to share our lives with one another just as jesus shares his life with us and may we be blessed with ever more meaningful connections with each other yes with our community yes but ultimately with god amen